SOUTH DAKOTA ParentConnection
Serving Families Since 1985

School 504 Plans and Health Care Plans: Understanding the Difference

Children with health needs may need extra support to be safe, healthy, and ready to learn. Schools may use a 504 Plan, a health care plan, or both. Understanding the difference helps you and the school team plan support that fits your child.

What is a 504 plan?

Section 504 is a federal civil rights law that protects people with disabilities from discrimination. A 504 Plan describes the supports and services a student needs to access education and school activities.

A student may qualify if a physical or mental impairment substantially limits a major life activity, such as breathing, eating, walking, concentrating, or learning. A medical diagnosis is not always required, and a diagnosis alone does not determine eligibility. The school team evaluates your child's individual needs. Students do not have to be failing classes to qualify.

Supports may include:

- Access to food, water, or the bathroom
- Breaks or a quiet place to manage health needs
- Extra time or changes to assignments and testing
- Nursing services or help managing a health condition
- Support for disability-related absences
- Supports during PE, field trips, and school-sponsored activities

What is a health care plan?

A school health care plan, sometimes called an Individualized Health Plan (IHP), explains how the school will manage your child's medical needs. The school nurse works with parents, health care providers, and other staff to develop the plan. Some children also need a separate emergency action plan with clear steps for responding quickly.

It may include:

- Medications, treatments, or medical procedures
- Symptoms staff should watch for and how to respond
- Emergency instructions and when to contact parents
- Staff responsibilities, training, and backup coverage
- Instructions from your child's health care provider



Why might my child need both?

The plans have different purposes, but they can work together. A health care plan gives detailed medical instructions. A 504 Plan identifies supports and services for access to education and school activities. These services may include nursing care.

For example, a student with diabetes may have a health care plan explaining blood sugar checks, insulin, and emergency treatment. Their 504 Plan may address access to snacks, water, bathroom breaks, nursing services, and time to complete work missed while receiving care.

A health care plan alone does not replace a Section 504 evaluation or parent rights when those are needed. A condition may still qualify as a disability even when medication or treatment helps manage it.

What is my role on the IEP team?

Share how your child's condition affects attendance, energy, concentration, and participation, along with what helps. Provide available recommendations from their health care provider and include your child's ideas when possible.

Contact the school nurse or 504 coordinator to discuss whether your child needs a health care plan, a Section 504 evaluation, or both. You can request an evaluation in writing. If you disagree with a Section 504 decision, ask for an explanation and your parent rights, called procedural safeguards.

Questions to Ask

- Does my child need a health care plan, a 504 Plan, or both?
- How will the plans work together?
- Who will provide care, and what training will they receive?
- Who will help when the nurse or regular staff member is absent?
- How will teachers and substitutes receive needed information?
- What support will be available on the bus, during field trips, and at school-sponsored activities?
- What will staff do during an emergency?
- What happens during an emergency, and where are medicine and supplies kept?
- When will we review the plans, and whom should I contact with concerns?

Parent tips

- **Share everyday examples.** Describe what happens, how often, and how it affects your child's school day. Explain what helps.
- **Review the written plans.** Make sure they explain what support your child will receive, when it will be provided, and who is responsible. Keep copies for your records.
- **Plan beyond the classroom.** Discuss meals, transportation, recess, field trips, and school-sponsored activities.
- **Ask about backup support.** Know who will help when the nurse or another trained staff member is absent.
- **Keep information current.** Share changes in symptoms, medications, treatment, and emergency contacts. Ask whether updated medical instructions are needed.
- **Build your child's voice.** Help your child recognize when they need help, identify a trusted adult, and practice asking for support.
- **Stay connected.** Agree on how to share updates. Discuss what is working and address concerns together before they become bigger problems.

South Dakota Parent Connection is Here to Help!

We offer free support, information, and resources to families across South Dakota.

SOUTH DAKOTA ParentConnection
Serving Families Since 1985

www.sdparent.org
(605) 361-3171
sdpc@sdparent.org

Main Office
701 W. 49th St, Suite 102
Sioux Falls, SD 57106

Offices located in
Sioux Falls and Rapid City

This resource was developed under grants from the U.S. Department of Education Project Grant H328M140021; Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Grant H84MC07994, Family to Family Health Information Center, $96,750, and approximately 5% financed with non-governmental resources. The contents should not be construed as the official position or policy of, nor should any endorsements be inferred by US Department of Education, HRSA, HHS or the Federal Government.

October 2026