

Navigating the Special Education System: A Guide for Parents in Rock Island County

1. Your Rights (The Essentials)

Under the **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)** and Illinois law, you have specific "Procedural Safeguards" to protect you and your child.

- **Right to Participate:** You are an equal, mandatory member of the IEP team. You have the right to be at meetings and help make decisions.
- **Prior Written Notice:** The school must provide written notice (usually 10 days in advance in Illinois) *before* they change your child's services, placement, or evaluation.
- **Access to Records:** You can see and copy all of your child's school records at any time. The school must provide them within 10 business days of your request.
- **Independent Evaluation (IEE):** If you disagree with the school's evaluation, you can request an evaluation by an outside expert—often paid for by the school district.
- **"Stay Put" Rights:** If you disagree with a proposed IEP change and officially challenge it (within 10 calendar days in Illinois), your child remains in their current educational placement until the dispute is resolved.
- **Language Access:** You have the right to an interpreter and translated documents if English is not your primary language.

2. Steps to Establishing an IEP

Step 1: The Request (Child Find)

If you suspect a disability, write a letter to the school principal or Special Education Coordinator requesting a "Full and Individual Evaluation."

The Illinois Rule: The school must respond to your written request in writing within **14 school days**, either agreeing to the evaluation or explaining why they are refusing.

Step 2: Evaluation

If the school agrees, you will sign a consent form. The school must test your child in all areas of suspected disability (speech, academics, behavior, motor skills, etc.).

Step 3: Eligibility Meeting

The team (including you) meets to review the test results. To qualify for an IEP, the student must have one of the 13 qualifying disability categories, and the team must show that the disability "adversely affects" their educational performance.

Step 4: Creating the IEP

The Illinois Rule: The entire process—from the day you sign the consent form to the day the IEP is finalized and implemented—must be completed within **60 school days**.

The finalized IEP must include:

- **PLAAFP (Present Levels):** A detailed snapshot of how your child is doing right now.
- **Goals:** Specific, measurable academic or functional goals your child will work on for one year.
- **Services:** The exact help they will get (e.g., 30 minutes of speech therapy per week).

- **Placement:** Where the services will happen, giving priority to the "Least Restrictive Environment" (keeping them with general education peers as much as possible).

3. Maintaining the IEP

- **Annual Review:** An IEP legally expires every year. The team must meet at least once every 12 months to review progress, update goals, and adjust services.
- **Three-Year Reevaluation:** Every three years, the school must review data and, if needed, retest to ensure the child continues to qualify for services and to determine whether their needs have changed.
- **Requesting a Meeting:** You don't have to wait for the annual date! If the plan isn't working, you can request an "IEP Revision Meeting" at any time. The school has 10 calendar days to respond to your request.
- **Progress Reports:** You should receive specific updates on your child's progress toward their IEP goals as often as you receive general education report cards.

4. Local Resource & Contact Bank

Family Matters (PTIC)	Free parent training, 1-on-1 IEP coaching, and advocacy across Illinois.	1-866-436-7842
The Arc of the Quad Cities	Local advocacy, community resources, and support for	(309) 786-6474

	intellectual/developmental disabilities.	
Equip for Equality	Legal advice, a Special Education Helpline, and protection of rights for students.	1-866-KIDS-046
Child Care Resource & Referral (Midwestern IL)	Finding inclusive childcare and early childhood resources in Rock Island/Moline.	(309) 205-3070
Prairie State Legal Services	Legal help and advice for low-income families (Rock Island Office).	(309) 794-1328
ISBE Special Education	Filing formal state complaints or requesting state mediation.	(217) 782-5589

Pro-Tip for Parents

Keep a "Purple Folder" (or a dedicated binder): Keep every piece of paper the school gives you in one place. If it isn't in writing, it didn't happen. Always follow up on phone calls or in-person conversations with a short email saying, *"Simply to confirm our conversation today regarding..."* to create a paper trail.

Parent Checklist: Understanding "Prior Written Notice" (PWN)

What is a Prior Written Notice?

Despite the confusing name, a Prior Written Notice is the school district's formal written explanation of a decision it has made regarding your child's special education.

The Golden Rule of Special Ed: If the school proposes a change to your child's IEP, or if they *refuse* a formal request you made, they must give you a PWN **at least 10 calendar days before** the change happens.

The "Must-Have" Checklist

Under Illinois and federal law, a valid PWN *must* contain the following seven pieces of information. If a school hands you a PWN form, check it against this list. If any of these are missing or left blank, the form is incomplete:

- 1. What is happening?** A clear description of the action the school is proposing to take OR refusing to take.
- 2. Why is it happening?** An explanation of exactly *why* the school is proposing or refusing this action. (Note: "We don't have the staff" or "We don't do that here" are not legally valid reasons.)
- 3. What data was used?** A description of every evaluation, test, record, or report the school used to make its decision.
- 4. What else was considered?** A description of other options the IEP team talked about and the specific reasons why those options were rejected.

5. What other factors matter? A description of any other factors that played a role in the school's proposal or refusal (e.g., behavior, attendance, medical needs).

6. Your Rights: A statement confirming that you have protection under special education procedural safeguards (your parent rights).

7. Who can help? A list of resources or contacts you can reach out to for help understanding your rights (like the contacts in your resource bank!).

When should you receive a PWN?

You should receive this document anytime the school proposes or refuses to:

- Evaluate your child (Initial or Re-evaluation).
- Change your child's disability category or eligibility status.
- Change your child's educational placement (the environment where they learn).
- Change the provision of a "Free Appropriate Public Education" (FAPE)—this includes adding, changing, or removing services, minutes, or accommodations in the IEP.

Red Flags to Watch Out For

- **Vague language:** The form should be specific to *your* child and their data, not a generic copy-paste statement.
- **Blank boxes:** Sometimes, school software leaves sections like "Other options considered" completely blank. If they didn't consider other options, they should write "None." A blank box renders a form legally incomplete.

- **You don't understand it:** By law, the PWN must be written in language understandable to the general public and in your native language. If it is full of acronyms or legal jargon you don't understand, ask them to rewrite or explain it.

Here is the complete list of website addresses and official citations to back up the information in the guide. You can copy and paste these directly into your resource bank for parents so they have the direct links to the laws and the organizations.

1. Legal Rights, Prior Written Notice & Timelines

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) Official Documents:

- **Notice of Procedural Safeguards for Parents/Guardians of Students with Disabilities:** This is the official legal document outlining parent rights and Prior Written Notice (PWN) requirements in Illinois.
 - Link: isbe.net/SPEDReqNotConForms/nc_proc_sfgrds_34-57j.pdf
- **Educational Rights and Responsibilities: Understanding Special Education in Illinois (The Parent Guide):** ISBE's comprehensive, parent-friendly breakdown of the special education process.
 - Link: isbe.net/Documents/Parent-Guide-Special-Ed-Aug20.pdf

Illinois Special Education Timelines (The Law):

- **23 Illinois Administrative Code 226.110:** This is the specific Illinois state law that dictates the 14-school-day rule for a school to respond to an evaluation request, and the 60-school-day rule to complete the evaluation and IEP process.
 - Link (*Equip for Equality's excellent parent-friendly timeline chart based on this law*): equipforequality.org/resource/special-education-timelines/

Federal Law (IDEA):

- **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Sec. 300.503:** The federal statute governing what must be included in a Prior Written Notice.
 - *Link:* sites.ed.gov/idea/regs/b/e/300.503

2. Local Organizations & Contact Links

Family Matters Parent Training and Information Center (PTIC)

- *Website:* fmptic.org
- *Details:* The federally funded PTIC for Illinois (outside of Cook County), provides free training and 1-on-1 IEP support.

The Arc of the Quad Cities Area

- *Website:* arcqca.org
- *Details:* Local advocacy and community support programs for individuals with intellectual and developmental disabilities.

Equip for Equality

- *Website:* equipforequality.org
- *Details:* The federally mandated Protection and Advocacy System for the State of Illinois, offering a Special Education Helpline and legal guidance.

Child Care Resource & Referral of Midwestern Illinois

- *Website:* childcareillinois.org
- *Details:* Operated by SAL Family & Community Services in Moline, this is the specific CCR&R agency serving Rock Island County to help families find inclusive childcare and navigate assistance programs.

Prairie State Legal Services (Moline Office)

- *Website:* pslegal.org
- *Details:* Provides free civil legal services for low-income residents and those age 60 and over. The Moline office specifically serves Rock Island County.

Illinois State Board of Education (ISBE) - Special Education Department

- *Website:* isbe.net/specialeducation
- *Details:* The state governing body where parents can file formal state complaints or request state-sponsored IEP facilitation and mediation.