



FLORIDA STATE IEP GUIDE

Exceptional Student Education (ESE) & Matrix Level System

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About This Guide

How to Use This Guide

- Terminology table: state-specific terms and what they mean in plain language
- Timeline differences: how this state's deadlines differ from federal IDEA
- State Education Agency: contact information for complaints and due process
- iepguide.org guidance: specific steps for using iepguide.org in this state
- Placement checklist: step-by-step placement timeline using iepguide.org

■ iepguide.org — School Placement Research Tool

Search by state, city, district, or school to compare SWD %, SDC program types, severity levels served, and specialist staff availability at iepguide.org

FLORIDA — STATE IEP GUIDE


How Florida Differs from Federal IDEA

Florida calls its special education system "Exceptional Student Education" (ESE) rather than special education, and uses a unique funding matrix called the Florida Complexity Matrix to classify student need levels. Understanding Florida's ESE system, terminology, and the Matrix of Services helps parents know what level of support their child is classified at and how that classification affects the services the school is funded to provide.

State-Specific Terminology

These terms appear in official school documents, meeting invitations, and procedural notices in this state:

Term in This State	What It Means
ESE	Exceptional Student Education — Florida's term for special education
ESE Specialist	The staff member responsible for coordinating ESE services — equivalent to a special education case manager
ESE Teacher	Florida's term for a special education teacher
Matrix Level	Florida's funding matrix (Levels 1–255) that classifies each student's support intensity — higher matrix levels indicate greater support needs and higher funding
Co-Location Model	Students in an ESE classroom that is located within a general education school building — common in Florida
Exceptional Student Support Team (ESST)	Florida's equivalent of a student support team — the group that reviews concerns before a formal ESE referral
Bureau of Exceptional Education	The Florida DOE office that oversees ESE — reports directly to the Commissioner of Education
PWN	Prior Written Notice — same as federal, required before any change to identification, evaluation, placement, or services

 **KEY TIMELINE DIFFERENCES IN FLORIDA**

- Referral to consent: Florida follows the federal 60-calendar-day window from written consent to completion of evaluation
- Consent to evaluation completion: 60 calendar days (federal standard applies)
- Evaluation completion to IEP meeting: must be held before or within a reasonable time after evaluation — Florida does not specify a separate post-evaluation window; the 60-day window covers both
- Annual review: within 12 months of last IEP date
- Reevaluation: at least every 3 years, or sooner if conditions warrant
- Matrix reassignment: the Matrix Level is reviewed at each annual IEP — this directly affects funding and services, so it is critical that parents understand the current matrix assignment

STATE EDUCATION AGENCY — FLORIDA

- Florida Department of Education — Bureau of Exceptional Education and Student Services (BEESS)
- Website: fldoe.org/academics/exceptional-student-edu
- Phone: (850) 245-0475
- Complaints: BEESS Complaints — (850) 245-0475
- Mediation: Florida Dispute Resolution Center — florida-dispute-resolution.org
- Due Process: Division of Administrative Hearings (DOAH) — doah.state.fl.us

HOW TO USE iepguide.org IN FLORIDA

- **Search iepguide.org by Florida school district or city** to compare ESE program types, SWD percentages, and on-site specialist staffing across schools before agreeing to any placement at your child's ESE meeting.
- **Florida's Matrix Level directly affects your child's services and funding.** Use iepguide.org to compare schools that serve higher Matrix Level students — these schools typically have more intensive staffing and program infrastructure.
- **Before every annual ESE review:** search the current school and any proposed alternative schools on iepguide.org to compare SWD %, program type, and ESE specialist staffing before the meeting.
- **If the district proposes a co-location model or separate ESE center:** use iepguide.org to verify the proposed campus has the appropriate Matrix Level support and on-site specialist staffing your child needs.
- Florida has significant variation in ESE program quality between counties — use iepguide.org to compare across districts if you are considering a school of choice or district transfer

PLACEMENT TIMELINE — USING iepguide.org IN FLORIDA

- STEP 1 — Before ESE eligibility meeting, search your neighborhood school on iepguide.org to see its ESE program type and SWD % — is it equipped for your child's expected Matrix Level?
- STEP 2 — At the IEP meeting when placement is discussed, search the proposed school on iepguide.org to verify it has the right program level and sufficient ESE specialist staffing
- STEP 3 — Ask specifically: what is my child's proposed Matrix Level, and does the proposed school have experience serving students at that Matrix Level?
- STEP 4 — Compare ESE teacher and specialist (SLP, OT) staffing at the proposed school versus current school using iepguide.org — only agree to a transfer if the new school provides meaningfully better appropriate services
- STEP 5 — Florida parents have the right to request a co-location school in their own district — use iepguide.org to identify which schools in your district have ESE classrooms at the appropriate level

Legal note: This guide reflects Florida special education rules as of May 2026. Timelines and agency contacts may change. Always verify with your district and consult a qualified special education advocate or attorney for guidance specific to your child's situation.