

Supreme Court Ruling Removes Heightened Barrier for Students With Disabilities Seeking Relief Against School Districts

Supreme Court ruling removes a higher legal barrier for students with disabilities pursuing discrimination claims against schools. #SpecialEducation #Disability

WASHINGTON, DC, UNITED STATES, August 24, 2026 /EINPresswire.com/ -- A unanimous U.S. Supreme Court decision is continuing to reshape the legal landscape for students with disabilities and their families by eliminating a heightened legal standard that had made certain disability-discrimination claims against public school districts substantially more difficult to pursue.



A Supreme Court ruling has removed a heightened legal barrier for students with disabilities pursuing federal discrimination claims against their schools.

In *A.J.T. v. Osseo Area Schools, Independent School District No. 279*, the Supreme Court held that students pursuing education-related claims under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act and Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) cannot be required to prove that a school district acted with “bad faith or gross misjudgment.” [As Reuters reported in its coverage of the decision](#), the Court unanimously rejected a rule that subjected students with disabilities to a more demanding discrimination standard simply because their claims arose in the educational setting.

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— [Keith Altman](#), Founder and Managing Partner, K Altman Law

For families who have repeatedly documented a child's needs, requested accommodations or services, and watched a school district fail to respond, the ruling provides an important additional framework for evaluating whether the problem may extend beyond an IDEA dispute and implicate broader federal disability rights.

The Supreme Court Rejected a Special Higher Standard for Schools

The case involved A.J.T., a student with a rare form of epilepsy whose condition prevented her from attending school in the morning. After her family moved to Minnesota, the school district declined requests for evening instruction that would have allowed her to receive educational hours comparable to those available to students without disabilities.



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Her family successfully pursued relief under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), with an administrative law judge finding that the district had denied her a free appropriate public education. But when the family separately pursued discrimination claims under Section 504 and the ADA, the courts applied an Eighth Circuit standard requiring proof that the school district had acted in “bad faith or gross misjudgment.”

The Supreme Court unanimously rejected that heightened requirement.

Chief Justice John Roberts, writing for the Court, held that students bringing ADA and Section 504 claims related to their education are subject to the same legal standards that apply to disability-discrimination claims in other contexts. The ruling did not create automatic liability whenever a school violates the IDEA, nor did it hold that every special-education dispute supports a claim for monetary damages.

It did, however, eliminate a significant additional barrier that applied specifically to students seeking to enforce federal disability-discrimination protections against schools.

Why the Decision Matters for Parents

The distinction between an IDEA violation and a potential federal disability-discrimination claim remains important.

A disagreement over an IEP, methodology, placement or level of services does not automatically become an ADA or Section 504 lawsuit. But certain fact patterns may warrant closer legal review, particularly when a school district has repeatedly been placed on notice of a student's disability-

related needs and nevertheless fails to act.

- repeated refusals to provide or implement documented accommodations;
- significant failures to deliver services required by an IEP or Section 504 Plan;
- shortened school days or exclusion from programs because of disability;
- decisions based primarily on staffing, scheduling or administrative convenience rather than the student's documented needs;
- repeated written notice to administrators without meaningful corrective action;
- disability-based bullying or harassment that the school knows about but fails to address;
- exclusion from extracurricular, academic or other school programs because appropriate accommodations were not provided; or
- systemic policies or practices that disproportionately restrict access for students with disabilities.

"Parents often spend months or years documenting the same concerns, attending meetings and asking a district to correct the same problem," Altman said. "That documentation can be important not only in an IDEA proceeding but also in determining whether the district's conduct raises separate questions under federal disability-discrimination law."

Part of a Broader Shift in the Rights of Students With Disabilities

The A.J.T. decision is particularly significant when considered alongside the Supreme Court's 2023 ruling in *Perez v. Sturgis Public Schools*.

In *Perez*, the Court held that a student seeking a form of relief that the IDEA cannot provide—such as compensatory damages under another federal statute—is not necessarily required to complete the IDEA administrative process before pursuing that separate claim. Together, *Perez* and A.J.T. underscore that the IDEA is not the only federal law protecting children with disabilities in public schools. Depending upon the facts, students may also have independent rights under Section 504 and the ADA.

The Supreme Court's decision nevertheless has limits. Standards governing damages, proof of discriminatory intent, causation, available remedies, procedural requirements and defenses can vary depending upon the claim and federal jurisdiction. Families should therefore avoid assuming that an IDEA violation, standing alone, establishes a viable civil-rights damages case.

What Families Can Do

Parents concerned that a school district is repeatedly failing to accommodate their child's disability should consider maintaining a clear written record, including:

- IEPs and Section 504 Plans;
- evaluations and assessments;
- emails and other communications with school personnel;
- written requests for accommodations or services;
- prior written notices and meeting notes;

- service-delivery records;
- attendance and disciplinary records;
- evidence showing how the district responded after being notified of the problem; and
- records documenting educational, emotional or other consequences to the student.

The circumstances of each student are different, and whether conduct constitutes an IDEA violation, disability discrimination, or both requires an individualized legal analysis.

About K Altman Law

K Altman Law represents students and families in education-related legal matters, including Special Education, Student Defense, Title IX, disability and civil-rights matters, and related litigation. The firm advocates for students confronting high-stakes disputes with schools, colleges, universities and other educational institutions. Visit the K Altman Law website.

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