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Mental Illness & Special Education

Mary Ellen Archer Lighthiser
Georgia State University College of Law

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Mental Illness & Special Education

Guide Information

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Scope

Parents of mentally ill children face a unique set of challenges in obtaining educational opportunities that will help their children grow into healthy and productive adults. Learning to navigate the tangled web of education law can be especially intimidating. This libguide provides a research starting point for parents, lawyers, and educators who are facing the special challenge of educating children with mental illnesses. The home page provides an overview, author introduction, and a few key definitions. The "Primary Sources" page contains citations and links to federal statutes, regulations, and case law dealing with special education, the IDEA, and mental illness. The "Secondary Sources" page contains law review articles, books, and news articles relating to this topic. Finally, the "Internet Resources" page will guide families and educators to resources of particular interest to those involved with children with mental illnesses.

Overview

While the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) has made great strides in appropriately educating children with disabilities, children with mental illnesses "remain the most underserved population of students with disabilities." [H.R. Rep. No. 101-544, at 39 \(1990\)](#), reprinted in 1990 U.S.C.C.A.N. 1723, 1765. This disparity is no doubt based partly in the stigma associated with mental illness, but other barriers to educating children with mental illnesses include the difficulty in recognizing behaviors associated with mental illnesses as disabilities, a lack of understanding about the causes and manifestations of mental illness, and the complexity involved with providing appropriate educational services to mentally ill children. When added to these obstacles, the complex web of law that governs special education can seem indecipherable. This research guide presents some of the primary and secondary sources, along with helpful internet resources, that may help to begin one's journey in researching special education law as applied to children with mental illnesses.

Definitions

Disability

- A child with a disability is a child between the ages of three and twenty-one with a statutory impairment, including serious emotional disturbance, who needs special education and related services because of his or her disability or disabilities. [20 U.S.C. § 1401\(3\)\(A\)](#).
- All children with disabilities are entitled to a FAPE.

Free and Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)

- Special education and related services that have been provided at the public expense, without charge to parents, meet the standards of the state educational agency, include appropriate education in the state, and are provided in conformity with the IEP. [20 U.S.C. § 1401\(9\)](#).

Related Services

- "[T]he term related services means transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes speech-language pathology and audiology services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, early identification and assessment of disabilities in children, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes. The term also includes school health services, social work services in schools, and parent counseling and training." [34 C.F.R. § 300.34\(a\)](#).
- "The list of related services is not exhaustive and may include other developmental, corrective, or supportive services if they are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education." 34 C.F.R. Part 300, Appendix A (2001).

Individualized Education Plan (IEP)

- Under [20 U.S.C. § 1414\(d\)](#), schools must create a written statement for each child with a disability who is in need of special education, including, *inter alia*, the "child's present levels of academic achievement and functional performance," a statement of measurable annual goals designed to meet the child's educational needs, a description of how the child's progress will be measured and when periodic progress reports will be provided, a statement of the special education, services, and aides to be provided, an explanation of the extent to which the child will not participate with nondisabled children in the regular class, a statement of appropriate accommodations, and the projected date for the beginning of the services and modifications, along with the anticipated frequency, location, and duration of those services and modifications.
- In order to create this plan, a team will be assembled, including the child's parents, the child's regular education teacher, the child's special education teacher, a representative of the local education agency who is knowledgeable about the school's resources and curriculum and qualified to design instruction, an individual who can interpret the instructional implications of any evaluations, any other individual with special expertise or knowledge regarding the child, and where appropriate, the child herself.
- Specific factors to be considered by the IEP team are further outlined in [§1414\(d\)](#).

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)

- To the greatest extent possible, children with disabilities should be educated with their non-disabled peers.

Child Find

- The IDEA creates an affirmative obligation on schools to identify, locate, and evaluate all children with disabilities who are in need of special education and related services. This is known as the "child find" obligation.

Disclaimer

While it is my hope that this research guide will be a helpful launching pad for attorneys, parents, and education professionals who would like to delve into the law surrounding childhood mental illness and special education, nothing here should be construed as legal advice. Please consult an attorney for any education or disability law issues you may encounter.

About the Author

Mary Ellen Archer Lighthiser is a third-year student at Georgia State University College of Law, graduating in May 2012. She graduated from the University of Georgia with a Bachelor of Arts in English and a minor in Sociology in May 2008. She grew up in Cartersville, Georgia, the fifth of six children. Mary Ellen now lives in Atlanta with her husband Brian and her English Springer Spaniel Layla.

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Primary Sources

Statutes

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, [20 U.S.C.A. § 1400 et seq.](#)

- Under 20 USC §1401(8), the term "free appropriate public education" means special education and related services that (A) have been provided at public expense, under public supervision and direction, and without charge; (B) meet the standards of the State educational agency; (C) include an appropriate preschool, elementary, or secondary school education in the State involved; and (D) are provided in conformity with the individualized education program required under section 1414(d) of this title.
- Under 20 USC §1401(25), the term "special education" means specially designed instruction, at no cost to parents, to meet the unique needs of a child with a disability, including (A) instruction conducted in the classroom, in the home, in hospitals and institutions, and in other settings; and (B) instruction in physical education.
- Under 20 USC §1401(26), the term "related services" means "transportation, and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services (including speech-language pathology and audiology services, interpreting services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, social work services, school nurse services designed to enable a child with a disability to receive a free appropriate public education as described in the individualized education program of the child, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services, except that such medical services shall be for diagnostic and evaluation purposes only) as may be required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes the early identification and assessment of disabling conditions in children."

Free and Appropriate Public Education

- Under [20 U.S.C. § 1412\(a\)](#), a free appropriate public education is available to all children with disabilities residing in the State between the ages of 3 and 21, including children with disabilities who have been suspended or expelled from school.

Least Restrictive Environment

- Under [20 U.S.C. § 1412\(a\)\(5\)\(A\)](#), "To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities...[shall be] educated with children who are not disabled, and special classes, separate schooling, or other removal...from the regular educational environment [shall] occur[] only when the nature or severity of the disability of a child is such that education in

regular classes with the use of supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.”

Child Find

- Under [20 U.S.C. § 1412\(a\)\(3\)](#), "All children with disabilities residing in the State, including children with disabilities who are homeless children or are wards of the State and children with disabilities attending private schools, regardless of the severity of their disabilities, and who are in need of special education and related services, are identified, located, and evaluated and a practical method is developed and implemented to determine which children with disabilities are currently receiving needed special education and related services"

Individualized Education Program

- "An individualized education program, or an individualized family service plan that meets the requirements of section [1436\(d\)](#) of this title, is developed, reviewed, and revised for each child with a disability in accordance with section [1414\(d\)](#) of this title." 20 U.S.C. § 1412(a)(4).

Procedural Safeguards, the Stay-Put Provision, and Behavioral Manifestations of Disability, [20 U.S.C. § 1415](#):

- "Except as provided in subsection (k)(4), during the pendency of any proceedings conducted pursuant to this section, unless the State or local educational agency and the parents otherwise agree, the child shall remain in the then-current educational placement of the child, or, if applying for initial admission to a public school, shall, with the consent of the parents, be placed in the public school program until all such proceedings have been completed." 20 USC § 1415(j)
- But under 20 USC § 1415(k), "A child with a disability who (i) carries a weapon to school or to a school function, (ii) possesses or uses illegal drugs or sells or solicits the sale...or (iii) has inflicted serious bodily injury upon another person while at school can be placed in an interim alternative educational ("IAES") setting for up to 45 days."
- "A school district may order a change in the placement of a child with a disability to an appropriate interim alternative educational setting or another setting, or may suspend a child with a disability, for not more than 10 school days to the same extent that such alternatives would be applied to children without disabilities." 20 USC § 1415(k)(1)(B).
- "Except as provided in subparagraph (B), within 10 school days of any decision to change the placement of a child with a disability because of a violation of a code of student conduct, the local educational agency, the parent, and relevant members of the IEP Team [shall determine]:
(I) if the conduct in question was caused by, or had a direct and substantial relationship to, the child's disability; or (II) if the conduct in question was the direct result of the local educational agency's failure to implement the IEP."
 - If so, "the conduct shall be determined to be a manifestation of the child's disability."
 - If behavior is NOT a manifestation of the disability, the school may discipline student to the same extent that it disciplines non-disabled students.
 - If the behavior IS a manifestation of the disability, the school must conduct a functional behavioral assessment; implement a behavioral intervention plan, and return student to placement from which he was removed, except as noted in § 1415(k).

Regulations

The Regulations dealing with the IDEA are found in 34 C.F.R. Part [300](#). Some specific provisions of interest are included below.

Emotional Disturbance, [34 C.F.R. § 300.8\(4\)\(i\)](#)

- Emotional disturbance means a condition exhibiting one or more of the following characteristics over a long period of time and to a marked degree that adversely affects a child's educational performance:
 - (A) An inability to learn that cannot be explained by intellectual, sensory, or health factors.
 - (B) An inability to build or maintain satisfactory interpersonal relationships with peers and teachers.
 - (C) Inappropriate types of behavior or feelings under normal circumstances.
 - (D) A general pervasive mood of unhappiness or depression.
 - (E) A tendency to develop physical symptoms or fears associated with personal or school problems.

Other Health Impairment, [34 C.F.R. § 300.8\(9\)](#)

- Other health impairment means having limited strength, vitality, or alertness, including a heightened alertness to environmental stimuli, that results in limited alertness with respect to the educational environment, that--
 - (i) Is due to chronic or acute health problems such as asthma, attention deficit disorder or attention deficit hyperactivity disorder, diabetes, epilepsy, a heart condition, hemophilia, lead poisoning, leukemia, nephritis, rheumatic fever, sickle cell anemia, and Tourette syndrome; and
 - (ii) Adversely affects a child's educational performance.

Related Services, [34 C.F.R. § 300.34\(a\)](#)

- "[T]he term related services means transportation and such developmental, corrective, and other supportive services as are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education, and includes speech-language pathology and audiology services, psychological services, physical and occupational therapy, recreation, including therapeutic recreation, early identification and assessment of disabilities in children, counseling services, including rehabilitation counseling, orientation and mobility services, and medical services for diagnostic or evaluation purposes. The term also includes school health services, social work services in schools, and parent counseling and training." 34 C.F.R. § 300.34(a).
 - "The list of related services is not exhaustive and may include other developmental, corrective, or supportive services if they are required to assist a child with a disability to benefit from special education." 34 C.F.R. Part 300, Appendix A (2001)

Supreme Court Cases

Cedar Rapids Community School District v. Garret F., [526 U.S. 66](#) (1999).

- The Supreme Court held that school districts "must fund such 'related services' in order to help guarantee that [students with disabilities] are integrated into the public schools," regardless of what those services might cost. *Id.* at 78-79. Such related services may include hiring and training new staff. However, this rule applies only to disabled students' to public schools, and the Court noted that the IDEA did not "require public schools to maximize the potential of disabled students commensurate with the opportunities provided to other children." *Id.* at 78.

Honig v. Doe, [484 U.S. 305](#) (1988).

- In this case, the Supreme Court dealt with the discipline of mentally ill children for the first time. The plaintiff in this case was an "emotionally disturbed" child who was expelled for aggressive behaviors associated with his disability. The Supreme Court held that, in light of the "stay-put provision," schools cannot unilaterally expel students for behaviors related to their disabilities. Instead, schools may use 10 day short-term suspensions pending the resolution of the placement dispute if a child is dangerous. Should a school seek to keep a disabled student out of school for more than 10 days, the burden is on the school to show that the student is a threat to himself or others.

Board of Education v. Rowley, [458 U.S.176](#) (1982).

- The Supreme Court adopted a narrow reading of the FAPE requirement, determining that FAPE is satisfied when there's personalized instruction in the IEP provided with sufficient support services to enable the child to benefit from instruction, meaning that the child is able to advance from grade to grade and receive passing marks. The Court's opinion was that the primary protection provided by the IDEA was procedural, not substantive. The IDEA grants equal access to schools, but does not guarantee services that will help a child meet her full potential.

Circuit Court Cases

Indep. Sch. Dist. No. 284, Wayzata Area Schools, Wayzata, Minnesota v. A.C., [258 F.3d 769](#) (8th Cir. 2001).

- The court noted that "a child whose disabling condition manifests itself in disruptive conduct is exempted, to a degree, from normal disciplinary procedures," and "suspension or expulsion is not normally appropriate as a first-line response to behavior problems resulting from a student's disability, even if the conduct in question violates school rules." Observing that "the mere fact that Congress regards emotional disturbances as disabilities entitling a child to special education shows that, at least in Congress's judgment, social and emotional problems are not *ipso facto* separable from the learning process," the court held that the student's emotional disturbances must be dealt with in order to provide her with a free and appropriate education.

Muller v. Comm. on Special Educ. of East Islip Union Free Sch. Dist, [145 F.3d 95](#) (2nd Cir. 1998).

- The court held that a child who had a history of suicide attempts, arson attempts, lies, cutting classes, failure to complete homework, stealing, quitting the basketball team, defiance, and poor grades and academic performance over the course of several years fit the statutory definition of a "severe emotional disturbance" even without a formal depression diagnosis, and was thus entitled to a free and appropriate education. The court rejected the school's argument that the child was simply suffering from a "conduct disorder" and was thus ineligible under the IDEA.

Springer v. Fairfax Co. Sch. Bd., [134 F.3d 659](#) (4th Cir. 1998).

- The Fourth Circuit, however, categorized one student's behavior as stemming from social maladjustment rather than a serious emotional disturbance, and thus the student was not disabled.

District Court Cases

Johnson v. Metro Davison County School District, [108 F.Supp. 2d 906](#) (E.D. Tenn. 2000).

- The Eastern District of Tennessee held that a student's repeated expulsions as a result of her inappropriate disorder showed that her bipolar disorder had an adverse affect on her educational performance. Thus, she qualified as seriously emotionally disturbed under the IDEA, since her inappropriate behavior lasted over an extended period of time to a marked degree and adversely affected her educational performance.

Doe v. Bd. of Educ. of Connecticut, [753 F.Supp. 65](#) (D. Conn. 1990).

- The District of Connecticut held that a child who was hospitalized as a result of his depression did not meet the statutory definition of serious emotional disturbance and thus was not a disabled child entitled to FAPE. The court came to this conclusion because it found that the child's educational performance was not adversely affected by his emotional problems, since his academic performance before, during, and after his hospitalization remained satisfactory or above.

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Secondary Sources

Law Review Articles

Ellen A. Callegary, *The IDEA'S Promise Unfulfilled: A Second Look at Special Education & Related Services for Children With Mental Health Needs After Garret F.*, 5 J. Health Care L. & Pol'y 164 (2002).

Leslie Seid Margolis, *The Provision of School Health Services to Students with Disabilities: The Intersection of Health Care Policy, Education and the Law in the Post-Garret F. Era*, 5 J. Health Care L. & Pol'y 99 (2002).

Joseph B. Tulman & Douglas M Weck, *Shutting Off the School-to-Prison Pipeline for Status Offenders with Education-Related Disabilities*, 54 N.Y.L. Sch. L. Rev. 875 (2010).

Note, Kelly S. Thompson, *Limits on the Ability to Discipline Disabled School Children: Do the 1997 Amendments to the IDEA Go Far Enough?*, 32 Ind. L. Rev. 565 (1999).

Michael A. Rebell, *Structural Discrimination and the Rights of the Disabled*, 74 Geo. L.J. 1435 (1986).

Ronald K. Lospennato, *Multifaceted Strategies to STOP the School-to-Prison Pipeline*, 42 Clearinghouse Rev. 528 (2009).

Michael L. Perlin, *"Simplify You, Classify You": Stigma, Stereotypes and Civil Rights in Disability Classification Systems*, 25 Ga. St. U.L. Rev. 607 (2009).

Reports

Bazon Center for Mental Health Law, [Way To Go: School Success for Children with Mental Health Care Needs](#) (March 2006).

National Council on Disability, [Back to School on Civil Rights](#) (Jan. 25, 2000).

[Press Release](#), United States Surgeon General, Surgeon General Releases a National Action Agenda for Children's Mental Health (Jan. 3, 2001).

[Report](#) of the Surgeon General's Conference on Children's Mental Health: A National Action Agenda (Jan. 3, 2001).

Bazon Center for Mental Health Law, [Left Out, Pushed Out, Placed Out and Worse... How Children with Serious Mental Health Problems Are Treated in Our Schools - and How to Fix It](#) (July 2011).

Books

- **Mad at School** by Margaret Price
ISBN: 0472051385
Publication Date: 2011-02-17
Mad at School explores the contested boundaries between disability, illness, and mental illness in the setting of U.S. higher education. Much of the research and teaching within disability studies assumes a disabled body but a rational and energetic (an "agile") mind. In *Mad at School*, scholar and disabilities activist Margaret Price asks: How might our education practices change if we understood disability to incorporate the disabled mind?
- **Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy** by Pamela Darr Wright; Peter W. D. Wright
ISBN: 1892320096
Publication Date: 2006-01-01
Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy, second edition will teach you how to plan, prepare, organize and get quality special education services. In this comprehensive, easy-to-read book, you will learn your child's disability and educational needs, how to create a simple method for organizing your child's file and devising a master plan for your child's special education. You will understand parent-school conflict, how to create paper trails and effective letter writing. This book includes dozens of worksheets, forms and sample letters that you can tailor to your needs. Whether you are new to special education or an experienced advocate this book will provide a clear roadmap to effective advocacy for your child. You will use this book again and again.
- **A Case about Amy** by R. C. Smith; Frank G. Bowe (Foreword by)
ISBN: 1566394120
Publication Date: 1996-06-10
The Rowley family's struggle began when Amy entered kindergarten and culminated five years later in a pivotal decision by the U.S. Supreme Court. In effect, the Court majority concluded that the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act did not mandate equal opportunity for children with disabilities in classes with typical children; a disappointing decision for disability advocates. The Supreme Court decided that schools were required only to provide enough help for children with disabilities to pass from grade to grade. The Court reversed the lower courts' rulings, which had granted Amy an interpreter, setting a precedent that could affect the quality of education for all individuals with disabilities. From the time Amy entered kindergarten in Peekskill, New York, her parents battled with school officials to get a sign language interpreter in the classroom. Nancy and Clifford Rowley, also deaf, struggled with officials for their own right to a communications process in which they could fully participate. Stuck in limbo was a bright, inquisitive child, forced to rely on partial lipreading of rapid classroom instruction and interaction, and sound amplifiers that were often broken and always cumbersome. R.C. Smith chronicles the Rowley family's dealings with school boards, lawyers, teachers, expert consultants, advocates, and supporters, and their staunch determination to get through the exhaustive process of presenting the case time after time to school adjudicative bodies and finally the federal courts. The author also documents his own "coming to awareness" about how the "able" see the "disabled." (Description from Amazon.com)
- **DSM-IV Diagnosis in the Schools** by Alvin E. House
ISBN: 1572303468
Publication Date: 1998-12-11
"School psychologists are increasingly being required to supply DSM-IV diagnoses for the children and adolescents they work with. Reflecting the author's more than 20 years of experience in child assessment and diagnosis, this comprehensive book familiarizes readers with the many features of DSM-IV. House provides useful decision trees for differential diagnosis and illuminates complex diagnostic and professional issues with examples drawn from school-based practice. This uniquely practical book should be required reading for all current and future school practitioners." --Mark E. Swerdlik, PhD, Professor of Psychology and Coordinator of Graduate Programs in School Psychology, Illinois State University
- **Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind** by Peter W. D. Wright; Pamela Darr Wright; Suzanne Whitney Heath
ISBN: 1892320126
Publication Date: 2004-01-01
The No Child Left Behind Act is confusing to parents, educators, administrators, advocates, and most attorneys. Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind provides a clear roadmap to the law. Wrightslaw: No Child Left Behind includes the full text of the No Child Left Behind Act with analysis, interpretation & commentary; advocacy strategies, tips, sample letters; and the No Child Left Behind CD-ROM of Publications & Resources.
- **Educator's Guide to Mental Health Issues in the Classroom** by Frank M. Kline (Editor); Larry B. Silver (Editor)
ISBN: 1557666709
Publication Date: 2004-06-01
An estimated 20% of students have an emotional, behavioral, or mental disorder. Teachers are often the first to notice these problems - and with this reader-friendly guide, they'll have the information they need to help create effective learning environments for children and adolescents and collaborate effectively with

mental health providers. Along with a detailed overview of the mental health system and the different types of mental health professionals, education professionals will get separate chapters on 11 specific mental health issues, each describing characteristics of the disorder ways the disorder might be manifested the process for diagnosing the disorder types of intervention and treatment practical guidelines on working with students who have the disorder Educators will also find specific strategies for building collaborative partnerships with mental health professionals and families; case studies illustrating successful collaboration; and appendices of definitions, DSM-IV-TR criteria for various disorders discussed in the book, common medications used to treat mental health disorders, and support organizations. Equally useful for preservice and in-service general and special educators and for the mental health providers who partner with them this important book will prepare readers to understand students with mental health disorders and help improve their chances for social and academic success.

News Articles

Kelly Griffith, [Group Illuminates Dark Puzzle of Disorders](#), Orlando Sentinel, May 9, 2006.

Leslie Sowers, [The Mental Health of Children: Part II, Up to the Schools?](#), Houston Chronicle, June 28, 1998.

Frank M. Gresham, [Response to Intervention: An Alternative Means of Identifying Students as Emotionally Disturbed](#), Education & Treatment of Children, Nov. 1, 2005.

Michael P. Krezmien et al, [Detained and committed youth: examining differences in achievement, mental health needs, and special education status](#), Education and Treatment of Children, Nov. 1, 2008.

DeAnn Lechtenberger, [Achieving the Promise: The Significant Role of Schools in Transforming Children's Mental Health in America](#), Teaching Exceptional Children, March 1, 2008, at 56.

Treatises

- Special Education Law and Litigation Treatise by Mark C. Weber
Call Number: KF4210 .W4 2008
ISBN: 0934753644
Publication Date: 1992-12-01
- Special Education Law by Laura F. Rothstein
Call Number: KF4210 .R68 1995
ISBN: 0801312345
Publication Date: 1994-08-01

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Internet Resources

Resources on Mental Illness & Education

- National Alliance on Mental Illness: Schools & Education Action Center
http://www.nami.org/template.cfm?section=schools_and_education
- NAMI: Organizations Focused on Special Education & School-Based Mental Health
http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=schools_and_education&template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=55468
- NAMI's Recommended Resources for Children & Adolescents Living with Mental Illnesses and Their Families
<http://www.nami.org/Template.cfm?Section=CAAC&Template=/ContentManagement/ContentDisplay.cfm&ContentID=38462>
- Bazelon Center for Mental Health Law: Education
<http://www.bazelon.org/Where-We-Stand/Success-for-All-Children/Education-.aspx>
- National Institute of Mental Health: Treatment of Children with Mental Illness
<http://www.nimh.nih.gov/health/publications/treatment-of-children-with-mental-illness-fact-sheet/index.shtml>
- Children's Law Center: Mental Health
<http://www.childrenslawcenter.org/issues/mental-health>

Resources on the IDEA

- U.S. Department of Education's IDEA Website
<http://idea.ed.gov/>
- Wrightslaw: What You Need to Know About IDEA 2004
<http://www.wrightslaw.com/idea/art.htm>
- National Dissemination Center for Children with Disabilities: IDEA
<http://nichcy.org/laws/idea>
- IDEA Parent Guide

<http://www.ncld.org/checklists-a-more/parent-advocacy-guides/idea-parent-guide>

Resources on Education Law

- National Coalition for Parent Involvement in Education
<http://www.ncpie.org/>
- Understanding Special Education: A Parent Guide
<http://www.understandingspecialeducation.com/>
- Special Education Law Blog
<http://specialedlaw.blogs.com/>
- NOLO: Special Education Law
<http://www.nolo.com/legal-encyclopedia/special-education-law-29626.html>
- Family Education: Special Education and the Law
<http://school.familyeducation.com/special-education/education-and-state/34580.html>

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