

Section 504 and Visual Impairment: Frequently Asked Questions

As a preview to the *Section 504 and Visual Impairment: Frequently Asked Questions*, the following is offered as a discussion of service differences provided under Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act. A side-by-side is linked to further understanding when comparing the two programs.

First, Section 504 is a civil rights, non-discrimination statute that protects persons with disabilities but is not funded by the government. IDEA is a fully funded educational law that details specialized educational services for students with disabilities receiving instruction from a local education agency (LEA) that accepts federal funds. EVERY student under the provision of IDEA is covered under Section 504, though not every student under the provision of Section 504 is covered under IDEA. To be covered under IDEA the student must meet one or more of [13 specific-disability categories](#). Section 504's definition of "a student with a disability" is broader than the IDEA's definition and is **not limited to** specific disability categories. "Some students with disabilities only qualify for Section 504 services (accommodations only), and some students qualify for services through an IEP [individualized education program] (accommodations and/or modifications to curriculum)" ([Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973](#)).

To qualify for services under IDEA, the student's disability in one or more of the 13 specific disability categories must also [adversely affect their educational performance](#), creating a need for specially designed instruction; whereas to qualify under Section 504, the student's disability does not require specialized instruction. Both programs demand students identified as having a disability be provided a free and appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE in Section 504 is defined as the right to the provision of regular or special education and related services that are designed to meet the individual educational needs of persons with disabilities as adequately as the needs of nondisabled persons are met, and that are provided without cost (except for fees imposed on nondisabled students and their parents) 34 C.F.R. §§ 104.33(b)-(c). ([Questions and Answers on the ADA Amendments Act of 2008 for Students with Disabilities Attending Public Elementary and Secondary Schools](#)). Conversely IDEA requires that "all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education that emphasizes special education and related services **designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment and independent living**" and "to ensure that the **rights of children with disabilities and parents of such children are protected . . .**" (Section 1400(d)). IDEA offers services and protections to students with disabilities beyond those that are offered for their non-disabled peers with the goal of improved educational performance. Section 504 seeks to meet educational needs by removing barriers, not providing academic growth. **It is a question of access to education with Section 504 and progress in educational outcomes with IDEA.**

Use the side-by-side below to see the similarities and differences between Section 504 and IDEA

Section 504 and IDEA Side-by Side Comparison Document

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973	LAW	Individuals with Disability Education Act (IDEA, amended 2004)
U.S. Department of Education: Office of Civil Rights (OCR)	AGENCY	U.S. Department of Education: Office of Special Education & Rehabilitation Services (OSERS)
Life	AGES	Birth to 21
Not a provision of Section 504	CHILD FIND	A provision in the IDEA requiring each state to locate, identify, and evaluate all children suspected of having a disability and who are in need of special education and related services. 34 CFR 300.111 (a)
Any disability; there is no exhaustive list per 34 CFR 104.3(j) . 1. Have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. 2. Have a record of such an impairment; or 3. Be regarded as having such an impairment.	ELIGIBILITY	1. Identified disability in one of the 13 disability categories, and 2. Requires specially designed instruction and related services to benefit from education. (Parent’s Guide to the ARD Process , p. 8) (34 CFR §300.8(a)(1), 300.301(c)(2)(ii))
School district is responsible for identifying and evaluating children (elementary & secondary) with disabilities at no cost to the student or family; though not required, it is best practice to reevaluate annually or if a change occurs.	EVALUATION	Initial evaluation in areas of concern or suspected disability; Re-evaluation required, at minimum, every three years at no cost to the student or family.
Consent is required prior to evaluation, though the school can develop a plan without family participation.	FAMILY INVOLVEMENT	Consent is required prior to evaluation, and the family is a required member of the individualized education plan (IEP) or individualized family service plan (IFSP) team.
No specific guidelines to protect the rights of the family or student. OCR will examine the identification and evaluation of students with disabilities and the procedural safeguards provided to those students, Office for Civil Rights. (2020)	PROCEDURAL SAFEGUARDS	Clearly defined set of procedural safeguards that must be followed to ensure the rights of the family and student.
Not required to be written unless a team knowledgeable about the student determines the student needs accommodations or other services; those measures are then written in a 504 plan	WRITTEN PLAN	A written plan, is required <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Birth to 2, an IFSP ● 3 to 21, an IEP

Not required	GOALS	Goals must be written and reviewed annually based on areas of need as identified in the present levels of academic achievement and functional performance (PLAAFP) and evaluation data
The student may receive reasonable accommodations to level the playing field and remove barriers to have the same access as their peers.	ACCOMMODATIONS	Accommodations reduce or eliminate the effects of a student’s disability, but do not reduce learning expectations.
Not typical in a 504 plan for school-aged students. See Title II of the American with Disabilities Act (ADA) for more information with regards to public entities.	MODIFICATIONS	Modifications change the content or performance expectations of what the student is required to learn.
The student completes the same curriculum as peers without disabilities	CURRICULUM	The IEP and IFSP may be adjusted to reflect the unique needs of the student.
A student may receive developmental, corrective, or other supportive services including psychological, counseling, transportation, and medical diagnostic services, i.e., orientation and mobility. Students with Visual Impairments: Eligibility for Special Education , p. 14; Office for Civil Rights. (2020)	SERVICES	Services are provided per the needs of the student to give access to a variety of educational environments, including vision, orientation, and mobility, etc.
Placement in the elementary and secondary school context; refers to a regular program in which a student receives educational and/or related services, i.e., orientation and mobility services Office for Civil Rights. (2020)	PLACEMENT	Placement must be in the least restrictive environment (LRE) based on a continuum of service options from general education to self-contained setting.
Not required	ANNUAL REVIEW	Required
Family or adult student may file a complaint with the governing body for Section 504, the Office of Civil Rights	RECOURSE	The family, student, and local education agency (LEA) follow specific guidelines, such as mediation and due process procedures to register and file a complaint.
No additional financial support to provide support services or auxiliary aids.	FUNDING	Federal funding available to provide services, instructional supports, and materials per the identified needs of the student.
504 protects students in federally funded colleges. Students may receive the same accommodations, but the office of disability services at each college decides what to provide based on their evaluation/assessment process.	COLLEGE	IDEA ends when a student graduates with a regular high school diploma or turns 21, i.e., ages out. The student may choose to disclose their disability to receive protections under Section 504 and American with Disability Act (ADA) See TAC 89.1070 for more information

Section 504 and Visual Impairment: Frequently Asked Questions

1. What does it mean to be identified as eligible for services under Section 504 based on visual impairment (VI)?
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10. When might a student move from being identified as 504-VI to being referred for a special education evaluation as having a visual Impairment and vice-versa?
11. If the student has good grades and is working on grade level, does that mean they should be served via Section 504 regardless of visual abilities?
12. Can Section 504 services be used as a safety net upon entry and/or if parents refuse special education services?
13. Who should make up the plan for a student identified as eligible for services under Section 504-VI?
14. When should a Section 504 representative be invited to an ARD meeting for a student who is being evaluated for eligibility Special Education services due to a visual impairment?
15. Does the expanded core curriculum apply to students who are served under Section 504-VI?
16. What is the difference between Section 504-vision impairment and special education eligibility based on visual impairment?
17. Is Child Find a provision of Section 504?
18. Should students in the evaluation process be considered for both Section 504 and special education services relating to vision?
19. What resources should be made available to a student identified as eligible for services under Section 504-VI?
20. What other considerations should be considered for a student identified as eligible for services under Section 504-VI?

1. What does it mean to be identified as eligible for services under Section 504 based on visual impairment?

Section 504 is a civil rights statute that requires the needs of students with disabilities to be met as adequately as the needs of the non-disabled are met. Section 504 protections can be triggered if there is suspicion that the student has a disability that substantially limits a major life activity. Major life activities, as defined in the Section 504 regulations at 34 C.F.R. 104.3(j)(2)(ii), include functions such as caring for oneself, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working. This list is not exhaustive. Other functions can be major life activities for purposes of Section 504 (Protecting Students with Disabilities, n.d.). To be protected under Section 504, a student must be determined to: (1) have a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities; or (2) have a record of such an impairment; or (3) be regarded as having such an impairment. In the case of 504 –VI the impairment is physical and is related to vision.

2. Why the interest in students who are considered Section 504 due to visual impairment (504-VI)?

The American Printing House for the Blind (APH) began asking Texas to collect statewide data on the number of students identified as 504-VI in 2012 as part of the Annual Registration of Students in Texas with Visual Impairments. Over that period, there was a significant increase in the number of students identified as 504-VI. The Texas Action Committee for the Education of Students with Visual Impairments noted in the 2021 census those students who were identified as having visual impairment through the annual VI Registration dropped 4.3% (n=393, the same year the students identified as 504-VI increased 7.3% (n=160). Previous years saw increases of 238 for 2020 (12.2%) and 239 for 2019 (14.1%). The committee believed it was identifying a Child Find issue, and that some of the students now identified as 504-VI should have been identified as having a visual impairment under IDEA.

Committee discussions over this data is the origin of this document. During the time of this investigation, new census data was reported that still followed the trends of the previous years. In 2022 the census of students who were identified as having visual impairment through the annual VI Registration dropped 2.6% (n=221), while the students identified as 504-VI increased 1.4% (n=32). For additional years' census data, please go to: [Statewide VI SPED Results](#). For more information, contact Texas School for the Blind and Visually Impaired (TSBVI) Outreach at (512) 206-9225 or (800) 872-5273.

3. Is an eye report from an ophthalmologist or optometrist considered an evaluation?

Reports from an eye medical professional are considered part of a full evaluation and should be documented as relevant data in decision making. The presence of the report may raise the suspicion of a visual disability. If a medical or outside evaluation is required, it must be provided at no cost to the families (([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), p. 10). Evaluation does not necessarily mean “test.” In a Section 504 context, “evaluation” refers to a gathering of data or information from a **variety of sources** so the committee can make the required determinations ([Protecting Students with Disabilities, Updated January 10, 2020, OCR FAQ 17-34](#)). It is important to note, it is a requirement that a person who “can interpret the meaning of the evaluation data” be present at Section 504 meetings (([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), p. 12). Evaluation and placement in (c)(2) of [CFR 34 B Chapter 1 Part 104 D §104.35](#) states when evaluating and making placement decisions, the local education agency (LEA) must

“establish procedures to ensure that information obtained from all such sources is documented and carefully considered”. This may indicate that a person who is trained in visual impairments, such as the teacher of students with visual impairments (TSVI) or certified orientation and mobility specialist (COMS) would help interpret the eye-medical report.

4. May a TSVI consult with a 504 committee on a student with a visual impairment?

Yes. Anytime a TSVI is asked consult on a student, parental permission must be obtained. If it is suspected the student has an impairment in vision and needs special education and related services, and evaluation should be initiated.

For full details, go to [Students with Visual Impairments: Eligibility for Special Education](#) p. 20.

5. What is the role of the TSVI when consulting with a 504 committee?

The TSVI’s role is to aid the 504 committee’s understanding of possible issues with vision that may be improved with accommodations or instructional strategies without conducting a formal evaluation. For example, it would be beneficial to help the 504 committee understand the process of patching for amblyopia or to explain how the loss of vision in only one eye could be accommodated.

For full details, go to [Students with Visual Impairments: Eligibility for Special Education](#) p. 20.

6. What are the limitations of the TSVI when consulting with a 504 committee?

There is a limit to a TSVI’s ability to identify accommodations and instructional strategies without a formal evaluation. When consulting with a 504 committee, a TSVI may not utilize tests or procedures that would be used in their FVE [functional vision evaluation] or LMA [learning media assessment]. A TSVI should never be asked to observe with the specific viewpoint of determining a need for services as this would violate 34 CFR, §300.304(b)(2) which states no "single measure or assessment" may be used "as the sole criterion for determining whether a child is a child with a disability."

If it is suspected that the student has an impairment in vision and needs special education and related services, a FIIE [Full and Individual Initial Evaluation] should be initiated.

For full details, go to: [Students with Visual Impairments: Eligibility for Special Education](#) p. 20.

7. Who should make up the Section 504 team when visual impairment is a concern?

Section 504 regulations require that decisions are made by a team which, in best, practice includes the parents and/or the student. There must be one representative who can make placement decisions for the student. There must be a representative who is knowledgeable about the student. This may include the student, parents or guardians, teachers, counselor, behavior specialist, campus 504 coordinator, and/or other instructional or related service providers ([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), p. 12). Finally, as stated above there must be someone who can interpret the meaning of evaluation data. Since up to 90% of all learning is visual, it may make sense to include a TSVI or a COMS in the meeting if possible visual impairment is being considered.

8. How does the Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee know when to make a Section 504 or IDEA (Special Education) recommendation?

The Admission, Review, and Dismissal (ARD) committee makes placement decisions during initial and three-year or other reevaluation meetings in Special Education, and 504 should be considered for each student, based upon a variety of sources, and include input from the parent and student when appropriate. Public elementary and secondary recipients are required to provide a free appropriate public education to qualified students with disabilities. Such an education, consists of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the individual educational needs of students with disabilities as adequately as the needs of students without disabilities are met ([Protecting Students with Disabilities, Updated January 10, 2020, OCR FAQ 17-34](#)). If the student is determined to require specially designed instruction in relation to their visual impairment, then a referral to special education is mandated as stated in 34 CFR, §300.39(b)(3). If the student’s educational needs can be met with a placement in the general education class with supplementary aids and services, then Section 504 is appropriate. A need for a change in general education placement would be a reason for referral to special education. Collaboration between Special Education and Section 504 coordinators can create a bridge to provide services in a fluid progression according to student growth, progress, and individual need ([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), p. 12).

9. Can a student who does not qualify as visually impaired receive O&M services through Section 504?

Yes. O&M is included in the definition of services that can be provided under Section 504. Therefore, O&M services can be provided under Section 504 if the ARD committee determines that the student does not qualify for special education under IDEA but needs O&M services as a child with a visual impairment.

The IDEA states if a student has a visual impairment "but only needs a related service and not special education, the child is not a child with a disability under this part" (34 CFR, §300.8(a)(2)). The ARD committee is encouraged to ensure that a complete evaluation of the expanded core curriculum (ECC) for students with visual impairments has been thoroughly evaluated, and that it has been determined no additional needs in any other area would warrant specially designed instruction. It is uncommon that a student with a visual impairment would only need O&M services. ([Students with visual impairments: Eligibility for special education \(2021\)](#) p.14)

Per [CRF, §§300.305\(e\)](#), “a public agency must evaluate a child with a disability in accordance with CRF, §§300.004 through 300.011 before determining that the child is no longer a child with a disability.”

10. When might a student move from being identified as 504-VI to being referred for a special education evaluation as having a visual impairment and vice-versa?

For a student served through 504-VI, any new medical report indicating an increase in vision loss or progression of visual condition causing a visual impairment may be a trigger for special education evaluation. Additionally, the need for the student to receive specialized services and support that are part of the expanded core curriculum (ECC) may trigger an evaluation. The ECC is used to define

concepts and skills that often require specialized instruction for students who are blind or visually impaired, including deafblind, to compensate for decreased opportunities to learn incidentally by observing others ([What is the ECC?](#)). It focuses on independence, assistive technology, vocational training, social engagement, and more to prepare a child to achieve their fullest life possible and success as adults. Finally, if the 504 plan has become or is shown to be unsuccessful, a referral to special education may be warranted.

It is possible that some students with disabilities who are eligible for special education services may not require special education for the entirety of their educational career. If a student has a stable eye condition, has improved visual capabilities due to surgical intervention, or needs minimal support from a vision professional, a move to 504-VI may be appropriate. These decisions are made based on current data and the child's ability to make progress in and have access to the general curriculum. Collaboration between Special Education and Section 504 coordinators can create a bridge to provide services in a fluid progression according to student growth, progress, and individual need ([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), p. 7).

Per [CRF, §§300.305\(e\)](#), "a public agency must evaluate a child with a disability in accordance with CRF, §§300.004 through 300.011 before determining that the child is no longer a child with a disability."

11. If the student has good grades and is working on grade level, does that mean they should be served via Section 504 regardless of visual abilities?

No. Grades should not be a deciding or sole factor. It is one piece of information. Placement decisions are made in an individual decision-making process by an evaluation team. Information from a variety of sources should be reviewed and considered before placement decisions are made. For instance, an eye-medical report that indicates a progressive eye condition may make a special education referral appropriate even if the student is performing well at the current moment, or the student is not making adequate progress despite adjustments in accommodations and instructional support. Additionally, input from the family and/or student may indicate they are spending a burdensome or an extraordinary amount of time completing standard homework assignments that may interfere with the student's ability to access extracurricular activities and/or make friends.

12. Can Section 504 services be used as a safety net upon entry into a district and/or if parents refuse special education services?

Yes. If a student is suspected of having a disability and will be or is referred for a special education evaluation for the first time, Section 504 services may be used to provide some of the accommodations and/or instructional support needed for the student to benefit from instruction while the evaluation process is undertaken for special education. Also, if a student's parents refuse to allow the evaluation of a student suspected of a disability, Section 504 support could be instituted to help provide the student access to the curriculum. In these instances, local education agencies should follow their established processes when a parent refuses evaluation.

13. Who should make up the plan for a student identified as eligible for services under Section 504-VI?

While it is not specifically required for a vision professional (TSVI or COMS) to be involved in the Section 504 team, it might be considered best practice, especially when eye medical information is being considered. The vision professional is knowledgeable about evaluation data which includes the eye medical information. They may also be able to recommend supplementary aids and instructional supports that are available to children who are blind or have a visual impairment that may not be known by the traditional membership of the Section 504 committee. (See Question 4 of this document for information on the TSVI's role in consulting with the Section 504 committee)

14. When should a Section 504 representative be invited to an ARD meeting for a student who is being evaluated for a visual impairment?

When a student is evaluated for a visual impairment for special education, and the TSVI and COMS recommend the student not qualify for vision services based on data collected and reflected in the written reports, it is best practice to invite a member of the Section 504 team to the ARD meeting if vision is the only special education service under consideration. Though the decision to qualify a student as having a visual impairment rests with the ARD committee, the recommendation of the vision professional carries much weight. If the committee determines the student is not eligible for vision services because they do not meet eligibility requirements as a student with a visual impairment, a Section 504 placement may be appropriate. With a Section 504 committee member present at the ARD meeting, information on the student's functional vision status and recommendations within the vision evaluations are used when considering 504 placement and developing a 504 plan for the student. Note: If the student has a disability and receives special education in other eligibility areas, attendance by a Section 504 committee member is not necessary.

15. Does the expanded core curriculum (ECC) apply to students who are served under Section 504-VI?

No. Instruction in the ECC is, by definition, specially designed instruction that must be provided within special education, as it is the driving force behind instruction in special education. Students who are appropriately served under Section 504, even with an identified visual impairment, would not qualify as having a visual impairment under IDEA. If a student needs specialized instruction in the ECC, due to their visual impairment to benefit from instruction in school and life, follow the Child Find process by referring them for a special education evaluation.

16. What is the difference between Section 504 vision impairment and special education visual impairment?

Students who are suspected of having a disability and needing special education services should immediately be referred for an evaluation under the IDEA. Section 504 evaluations cannot be used to delay or deny a referral for special education ([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), p. 8). Two questions must be answered for placement in 504:

- A. Does the student have a disability as defined by Section 504 regulations?

- B. If so, does the student need regular or special education, related aids and services, or supplementary aids and services because of the disability, and in what setting should the student receive them? ([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#), pp. 8 & 11)

17. Is Child Find a provision of Section 504?

While Child Find is a provision of the IDEA, Child Find is not a component of Section 504. The evaluation and identification of a visual impairment or Deaf-Blindness are treated in the same way as other IDEA eligible disability categories in terms of the referral process. Anytime the LEA suspects or has reason to suspect that a student has a visual impairment, is Deafblind, or has another disability condition, and needs special education services, the LEA must seek parental consent for a full individual and initial evaluation (FIIE) under IDEA.

For students who have a disability referenced in the IDEA, but do not require special education services (specially designed instruction), such a student is eligible for services under Section 504. The LEA must determine whether the student has an impairment which substantially limits their ability to learn or another major life activity and, if so, make an individualized determination of the student's educational needs... For example, such as a student may receive adjustments in the classroom, i.e., access to large print, use of low vision and/or amplification devices, preferential seating, etc. (from [Protecting Students with Disabilities, Updated January 10, 2020, OCR FAQ](#)).

18. Should students in the evaluation process be considered for both Section 504 and special education relating to visual impairment?

Yes. If a student is suspected of having a disability, they should be considered for all programs to support their growth and access to the curriculum. That includes an array of placements including special education and Section 504. Both IDEA and Section 504 regulations require a school district to provide a "free appropriate public education" (FAPE) to each qualified student with a disability who is in the school district's jurisdiction, regardless of the nature or severity of the disability ([Protecting Students with Disabilities, Updated January 10, 2020, OCR FAQ 17-34](#)).

19. What resources should be made available to a student identified as eligible for services under Section 504-VI?

Under Section 504, FAPE consists of the provision of regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the student's individual educational needs as adequately as the needs of nondisabled students are met ([Protecting Students with Disabilities, Updated January 10, 2020, OCR FAQ 17-34](#)). Specific resources related to visual impairments include possible referral to Texas Workforce Commission programs for people with disabilities and education about the nine skill areas of the ECC.

20. What other factors should be considered for a student identified as eligible for services under Section 504-VI?

Section 504 committees must "CONSIDER the child's language and communication needs, opportunities for direct communications with peers and professional personnel in the child's language and communication mode including opportunities for direct instruction in the child's language and communication mode" when making placement decisions.

In addition, public school districts are to give primary consideration to the auxiliary aid or service requested by the student with the disability when determining what is appropriate. This means that the student or parent must be given the opportunity to request the aid or service that they think is needed to provide effective communications. The school district will then make an individualized determination considering the communication used by the student, the nature, length, and complexity of the communication involved and the context in which the communication is taking place.

Examples of auxiliary aids and services for students who are blind, deafblind, or have low vision include, but are not limited to:

- Qualified readers
- Taped texts
- Audio recordings
- Braille materials and displays
- Screen reader software
- Magnification software
- Optical readers
- Secondary auditory programs (SAP)
- Large print materials
- Accessible electronic and information technology

For more information, go to ([Technical Assistance: Section 504 \(2020\)](#)) and reference pages 22 & 23.

References

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- Office for Civil Rights. (2020) Protecting students with disabilities. US Department of Education.
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<https://www.tsbvi.edu/programs/ecc>
- U.S. Department of Education (2020). Protecting students with disabilities: Frequently asked questions about Section 504 and the education of children with disabilities. Office of Civil Rights.
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/504faq.html>
- U.S. Department of Education (2020) Questions and answers on the ADA amendments of 2008 for students with disabilities attending public elementary schools. Office of Civil Rights.
<https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/ocr/docs/dcl-504faq-201109.html>

Resources for the Side–by Side Comparison Table:

- [Comparison of the individuals with disabilities education act \(IDEA '04\), section 504 of the rehabilitation act \(section 504\), the americans with disabilities act \(ADA\), and the elementary and secondary education act](#)
- Facilitating section 504 meetings through building collaborative parent-school partnerships. (2019), LRP. Jennifer V. Herseim
- [Texas education agency technical assistance guidance document: Section 504](#)
- [The legal framework for the child-centered special education process](#)