



“SPEAKING SCHOOL” TOOLKIT

Navigating California’s Education & Special Education Systems

A practical guide for caregivers, foster parents, social workers, behavioral health professionals, advocates, and youth-serving partners

2026 Edition

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PURPOSE OF THIS MANUAL

This toolkit is intended to strengthen the ability of caregivers, foster parents, social workers, behavioral health professionals, advocates, and youth-serving partners to navigate California school systems with clarity, confidence, and collaboration. It is designed as a practical guide rather than a substitute for legal advice, and emphasizes early intervention, informed advocacy, trauma-responsive practice, and cross-system partnership in support of student success.

How to Use This Toolkit

This toolkit is designed to be both a learning resource and a working tool.

It can be used by:

- caregivers and parents
- foster parents and relative caregivers
- social workers and probation staff
- behavioral health professionals
- CASA volunteers
- school staff seeking a stronger systems lens
- community-based providers supporting youth and families

This guide is most useful when readers use it in three ways:

First, to understand the system.

Many school concerns become easier to address when people understand who is responsible, what options exist, and what steps usually come next.

Second, to prepare for meetings and decisions.

The toolkit includes practical questions, worksheets, templates, and planning tools that can be used before SST, 504, IEP, discipline, reentry, or other school meetings.

Third, to support advocacy over time.

Educational advocacy is rarely one conversation. It often involves follow-up, documentation, collaboration, and revisiting concerns as a student's needs evolve.



You do not need to be an expert in education law to advocate effectively.
Effective advocacy often comes from understanding the process, asking thoughtful questions, documenting concerns, and staying focused on the student's needs.

SYSTEM NAVIGATION GUIDE

Understanding How California School Support Systems Work

Supporting a student effectively requires more than knowing a few school terms. It requires understanding how the school system is structured, who makes which decisions, and how different supports connect to one another.

Many caregivers and professionals assume “the school” is one single system. In reality, student support often involves multiple layers of responsibility, including the school site, school district, special education department, SELPA, County Office of Education, child welfare agencies, probation, and outside behavioral health providers.

When these systems are not well coordinated, students can fall through the cracks. Understanding the structure helps advocates know where to start, who to contact, and when to escalate concerns.

The Different Layers of the School System

School Site

The school site is where most day-to-day concerns first appear and are often first addressed.

This includes:

- classroom teachers
- school counselors
- school psychologists
- site administrators
- attendance staff
- behavior support personnel
- special education case managers

The school site is often the first place to raise concerns related to:

- academic struggles
- behavior concerns
- attendance issues

- emotional regulation in the classroom
- classroom accommodations
- SST meetings
- communication about progress

School District

The district oversees broader educational processes and legal compliance.

District-level departments may include:

- Special Education Department
- Student Services
- Foster Youth Services
- Attendance and Discipline
- Section 504 coordination
- behavioral health or counseling services
- Transportation

The district often becomes directly involved when there are concerns about:

- evaluation timelines
- IEP compliance
- district assessments
- school-of-origin issues
- foster youth rights
- due process concerns
- placement disputes
- district-wide policies

SELPA (Special Education Local Plan Area)

In California, special education services are coordinated regionally through a SELPA.

A SELPA helps participating districts plan for and deliver special education services across a geographic region. SELPAs may support:

- program coordination
- technical assistance
- specialized placements
- dispute resolution support
- compliance structures
- regional service planning

Caregivers do not always interact directly with the SELPA, but it is helpful to know that the SELPA may influence:

- nonpublic school placements
- nonpublic agency services
- regional special education programming
- service availability across districts

County Office of Education (COE)

County Offices of Education provide oversight, support, and county-level services to districts.

Depending on the county, the COE may play a role in:

- Foster Youth Services Coordinating Programs (FYSCP)
- court and community schools
- alternative education
- countywide special education supports
- homeless education support
- professional consultation to districts

For foster youth and highly mobile students, the COE can sometimes be an important resource when district-level navigation becomes difficult.

Outside Systems That May Also Be Involved

Some students are supported not only by schools, but by several systems at the same time.

This may include:

- child welfare
- probation or juvenile justice
- county behavioral health
- community therapists
- wraparound or intensive care coordination teams
- foster family agencies
- CASA volunteers
- regional center
- residential treatment providers

The more complex the student's needs, the more important cross-system communication becomes.

General Education vs. Special Education

One of the most common points of confusion is the difference between general education supports and special education services.

General Education Supports

These are supports available without a finding of special education eligibility.

Examples include:

- tutoring
- teacher conferencing
- behavioral supports
- counseling check-ins
- classroom accommodations

- seating changes
- school-based interventions
- SST problem-solving meetings
- MTSS or PBIS interventions

These supports are often tried first.

Special Education Services

Special education services are formal services provided under IDEA after:

1. a student is evaluated, and
2. the student is found eligible under a qualifying disability category.

Special education may include:

- specialized academic instruction
- speech and language services
- counseling
- occupational therapy
- behavioral intervention
- adapted physical education
- ERMHS
- a formal IEP

Not every struggling student needs special education, but when a disability is suspected and learning is impacted, evaluation should be considered.

Section 504 vs. IEP: A Practical Distinction

Both 504 Plans and IEPs support students with disabilities, but they are not the same.

504 Plan

A 504 Plan provides accommodations to ensure equal access to education.

Examples:

- extended time

- breaks
- preferential seating
- health-related supports
- behavior-related accommodations

A 504 Plan is generally appropriate when a student needs accommodations, but not specialized instruction.

IEP

An IEP provides individualized special education services and specialized instruction.

Examples:

- academic goals
- counseling
- speech therapy
- specialized instruction
- behavior intervention
- classroom supports
- progress monitoring

An IEP is appropriate when disability-related needs require more than accommodations alone.

When County Behavioral Health May Become Involved

Some students receive mental health support through the school system. Others may receive services through county behavioral health, Medi-Cal providers, or community agencies.

County behavioral health may become involved when:

- the student has significant mental health needs
- the student is already connected to public behavioral health
- school-based counseling is not sufficient
- services are needed beyond school capacity

- there are crisis, safety, or intensive care coordination needs

Even when outside mental health systems are involved, schools still remain responsible for providing educationally necessary supports.

Key System Navigation Principle

A student does not have to fail completely before support is appropriate.

When concerns emerge, advocates should ask:

- What system is responsible for this issue?
- What interventions have already been tried?
- What data do we have?
- What support can be implemented now?
- Is a formal evaluation needed?
- Who is coordinating across systems?



SYSTEM NAVIGATION QUESTION

When multiple systems are involved, ask:

“Who is coordinating the education plan across systems?”

TRAUMA-INFORMED EDUCATION LENS

Understanding Behavior, Learning, and Regulation in School

Many students who struggle in school are not simply “unmotivated,” “defiant,” or “distracted.” Some are carrying the effects of trauma, chronic stress, disrupted attachment, grief, instability, or untreated behavioral health needs.

A trauma-informed lens helps adults understand that academic and behavioral struggles are often connected to stress responses, emotional regulation difficulties, and unmet support needs rather than willful noncompliance.

For foster youth and students impacted by adversity, this lens is especially important.

What Trauma Can Look Like at School

Trauma does not look the same in every student. In school settings, it may appear as:

- shutting down
- difficulty focusing
- irritability or defiance
- frequent absences
- emotional outbursts
- difficulty trusting adults
- perfectionism or anxiety
- frequent nurse visits or somatic complaints
- peer conflict
- unsafe or impulsive behavior
- inconsistent academic performance

What looks like “not caring” may actually be:

- overwhelm
- fear
- shame
- fatigue

- hypervigilance
- difficulty with executive functioning

Behavior Is Communication

When students act out, withdraw, refuse, or escalate, adults often focus first on compliance. A trauma-informed approach asks a different question:

What is this behavior communicating?

Possible underlying messages may include:

- “I feel unsafe.”
- “I do not understand this work.”
- “I am embarrassed.”
- “I do not know how to regulate right now.”
- “I am expecting rejection or punishment.”
- “Too much is happening at once.”

This does not mean unsafe behavior should be ignored. It means support should address the root issue, not only the surface behavior.

Trauma Can Affect Learning

Trauma can interfere with:

- attention
- memory
- organization
- emotional regulation
- transitions
- frustration tolerance
- verbal processing
- social interpretation
- sleep and energy
- school attendance

A student may be intelligent and capable, but still struggle to perform consistently because of trauma-related dysregulation.

Trauma-Informed Questions to Ask in Meetings

Instead of only asking, “How do we stop this behavior?” ask:

- What may be contributing to the behavior?
- When does the student appear most dysregulated?
- What environments seem to help the student feel safe?
- Are demands being placed on the student that exceed their current regulation capacity?
- What coping skills or co-regulation supports are available?
- Is discipline being used where support is needed?

Trauma-Informed School Responses

Helpful trauma-informed responses may include:

- predictable routines
- calm adult responses
- clear transitions and previews
- reduced punitive discipline
- check-ins with trusted adults
- sensory or movement breaks
- safe spaces for regulation
- positive relationship-building
- behavior plans based on skill-building, not punishment
- coordination with mental health providers

Trauma-Informed Advocacy Reminder

A trauma-informed approach does not lower expectations. It improves how adults help students meet them.

The goal is not to excuse all behavior. The goal is to:

- understand what is driving the behavior
- respond effectively
- build skills
- preserve dignity
- keep the student connected to learning



TRAUMA-INFORMED REFRAME

Instead of asking, **“What is wrong with this student?”**

Ask, **“What may be happening for this student, and what support is needed?”**



EDUCATION ADVOCACY STRATEGY

How to Advocate Effectively and Sustainably

Strong advocacy is not only about knowing rights. It is also about knowing how to engage the system effectively.

The most effective advocates are often those who are:

- organized
- calm
- persistent
- student-centered
- well-documented
- collaborative, but clear

Advocacy is a process. It usually works best when it moves from informal problem-solving to formal request to documented follow-through when needed.

Core Advocacy Principles

Stay Student-Centered

Keep the conversation focused on the student's functioning, needs, strengths, and access to education.

Use Specific Examples

Instead of saying "School is going badly," describe:

- the behaviors observed
- the academic concerns
- the emotional impact
- patterns over time

Put Important Requests in Writing

Written communication creates clarity and documentation.

Ask for Data

Good advocacy relies on more than opinion. Ask what information the school is using to guide decisions.

Follow Up

Many school concerns are not resolved in one meeting. Follow-up is often where progress happens.

A Practical Advocacy Sequence

Step 1 — Raise the Concern Early

Start with the teacher, counselor, case manager, or principal when concerns first appear.

Step 2 — Request a Problem-Solving Meeting

If concerns persist, request an SST, 504 meeting, or check-in with the team.

Step 3 — Document Concerns

Keep track of:

- emails
- report cards
- behavior reports
- attendance data
- work samples
- meeting notes

Step 4 — Ask What Interventions Have Been Tried

Clarify what supports have already been used and whether they have helped.

Step 5 — Request Evaluation if Disability Is Suspected

If struggles persist and a disability may be involved, request a formal evaluation in writing.

Step 6 — Confirm Next Steps

Every meeting should end with:

- what will happen
- who will do it

- when it will happen
- how progress will be reviewed

Advocacy Is Not the Same as Adversarial Communication

It is possible to be both:

- collaborative, and
- clear about concerns

Helpful phrases include:

- “I want to better understand the school’s thinking.”
- “I appreciate the efforts that have been made so far.”
- “I remain concerned because the problem is continuing.”
- “Can we review what has been tried and what comes next?”
- “I would like this request documented in writing.”

When You May Need to Escalate

Escalation may be appropriate when:

- timelines are not being followed
- communication repeatedly breaks down
- supports are not being implemented
- legal rights are being ignored
- the school is refusing to evaluate despite ongoing evidence of concern
- meetings occur without clear outcomes

Escalation does not always mean conflict. It may simply mean moving from site-level conversations to district-level involvement.

ADVOCACY BEST PRACTICE

Strong advocacy is usually: **clear, calm, specific, documented, and persistent.**

SPECIAL EDUCATION DEEP DIVE

Understanding Evaluation, Eligibility, and IEP Development

Special education can feel intimidating because it involves formal legal processes, technical language, and multiple decision points. But at its core, the process asks a simple question:

Does this student have a disability that affects educational performance and requires specialized instruction?

If the answer is yes, the student may be eligible for special education under IDEA.

What a Special Education Evaluation Does

A special education evaluation gathers information across areas of suspected disability to determine:

- whether a disability is present
- how the disability affects school functioning
- whether special education is needed
- what types of supports may be appropriate

Evaluations should be comprehensive and individualized.

Areas That May Be Assessed

Depending on the concern, an evaluation may look at:

- academics
- cognition
- attention
- executive functioning
- speech and language
- fine or gross motor skills
- adaptive functioning

- social-emotional functioning
- behavior
- sensory needs
- health or developmental factors

If a student has complex needs, advocates should ensure the evaluation looks broadly enough at the whole picture.

What Happens After Evaluation

After assessments are completed, the school team holds an eligibility meeting.

At that meeting, the team reviews:

- test results
- teacher input
- caregiver input
- observations
- educational impact
- whether criteria are met
- whether special education is required

A student may have a diagnosis or struggle significantly, but still not qualify under IDEA if the school determines the criteria are not met. In that case, families may still discuss 504 supports or additional general education interventions.

What an IEP Should Include

A strong IEP should clearly describe:

- the student's present levels of performance
- strengths and needs
- measurable annual goals
- services and frequency

- accommodations and modifications
- placement and educational setting
- progress reporting schedule

The IEP should tell a clear story:

What are the student's needs, and how will the school address them?

Related Services That May Be Included

Depending on the student's needs, IEP services may include:

- specialized academic instruction
- counseling
- speech-language services
- occupational therapy
- physical therapy
- behavioral intervention
- social skills support
- ERMHS
- adapted physical education
- transportation

Services should be tied to educational need, not simply included because they sound helpful.

Behavioral Supports Within Special Education

If behavior significantly affects learning, the IEP team may need to consider:

- functional behavioral assessment (FBA)
- behavior support plan (BSP/BIP)
- counseling

- ERMHS
- behavior intervention services
- staff strategies for de-escalation and support

Behavior plans should be individualized and based on function, not just punishment.

Caregiver Participation Matters

Caregivers should ask:

- What does this data mean in plain language?
- How does this affect classroom functioning?
- What are the school's recommendations?
- What goals are being proposed?
- How will progress be measured?
- What will happen if the plan is not working?



IEP CHECK

A strong IEP should answer two questions clearly:

What does this student need?

How will the school provide it?

DISCIPLINE AND STUDENT RIGHTS

Understanding Suspension, Behavior Supports, and Protections

School discipline can be one of the most emotionally charged areas for caregivers and professionals, especially when a student's behavior may be related to trauma, disability, grief, or unmet mental health needs.

Discipline responses that focus only on punishment often fail to address the underlying causes of behavior and may increase student disengagement.

Questions to Ask When Behavior Concerns Arise

When a student is being repeatedly disciplined, ask:

- What behaviors are leading to discipline?
- What happened before the behavior?
- What supports were in place?
- Has the student been assessed for disability-related needs?
- Has a behavior support plan been considered?
- Are trauma or emotional factors contributing?
- Is the student being removed instead of supported?

When Repeated Suspensions Are a Red Flag

Repeated suspensions can signal that:

- current supports are insufficient
- behavior is being punished without intervention
- a disability may be present
- a student needs evaluation
- a behavior intervention plan is needed
- the school is relying too heavily on exclusionary discipline

For some students, repeated suspension should trigger a strong discussion about evaluation and additional support.

Manifestation Determination

For students with IEPs, an important protection applies when suspension reaches a certain threshold.

If a student with an IEP is suspended for enough days to trigger disciplinary review, the school must determine whether the behavior was related to:

- the student's disability, or
- the school's failure to implement the IEP

If the behavior is a manifestation of disability, the response should focus on support and adjustment of services, rather than simply applying the same disciplinary consequences used for nondisabled peers.

Disability, Trauma, and Discipline

Not all trauma-related behavior qualifies as disability-related behavior, but many students who are repeatedly disciplined may need closer review for:

- emotional disturbance
- other health impairment
- autism
- specific learning disability with emotional impact
- mental health-related educational need

When behavior is persistent and significantly impacts school functioning, a formal assessment may be appropriate.

Law Enforcement on Campus

Some schools have School Resource Officers (SROs) or other law enforcement presence.

Caregivers should understand:

- school discipline and law enforcement are not the same
- not all misconduct should become a law enforcement issue
- students still have legal rights
- foster youth and youth of color are often disproportionately impacted by school policing

A trauma-informed and equity-aware approach requires caution about over-criminalization of student behavior.

DISCIPLINE REFRAME

When behavior repeatedly leads to removal, ask:

Is this a discipline problem, a disability issue, a trauma response, or an unmet support need?

FOSTER YOUTH EDUCATION STABILITY

Protecting Educational Continuity for Students in Care

Students in foster care often experience school disruption due to placement changes, transportation challenges, missing records, and inconsistent coordination across systems.

Educational instability can worsen:

- academic decline
- disengagement
- behavior concerns
- attendance issues
- emotional distress
- loss of relationships with trusted adults

California provides important protections to reduce this disruption.

School of Origin

A foster youth may have the right to remain in the school of origin when it is in their best interest, even when a placement changes.

School of origin often refers to the school the student attended when permanently housed, or the school in which the student was last enrolled.

The purpose of this protection is to preserve:

- continuity
- relationships
- stability
- educational progress

Immediate Enrollment

When a foster youth changes schools, enrollment should not be delayed because of missing records or documents.

Students should be enrolled immediately, even if items such as:

- immunization records
- transcripts
- proof of residency
- prior school documents

are still being transferred.

Records Transfer and Partial Credit

Educational transitions often lead to lost coursework and disrupted progress.

Foster youth protections help address this by supporting:

- timely transfer of records
- review of completed coursework
- partial credit for work already completed
- continuation of educational progress despite mobility

This is especially important for middle school and high school youth.

The Importance of the Foster Youth Liaison

The Foster Youth Liaison can be a critical support when:

- a school transfer is delayed
- school-of-origin issues arise
- transportation is unclear
- records are missing
- a student is not receiving adequate support
- there is confusion between school and child welfare roles

The liaison can often help connect the school, district, and child welfare team.

Cross-System Advocacy for Foster Youth

Educational stability for foster youth often depends on coordination among:

- caregivers
- social workers
- probation officers
- school staff
- district liaisons
- behavioral health providers
- CASA volunteers
- FFAs

One of the strongest advocacy questions in these situations is:

Who is coordinating the education plan across systems?

FOSTER YOUTH STABILITY

Placement changes should not automatically mean school changes.
Educational stability should be actively considered and protected.

MENTAL HEALTH SERVICES IN SCHOOLS

Understanding School-Based Behavioral Health Supports

Students do not need to be in special education to receive some forms of school-based mental health support. Schools often provide supports at different levels depending on student need.

These supports may range from universal prevention to highly individualized services.

MTSS and School Mental Health

Most schools use a Multi-Tiered System of Supports (MTSS) framework.

Tier 1 – Universal Supports

Available to all students:

- social-emotional learning
- school climate supports
- PBIS
- universal prevention activities
- wellness programming

Tier 2 – Targeted Supports

For students with emerging needs:

- check-in/check-out systems
- small group counseling
- targeted behavioral interventions
- attendance supports

Tier 3 – Intensive Supports

For students with significant needs:

- individualized counseling
- behavior plans
- wraparound supports

- crisis response
- special education mental health services

Educationally Related Mental Health Services (ERMHS)

ERMHS are mental health services provided through an IEP when a student's emotional or behavioral needs interfere with access to education.

These services may include:

- individual counseling
- group counseling
- family consultation
- behavior intervention
- social skills instruction
- crisis intervention

ERMHS are not simply “therapy at school.” They must be connected to the student's educational needs and reflected in the IEP.

Who May Provide Mental Health Services

Depending on the district and student plan, supports may be provided by:

- school counselors
- school psychologists
- school social workers
- district mental health staff
- contracted providers
- county behavioral health partners

Why Cross-System Communication Matters

Many students receive services from multiple systems at once.

A student may have:

- school counseling
- outside therapy
- psychiatric care
- case management
- child welfare involvement
- probation oversight

When these systems are not aligned, students receive fragmented care. When communication improves, supports are more likely to reinforce one another.



MENTAL HEALTH AND SCHOOL ACCESS

When mental health needs affect a student's ability to participate, regulate, attend, or learn, educational supports should be considered.



ADVOCACY TOOLS AND WORKSHEETS

Practical Tools for Preparing, Organizing, and Following Through

One of the biggest barriers to effective advocacy is not lack of concern — it is lack of structure.

Caregivers and professionals are often juggling many responsibilities, and school concerns can quickly become scattered across emails, calls, report cards, and meeting conversations.

This section functions as the practical backbone of the guide.

Why Tools Matter

Written tools help people:

- organize concerns clearly
 - prepare more confidently
 - track accountability
 - reduce confusion
 - notice patterns over time
 - strengthen follow-up
-

TOOL 1: School Meeting Preparation Worksheet

Use before SST, 504, IEP, discipline, reentry, or other school meetings.

Student Name: _____

School: _____

Grade: _____

Meeting Date: _____

Meeting Type: _____

Student Strengths

What strengths should the team remember and build on?

Current Concerns

What concerns are bringing us to this meeting?

Patterns Observed

When does the student tend to struggle? Are there patterns by class, time of day, staff interaction, peer interaction, transitions, or workload?

Questions to Ask

Supports to Request or Discuss

Desired Outcome

What would a successful next step look like?

TOOL 2: Evaluation Request Template

Subject: Request for Special Education Evaluation

Dear [Principal / Special Education Coordinator / School Team],

I am writing to request a comprehensive evaluation to determine whether [student name] may qualify for special education services under IDEA.

I have ongoing concerns related to [brief description of academic, behavioral, emotional, attention, developmental, or communication concerns]. These concerns appear to be affecting [student name]'s ability to access and make progress in school.

Please provide the assessment plan within the required timeline. Thank you for your support in helping ensure that [student name] receives the services and supports needed to access education.

Sincerely,

[Name]

[Relationship to Student]

[Contact Information]

TOOL 3: School Communication Log

Date	Contact Person	Reason for Communication	What Was Discussed	Next Steps	Follow-Up Needed

TOOL 4: Documentation Checklist

Keep copies of:

- report cards
 - progress notes
 - behavior reports
 - attendance records
 - meeting notices
 - evaluations
 - IEPs
 - 504 Plans
 - emails
 - meeting notes
 - discipline notices
 - work samples
 - medical or behavioral health documents relevant to school functioning
-

TOOL 5: Meeting Notes Template

Meeting Date: _____

Meeting Type: _____

Attendees: _____

Concerns Discussed

Decisions Made

Action Steps

Timelines

Next Meeting Date

TOOL 6: Student Snapshot Form

This can be especially helpful for foster youth with placement or school transitions.

Student Name: _____

Grade: _____

School: _____

Strengths

Triggers or Stressors

Calming Strategies / What Helps

Diagnoses or Relevant Needs, if Appropriate to Share

Educational Concerns

Current Supports

TOOL 10. ADVANCED ACRONYM GLOSSARY

Understanding the Language of Schools

Acronyms are one of the biggest barriers to participation in school meetings. Teams often speak in shorthand, and caregivers may leave meetings confused, embarrassed, or uncertain about what was discussed.

A strong toolkit should not only define acronyms but explain them in plain, functional language.

Special Education Terms

IDEA — Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

A federal law governing special education.

Why it matters: This is the main legal framework for special education eligibility, evaluations, IEPs, and services.

IEP — Individualized Education Program

A legal plan for a student who qualifies for special education. It describes the student's goals, services, accommodations, and supports.

Why it matters: This is the main document that holds the school accountable for delivering special education services.

FAPE — Free Appropriate Public Education

A student's right to an education designed to meet their unique disability-related needs at no cost to the family.

Why it matters: FAPE is one of the core rights underlying special education.

LRE — Least Restrictive Environment

The requirement that students with disabilities be educated with nondisabled peers as much as appropriate.

Why it matters: LRE affects placement, inclusion, and service delivery.

SAI — Specialized Academic Instruction

Instruction designed specifically to meet the learning needs of a student with an IEP.

Why it matters: SAI is often a primary special education service.

ERMHS — Educationally Related Mental Health Services

Mental health services provided through an IEP when emotional or behavioral needs affect school access.

Why it matters: ERMHS may be essential when mental health needs interfere with learning.

FBA — Functional Behavioral Assessment

An assessment used to understand why a behavior is happening and what function it serves.

Why it matters: An FBA can guide more effective, individualized behavior planning.

BIP / BSP — Behavior Intervention Plan / Behavior Support Plan

A structured plan for addressing behavior through support strategies, prevention, skill-building, and response planning.

Why it matters: Behavior plans should help adults respond consistently and effectively.

NPA — Nonpublic Agency

An outside agency contracted to provide services such as therapy or behavior support.

Why it matters: Some specialized services may be delivered through NPAs.

NPS — Nonpublic School

A specialized school placement used when a student's needs cannot be met in a typical school setting.

Why it matters: NPS placement is a significant educational decision and usually reflects intensive need.

DIS / Related Services — Designated Instruction and Services

Support services required for a student to benefit from special education, such as speech, OT, counseling, or transportation.

Why it matters: These services help make the IEP meaningful and accessible.

General Education / Student Support Terms

SST — Student Study Team

A collaborative problem-solving meeting used to review concerns and plan supports for a struggling student.

Why it matters: SST is often an important early intervention step.

MTSS — Multi-Tiered System of Supports

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A framework for providing layered academic, behavioral, and emotional support.

Why it matters: MTSS helps schools organize supports from universal to intensive levels.

PBIS — Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports

A school-wide approach focused on prevention, skill-building, and positive behavior support.

Why it matters: PBIS is often part of how schools structure behavior support.

SEL — Social-Emotional Learning

Instruction and practices that help students develop self-awareness, regulation, relationship skills, and decision-making.

Why it matters: SEL can strengthen school climate and support emotional development.

SARB — School Attendance Review Board

A process used to address significant school attendance concerns.

Why it matters: SARB may come into play when attendance problems are chronic and unresolved.

RTI — Response to Intervention

A framework for identifying and supporting students with academic or behavioral challenges through targeted interventions.

Why it matters: RTI often overlaps with early support planning before special education referral.

California Foster Youth / Systems Terms

AB 490

A California law protecting educational rights and stability for foster youth.

Why it matters: AB 490 is central to school stability, immediate enrollment, and records transfer.

FYSCP — Foster Youth Services Coordinating Program

County-level programs that support educational stability and coordination for foster youth.

Why it matters: FYSCP can be a valuable support when school issues become complex.

COE — County Office of Education

A county-level agency that supports school districts and may provide specialized programs or services.

Why it matters: COEs can help with foster youth, alternative education, and countywide supports.

LEA — Local Education Agency

The public agency responsible for providing education services, usually a school district or charter school.

Why it matters: The LEA is the entity legally responsible for many educational decisions and services.

SELPA — Special Education Local Plan Area

A regional California structure for coordinating special education services across districts.

Why it matters: SELPAs influence regional program and service availability.

CASA — Court Appointed Special Advocate

A trained volunteer who may advocate for a foster youth's educational and well-being needs.

Why it matters: CASAs can be important allies in school advocacy and cross-system planning.

Discipline / Attendance / School Climate Terms

MDR — Manifestation Determination Review

A meeting to determine whether a student's behavior was caused by, or had a direct relationship to, their disability, or resulted from failure to implement the IEP.

Why it matters: MDR protects students with IEPs from inappropriate discipline when disability is involved.

Truancy

Repeated unexcused absences from school.

Why it matters: Truancy may signal deeper issues such as trauma, avoidance, instability, or unmet needs.

Suspension

A temporary removal from school or class due to discipline concerns.

Why it matters: Repeated suspension is often a sign that support strategies need review.

Expulsion

A formal removal from school through a disciplinary process.

Why it matters: Expulsion is one of the most serious school consequences and may significantly affect educational access.

Restorative Practices

Approaches focused on accountability, repair, relationship, and community-building rather than punishment alone.

Why it matters: Restorative practices can reduce harm and support school connection.

Reentry Meeting

A meeting held when a student returns to school after suspension, hospitalization, placement change, or other major interruption.

Why it matters: Reentry planning can help reduce confusion and support a more successful return.

TOOL 11. QUICK REFERENCE GUIDES

High-Utility One-Page Tools for Everyday Use

Quick-reference pages are often the most used part of a toolkit because they allow caregivers and professionals to access essential information quickly without reading the full document.

These should be concise, practical, and visually easy to scan.

QUICK GUIDE A: Know Your Rights in California Schools

Students may have the right to:

- FAPE
- evaluation when disability is suspected
- accommodations under Section 504
- an IEP if eligible
- caregiver participation in educational decisions
- foster youth protections related to school stability, enrollment, and records

QUICK GUIDE B: SST → 504 → IEP Flowchart

Concern

↓

general education supports

↓

SST

↓

504 consideration

↓

evaluation request

↓

assessment plan

↓

eligibility meeting



IEP and services

QUICK GUIDE C: Important California Timelines

- response to evaluation request – 15 calendar days
- completion of assessment – 60 calendar days after consent received
- annual review
- reevaluation cycle – every 3 years

Notes:

QUICK GUIDE D: Top Questions to Ask in School Meetings

- What supports have already been tried?
 - What data are we using?
 - What patterns are we seeing?
 - What strengths does the student show?
 - What might help next?
 - How will progress be measured?
 - If this plan does not work, what happens next?
 - Is evaluation appropriate at this point?
 - Who is responsible for each step?
 - When will the team review progress again?
-

QUICK GUIDE E: Red Flags That a Student May Need More Support

A student may need additional intervention or evaluation when there are persistent concerns about:

- academics
 - attention
 - behavior
 - attendance
 - emotional regulation
 - peer relationships
 - organization
 - communication
 - developmental functioning
 - repeated reports from multiple adults
-

QUICK GUIDE F: Meeting Closing Checklist

Before leaving the meeting, confirm:

- next steps
 - who is responsible
 - timeline
 - follow-up date
 - documents to be provided
-

QUICK GUIDE G: Phrases That Build Partnership

- “Can you help me understand the school’s thinking?”
- “What supports have been tried so far?”
- “I appreciate the efforts that have been made.”
- “I remain concerned because the issue is continuing.”

- “What would the next step be if this is not enough?”
 - “Can we summarize next steps before we end?”
 - “Who will be responsible for each action item?”
-

FINAL REMINDERS

Educational advocacy works best when it is grounded in clarity, preparation, persistence, and partnership.

Students do not need to fail completely before support becomes appropriate. Early intervention matters. Documentation matters. Cross-system communication matters. Relationships matter.

Most importantly, the student matters.

The goal is not simply to navigate systems. The goal is to help ensure that students are seen fully, supported appropriately, and connected to the educational opportunities they need to learn, stabilize, and succeed.

Keep asking:

- What does this student need?
- What has already been tried?
- What can be done now?
- Who is responsible?
- How will we know whether the plan is working?

Those questions often move advocacy forward.

END OF MANUAL

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