

PTN EXCLUSIVE ARTICLE

Navigating the Path: A Parent's Guide to School Accommodations

By: Robert Urkofsky

Hi Parents,

In the last issue, I introduced you to my daughters, Hailey and Peyton. You learned a bit about their lives, including some of the school accommodations they receive. I've been invited to write for the PTN News again, and Lori asked if I would focus specifically on the "how-to" of school accommodations.

Before getting into the meat and potatoes of this topic, I want to acknowledge that while my name is on this article, it reflects more than just my perspective. Like most things I try to do well, I rely heavily on collaboration. I talked it through with my wife, Felicia, and also shared it with our daughters' assistant principal, Kelly Webb of Nixon Academy in Cerritos, California, who offered valuable constructive feedback.

We specifically sought her input because of the way she supported our family during the girls' 504 meeting. In addition to addressing their immediate needs, she demonstrated a strong ability to anticipate future supports—such as ensuring parent availability during overnight trips and access to a private changing space for PE at the secondary level.

While much of what I share comes from my experience as a parent, it is also shaped by my professional background. I have been a teacher for 30 years, and my wife, Felicia, has been teaching for over 20. Our careers have been at the secondary level, so navigating the "parent side" of accommodations at the elementary level was a new and eye-opening experience for us.

A Note on Perspective

Whether your child has a 504 Plan (the most common) or an IEP, I encourage families to view accommodations as supports to be used when truly needed—not necessarily as the default response to every challenge. In my view, accommodations represent the most supportive structure available; however, whenever possible, students should also practice working with fewer supports.

Most of their lives beyond school will not include formal 504 Plans or IEPs. That said, students should always advocate for their needs and never feel embarrassed about exercising their rights. The goal is simple: to prepare them for a future in which they have the skills to succeed, even when these formal structures are no longer in place.

With that in mind, I'll shift to a more direct, professional tone to discuss the specifics of school accommodations.

Preparing Early: A Clear Path to Kindergarten Supports

Both an IEP (Individualized Education Program) and a 504 Plan are designed to support students with disabilities, but they operate under different laws and provide different types of services.

- **IEP (Individualized Education Program):** Governed by the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), an IEP provides specialized instruction and related services for students whose disabilities affect their ability to make progress in the general curriculum. An IEP may modify

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what a student is taught and includes measurable goals, along with services such as speech therapy, occupational therapy, or small-group instruction.

- **504 Plan:** Falling under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, this is a civil rights protection that ensures students with disabilities have equal access to education. A 504 Plan typically does not change what a child is learning; instead, it changes how the child accesses that learning through accommodations such as extended time, preferential seating, movement breaks, or medical supports.

The Simplest Distinction:

- **IEP = Specialized instruction** (what is taught may change)
- **504 = Accommodations** (how learning is accessed changes)

Neither is “better” than the other. They serve different levels of need, but both exist to level the playing field.

Start Early—Not Anxious

Some families prefer to act early rather than wait. This is not impatience; it is preparation. Few processes unfold perfectly, and building in extra time allows for adjustments without the stress of a looming deadline.

If you feel behind on a suggested timeline, do not panic. These are proactive guidelines, not parenting deadlines. I tend to err on the side of starting too early, so take this perspective with that in mind. Think of kindergarten as “Day 1” and work backward from there. The goal is simple: your child walks into school with supports already in place.

The Kindergarten Countdown: A Formalized Timeline

Early Conversations (Ages 2–4)

Preparation often begins years before kindergarten. Many families are already working with pediatricians or specialists by age two or three. At this stage, you can begin gathering documentation that will serve as the foundation for your child’s school plan.

12–18 Months Before Day 1 (The “Data” Phase)

- **Goal:** Build your evidence
- **What to do:** Gather all private evaluations. If you don’t have a formal diagnosis but have concerns, this is the time to consult a specialist.
- **Key Action:** Start a “School Transition” binder (digital or physical) to keep doctor’s notes and observations in one place

9–12 Months Before Day 1 (The “Initial Contact” Phase)

- **Goal:** Get on the district’s radar
- **What to do:** Contact your local elementary school and ask about the “Child Find” process—a legal mandate requiring districts to identify and evaluate children with disabilities at no cost to parents
 - The best course of action is to ask specifically for the School Psychologist or the administrator who serves as the liaison to the special education department to ensure the “Child Find” process is triggered immediately
- **Key Action:** Attend a “Kindergarten Roundup” early and mention your intent to seek an evaluation

6 Months Before Day 1 (The “Formal Request” Phase)

- **Goal:** Trigger the legal timeline
- **What to do:** Submit your written request for evaluation. Once you sign the district’s formal Assessment Plan, the district typically has a set window (often 60 days) to complete testing

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3–4 Months Before Day 1 (The “Eligibility” Phase)

- **Goal:** Determine eligibility for an IEP or 504 Plan
- **Key Action:** Attend the eligibility meeting. If your child qualifies, the team will decide which plan best fits their needs

2 Weeks Before Day 1 (The “Connection” Phase)

- **Goal:** Humanize the paperwork
- **Key Action:** Send a friendly introductory email to your child’s teacher with a one-page summary of your child’s strengths and interests. Teachers are especially busy at this time, so keeping it brief is helpful. This helps them see the child, not just the file

Some Final Thoughts

IEPs and 504 Plans are reviewed annually, so you are never “locked in.” However, remember that your 5-year-old will eventually become a 15-year-old. Their needs will evolve—from needing a private restroom in the nurse’s office to requiring a private changing area for PE in high school. Planning for the long term is always wise.

I often say: **assume good intentions**, even as you advocate fiercely for your child. Most people are overwhelmingly on your child’s side. We are all in this together.

Building Independence: The “Your Child Leads” Model

In July 2024, Felicia and I attended the PTN National Conference in Phoenix, Arizona. One session, *Preparing for Sleepovers and Overnight Camp* led by Marla and Maddie Martin a dynamic teacher and her equally dynamic daughter. The session offered practical advice on the topic, but one idea stood out as truly transformative: put your child in charge of their own meeting.

Learning by doing is essential. They won’t be perfect at it—and, most likely, neither will you (I certainly wasn’t)—but it is a skill developed through practice.

- **Self-Advocacy:** Children need opportunities to learn how to speak for themselves
- **Reflection:** This approach makes them active participants in their lives, rather than passive observers

Hailey and Peyton began leading their meetings at ages 9 and 10. They weren’t thrilled at first, but by the second year, they had grown more comfortable and less anxious. When I asked Peyton what she thought about next year, she said, “Piece of cake.” We both recognize that new nerves may develop when they move on to middle school, but she has already proven that she can do it. Eventually, Felicia and I will simply be there to sign the paperwork.

I’ve shared a lot here, but I hope it helps. If you have questions, please feel free to contact either Felicia (the smart one) at yang.felicia@gmail.com or me (Rob, the loud one) at rurkofsky@gmail.com.

Our goal isn’t just to get them through the next school year; it’s to help them find their own voice. One day, 504 meetings and IEP evaluations will be a thing of the past. What will remain is a young adult who knows exactly who they are and what they need to succeed.

That is the real “Day 1” we are all working toward.

About the Author

Robert Urkofsky is a single-subject social studies teacher with 18 years of middle school experience and is completing his 13th year at the high school level. He currently teaches AP Microeconomics and U.S. History. At one point, he would have described teaching as his primary identity. Later, that identity became husband and teacher, and eventually evolved into dad and husband who teaches. He has worked for the Los Angeles Unified School District for the past 27 years.