

Least Restrictive Environment

Where and how your child learns, what federal and Illinois law require, and what to ask when the IEP team talks about placement.

The short version

Least Restrictive Environment, or LRE, is a principle rather than a place. Under federal and Illinois law, the conversation about your child's education begins in the general education classroom with the supports your child needs. Your child learns somewhere else only when education in the regular classroom cannot be achieved satisfactorily, even with supplementary aids and services. That decision belongs to the IEP team, and you are a full member of that team. This fact sheet describes what the federal and Illinois rules say. It is general educational information and is not legal advice about any individual child.

What LRE actually means

It is decided one child at a time

There is no single correct answer. What counts as least restrictive for one student may not be least restrictive for another, because the decision follows your child's individual needs and goals.

It is about the whole program

LRE covers what supports your child receives and how they are delivered, not only which room your child sits in. Any removal from general education has to be justified in the IEP itself.

34 CFR 300.320(a)(5); Understood.org

It is not all or nothing

Placement is not an either/or choice. Many students receive services across a combination of settings in the same school day, and those arrangements are meant to be flexible and revisited.

IRIS Center, LRE Information Brief

It includes the whole school day

Lunch, recess, assemblies, clubs, athletics, field trips, and other nonacademic activities are part of LRE, not extras that sit outside of it.

34 CFR 300.117

What the law says

Federal law: IDEA

- To the maximum extent appropriate, children with disabilities are educated with children who are not disabled. Removal happens only when the nature or severity of the disability is such that education in regular classes with supplementary aids and services cannot be achieved satisfactorily.
20 USC 1412(a)(5); 34 CFR 300.114
- Every district must keep a continuum of alternative placements available, and must provide supplementary services such as resource room or itinerant instruction alongside regular class placement.
34 CFR 300.115
- The placement decision is made by a group that includes you, is determined at least annually, is based on the IEP, and is as close as possible to your home. Unless the IEP requires another arrangement, your child attends the school they would attend if they did not have a disability.
34 CFR 300.116(a) through (c)
- The team must consider any potential harmful effect on your child or on the quality of the services your child needs.
34 CFR 300.116(d)

- Your child may not be removed from regular classrooms that match their age solely because the general education curriculum needs to be modified.
34 CFR 300.116(e)

- Your child participates in nonacademic and extracurricular activities with peers to the maximum extent appropriate, with the supplementary aids and services the IEP team decides are needed.
34 CFR 300.117

Illinois law and rules

- Illinois adopts the federal definition of LRE directly.
23 IAC 226.75
- Students recommended for regular education classrooms must be given supplementary services and must be included on the general education teacher's regular class register.
105 ILCS 5/14-8.02(d)
- English learners with disabilities are to be placed in environments that are not restrictive and that provide integration with peers who do not have disabilities.
105 ILCS 5/14-8.02(d)
- Placement must conform to the federal LRE rules, and the team also considers eligibility for other programs such as bilingual education, career and technical education, gifted education, and Title I. The placement determination is reviewed at least annually or any time the IEP is revised.
23 IAC 226.240
- Every Illinois district must ensure a continuum of placements is available.
23 IAC 226.300
- A state operated or nonpublic facility may be used only when the IEP team determines that no less restrictive setting on the continuum will meet your child's needs. Proximity to your home is among the factors weighed.
23 IAC 226.330
- When behavioral interventions are used, they must respect your child's physical freedom and social interaction and protect the right to placement in the least restrictive educational environment.
105 ILCS 5/14-8.05

The continuum of placements

Options range from least restrictive at the top to most restrictive at the bottom. Your child's IEP team starts at the top and moves down only as far as your child's needs require.

Setting	What it can look like
General education class, full day	Specially designed instruction, accommodations, assistive technology, a paraprofessional, or teacher consultation, all delivered inside the classroom.
General education class, most of the day	Services delivered in the room plus limited time in a resource room or with an itinerant teacher or therapist.
General education and special education class, split day	Your child joins peers for some subjects and receives instruction in a special education class for others.
Special education class, most or all of the day	A separate classroom in the neighborhood school, with planned time to join peers for nonacademic activities.
Separate day school	A public or approved nonpublic facility serving only students with disabilities, used only when the team documents that no less restrictive option will work.
Residential facility	A setting where your child lives and attends school. State operated programs receive first consideration in Illinois.
Home or hospital instruction	Used when a medical condition prevents attendance elsewhere. Illinois requires a written physician statement, and instruction is generally at least five hours per week.

Three things to consider. First, the continuum is a set of options, not a ladder your child has to climb one rung at a time. Second, districts are not required to house every option in every building, which is why the team may discuss location separately from placement. Third, more minutes of service does not automatically mean a more restrictive setting, because services can be delivered inside the general education classroom.

34 CFR 300.115; 23 IAC 226.300 and 226.330; IRIS Center

Common questions families ask

Does LRE mean my child must be in general education all day?

No. It means the team begins there and removes your child only to the extent necessary, then documents why. Full inclusion is not required, and neither is a separate setting.

Who actually makes the placement decision?

A group that includes you, along with people who know your child, understand the evaluation data, and know the placement options. You are not a guest at that meeting.

34 CFR 300.116(a)(1)

How often is placement revisited?

At least once a year, and any time the IEP is revised. You may request a meeting at any point, and a refusal requires written notice.

34 CFR 300.116(b)(1) and 300.503; 23 IAC 226.240

What if the school says the program my child needs is not offered here?

The rules state that placement is based on the child's IEP and that each Illinois district must ensure a continuum of placements is available. You can ask how the district plans to provide what the IEP requires.

34 CFR 300.115 and 300.116(b)(2); 23 IAC 226.300

My child needs the curriculum modified. Does that mean a separate class?

Not by itself. Federal law specifically prohibits removing a child from regular classrooms that match their age solely because modifications to the general education curriculum are needed.

34 CFR 300.116(e)

Why is my child bussed across the district?

Placement should be as close as possible to your home, and unless the IEP requires otherwise, your child attends the school they would attend without a disability. Ask the team to explain what in the IEP requires a different building.

34 CFR 300.116(b)(3) and (c)

Does LRE apply to recess, clubs, and sports?

Yes. Nonacademic and extracurricular activities are covered, and the rules call for the supplementary aids and services the IEP team determines are needed to take part.

34 CFR 300.117

We speak Spanish at home. Does that change anything?

Illinois law is explicit that English learners with disabilities are placed in environments that are not restrictive and that provide integration with peers. Illinois rules also address notices and translated documents for families whose native language is not English.

105 ILCS 5/14-8.02(d); 23 IAC 226.500

Barriers families run into, and what helps

What you may hear or see	What can help
Placement is discussed before goals and services are written.	Ask the team to complete goals and services first, since placement is based on the IEP.
"We do not have that here" or "that classroom is full."	Ask what the IEP requires and how the district plans to provide it.
The team offers a list of rooms rather than a discussion of supports.	Redirect to supplementary aids and services. Ask what has been tried in general education and what the data showed.
A move to a more restrictive setting is proposed in response to behavior.	Ask whether a functional behavioral assessment was completed and whether a behavior intervention plan is in place and being followed.
Minutes are written to fit an existing schedule or staffing pattern.	Ask the team to describe the need first, then the minutes. Note any place where the schedule appears to be driving the service.
The decision seems settled before the meeting begins.	Name it calmly and ask that the discussion happen with you present. Ask for the proposal in writing with the reasons.
Nonacademic time is never mentioned.	Ask directly about lunch, recess, assemblies, clubs, and field trips, and ask that supports for those times be written into the IEP.
The meeting happens without an interpreter or translated documents.	Request interpretation and translated notices ahead of time. Illinois requires notices in your native language.

Concerns that belong in the room

Families arrive at placement conversations with real and often opposite worries. Both sets are legitimate, and both belong on the table. LRE is individualized precisely because these tensions do not resolve the same way for every child.

Worries about more time in general education

- Will my child actually get the specialized instruction, or just sit in the room?
- Is the general education teacher prepared and supported to teach my child?
- Will my child be excluded socially, bullied, or left out in ways I will not hear about?
- Will the pace leave my child frustrated or exhausted by the end of the day?

Worries about a more separate setting

- Will expectations quietly drop, and will my child fall further behind?
- Will my child lose access to peers who model language and social skills?
- Will my child be able to move back, or does this become permanent?
- What does leaving the neighborhood school cost my child in belonging?

Say the concern out loud and ask the team to respond to it directly. Ask that both the concern and the response be recorded in the meeting notes so the conversation is available the next time placement is discussed.

Questions to bring to the IEP meeting

"What supplementary aids and services have we tried in the general education classroom, and what does the data show about how they worked?"

"What would need to be true for my child to spend more of the day with peers? Can we write that into the IEP as a plan with a timeline?"

"What potential harmful effects did the team consider, as required by 34 CFR 300.116(d)?"

"Which school would my child attend if they did not have an IEP, and what in the IEP requires a different building?"

"How will my child take part in lunch, recess, assemblies, clubs, and field trips, and what supports are written down for those times?"

"Please walk me through the IEP's explanation of the extent to which my child will not be with peers who do not have disabilities."

If you disagree with the placement decision

You have options, and using an earlier one does not give up a later one. Family Matters can help you think through which fits your situation.

- 1. Ask for prior written notice.** The district must give you written notice explaining what it proposes or refuses, why, and what other options it considered and rejected.
34 CFR 300.503
- 2. Request an IEP meeting.** You do not have to wait for the annual review. Put the request in writing and say what you want the team to reconsider.
- 3. Ask for time to review.** Families may request a copy of the draft and respond in writing rather than at the meeting.
- 4. Request mediation.** Mediation through the Illinois State Board of Education is voluntary, is at no cost to you, and does not delay or replace your other options.
34 CFR 300.506; 23 IAC 226.560
- 5. File a state complaint.** A written complaint may allege a violation that happened within the past year, and ISBE investigates.
23 IAC 226.570; 34 CFR 300.153(c)
- 6. Request a due process hearing.** This is the most formal route and has its own timelines and procedures.
23 IAC 226.615; 34 CFR 300.507 and 300.508

Where to learn more

Plain language explanations

- Understood, "What is least restrictive environment?" Also available in Spanish.
understood.org/en/articles/least-restrictive-environment-lre-what-you-need-to-know
- Center for Parent Information and Resources, "Considering LRE in Placement Decisions."
parentcenterhub.org/placement-lre/

Deeper reading and data

- IRIS Center, "Least Restrictive Environment" information brief, with a placement decision flowchart and examples.
iris.peabody.vanderbilt.edu/information-brief/least-restrictive-environment-lre/
- Illinois Report Card, educational environment data for your own district.
irc.isbe.net
- IDEA regulations in full: sites.ed.gov/idea

Illinois reports to the federal government each year on how much time students with IEPs spend in general education, through State Performance Plan Indicator 5 for school age students and Indicator 6 for preschool. Targets are set by the Illinois State Board of Education with public input from families. You can look up your own district's numbers on the Illinois Report Card.

Talk with a real person at Family Matters

We are the federally funded Parent Training and Information Center for the state of Illinois. Our Educational Support Coaches help families prepare for IEP meetings, understand their rights, and think through options. Our support is free.

Email: info@fmptic.org | **Web:** fmptic.org

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