



THE INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PROGRAM JOURNEY

For the Love of a Child: Parental Advocacy in an Underfunded System

LILY ANA MARQUEZ | AUGUST 2026

INTRODUCTION

Having a child can be one of life's most profound joys. Yet, parenthood also means a constant balance between nurturing, protecting, and advocating. For parents of children with special needs, that responsibility deepens into something more urgent: a fight to be heard in systems that too often overlook them. Parents who raise concerns about their child's development know this fight all too well, as they frequently encounter delays, dismissals, or systems too strained to respond effectively. These major gaps affect a child's ability to grow, learn, and thrive.

UNDERSTANDING IDEA AND THE IEP PROCESS

The challenges families experience at their children's schools or child care programs are not isolated; rather, they are directly tied to federal and state decisions. The **Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)**, passed in 1975, was designed to ensure that children with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. This federal law ensures that children from age three through high school, and in some cases up to age 21, can receive an **Individualized Education Program (IEP)** tailored to their unique learning needs. An IEP is a written, legally binding document

that outlines the specialized instruction, supports, and services a student needs to succeed in school. These supports may include targeted special education services such as reading instruction; related services like speech or occupational therapy; classroom accommodations such as extended time on tests; and assistive technology supports, including the use of calculators or other tools when appropriate. Together, these individualized services are designed to remove barriers to learning and ensure that each child has meaningful access to their education in a way that supports their growth and success.

HOW UNDERFUNDING AFFECTS CHILDREN AND FAMILIES

These special education services are a part of public education. Public education is a program that is **often affected** when there are budget cuts. As a result, programs become overstretched, specialists are limited, and early intervention, which is arguably the most critical stage, is underfunded. What begins as a federal shortfall trickles down to the state and local levels, creating real consequences in classrooms, therapy sessions, and homes. These gaps in support **can impact** not only a child's disability related needs, but can also contribute to mental health, emotional, and long-term developmental challenges. This is why it is critical that we invest in and protect our most vulnerable children and families. Supporting children through early care, education, and intervention services not only improves developmental outcomes, but also allows parents and caregivers the ability to work and maintain stability for their families.

At the state level, policy commitments do not always translate into outcomes. In 2021, Governor Gavin Newsom pledged to create **200,000** new subsidized child care slots by the 2025–2026 fiscal year. However, as of July 2026, that goal remains unmet, with approximately only **155,100 new slots**, or three quarters, of that pledge achieved. This shortfall is especially concerning given that in 2024, the most recent data available, **1.8 million children** in California were eligible for child care but were not receiving services, compared to 349,000 children who were receiving services. This means that only about 1 in 6 children had access to subsidized care. Together, these figures highlight a persistent disconnect between policy promises and the lived realities of families, demonstrating the urgent need for increased investment, accountability, and long-term support within California's child care and early education systems. To make matters worse, ongoing funding and administrative **challenges** continue to slow progress, leaving many children and families without the support they need.

PARENTS AS PRIMARY ADVOCATES

This means that parents of children with special needs who qualify for an IEP must become the primary advocates for their children. They learn to navigate complex and unfamiliar systems to push for policy changes that reflect the realities families face every day. Unfortunately, advocating doesn't end after a child with special education needs is evaluated and granted an IEP that confirms their eligibility for service. In many ways, that's just the beginning. Following the confirmation, families are **assigned** an orientation and an advocate; they also receive guidance and ongoing resources to help navigate the process.

This complex process can become more complicated due to how individualized IEPs are. Even if an education specialist has the background and training to work with students with IEPs, what works for one student may not work for others. And what works for one family might not work for another, either. One mother I spoke with described the IEP implementation process as isolating, rather than supportive, in part because English is not her first language. Her child's IEP documents lack the root cause of focus, inconsistency with implementation, overwhelming bureaucracy, poor metrics, and technical language—all of which can be intense for many families to navigate.

"I go to meetings," this mother explained, "but sometimes I don't know what they are saying fully. I want to help my child, but I need them to help me understand first and work with me because I know my child's needs." Her experience highlights a critical breakdown at the local level: at times there's a lack of communication and a collaboration process between the school and families. Schools are **required** to provide interpretation and translation services or provide families with "Know Your Rights" education. But support services, access, capacity, and quality can vary widely depending on the district and/or school. Without clear communication, collaboration between families and schools—the foundation of an effective IEP—suffers. The mother also described feeling unheard during meetings with educators and specialists, where there is often an assumption that professionals know what is best for the child. This creates a disconnect between parents and professionals, resulting in a fragmented system where the child, the family, and the school operate in silos.

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An IEP should serve as a plan to help families navigate the special education process. Each IEP document should be individualized to meet the unique needs of the student and **updated regularly** to support the child's educational goals, growth, and overall success. Based on my experience, the following visual provides an example of an IEP roadmap that can help guide families who are beginning this journey.

IEP Process Roadmap for a Case Scenario



A roadmap is essential for families so they understand the process and their rights. However, the role of state and federal funding is also very important. Even though policies like IDEA were supposed to remedy these problems, such solutions **will never** fully succeed without proper investment and execution. And underfunding at the federal level means that state-level and school-level funding is also lacking, and that can lead to implementation challenges and early interventions that are delayed or inaccessible for families to afford. A lack of funding also means that educators and administrators are **overburdened** and parents struggle to receive the guidance, transparency, and resources necessary to navigate the often complicated system. Further, inflation, population growth, and increasing demand have outpaced funding levels, leaving programs unable to meet the needs of eligible children.

Given all this, it's not surprising that the mother I spoke with emphasized how persistent parents must be during the IEP process. She told me that parents must continuously advocate by attending meetings, asking questions, tracking progress, monitoring their child, and challenging decisions when necessary. These parents also must take on multiple roles that can include provider, educator, therapist, case manager, and legal advocate, often without formal training or adequate support. Advocacy should empower families, not exhaust them. Yet for many, it remains the only way forward.

Parental involvement is critical, but the system's reliance on constant family intervention reveals its weaknesses. Addressing these challenges requires alignment across all levels of government and community. "Know Your Rights" workshops; focus groups of parents with lived experience and families affected by these issues; and ensuring that those families are represented in decision-making environments like coalitions, boards, and committees that have parent engagement to include them in the process are all essential.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Along with these recommendations, here are some other suggestions of ways parents, educators, and advocates can help maximize the effectiveness of an IEP while also supporting one another in confidently navigating the process:

1. **Ensure that IEPs include specific, measurable goals** that include clear benchmarks and timelines so progress can be tracked meaningfully over time.
2. **Center the student's strengths and needs** by using what the student already does well as a foundation for addressing areas of challenge.
3. **Include meaningful accommodations** such as scheduled breaks, visual supports, and structured checklists to promote independence and accessible learning.
4. **Use appropriate modifications** like an adjusted workload, simplified tasks, or strategic seating to support focus and engagement.
5. **Intentionally address social-emotional development** through supports like regular check-ins or tools, such as the **Zones of Regulation**, to help the student recognize and communicate their emotions.
6. **Ensure structured breaks and smooth transitions**, including advance warnings and opportunities for movement, are incorporated into the school day to improve regulation and attention.
7. **Keep routines and timing consistent** to help the student understand expectations and feel secure in the daily structure.
8. **Consistently monitor progress** beyond report cards to include assignments, writing tasks, tests, and projects to help ensure timely adjustments to instruction.
9. **Actively encourage the student to share how they learn best and what supports work for them** and also encourage families to be well-prepared for IEP meetings by reviewing notes, sharing concerns, and ensuring all documentation is clear so that goals and progress remain transparent and actionable.

CONCLUSION

The case for investing in IEPs is both moral and practical. **Supporting children** during their formative years reduces the need for more intensive and costly interventions later in life, strengthens families, stabilizes the workforce, and contributes to a more equitable society. When systems fail to support children early, the cost is not eliminated; it is simply delayed and, often, multiplied.

That is why both the recommendations above and **fully funding** IDEA are so important. A fully funded federal program would ease the financial burden on states, ensure more consistent support nationwide, engage those affected by the issues, and improve programs. At the state level, honoring commitments to child care and early education would help stabilize families and improve access to essential services. Locally, schools must prioritize communication, cultural competency, and genuine collaboration with families. And of course, parent education is crucial in helping families understand their rights and resources, how to navigate complex systems, and effectively advocate for their children.

At the heart of this issue is something simple yet powerful: love. Parents advocate not because it is easy, but because their children depend on it. But love alone should not have to compensate for systemic gaps. A functioning system would meet families where they are, listen to their voices, and provide the resources necessary for every child. Until then, parents will continue to carry the weight of fighting not just for services, but for recognition, respect, and a fair chance for their children.

Guest author **Lily Marquez** was part of CLASP 2025-2026 Child Care and Early Education Policy Fellowship for Parents Cohort. More information about the fellowship program can be found [here](#).