IDEA is directed primarily at the states, which are responsible for providing education to their citizens. The majority of the many rules and regulations defining how IDEA operates fall under six major principles that have remained basically unchanged since 1975 (Turnbull & Cilley, 1999; Turnbull & Turnbull, 2000):

Zero Reject.
Schools must educate all children with disabilities. This principle applies regardless of the nature or severity of the disability; no child with disabilities may be excluded from a public education. The requirement to provide special education to all students with disabilities is absolute between the ages of 6 and 17. If a state provides educational services to children without disabilities between the ages of 3 to 5 and 18 to 21, it must also educate all children with disabilities in those age groups. Each state education agency is responsible for locating, identifying, and evaluating all children, from birth to age 21, residing in the state with disabilities or who are suspected of having disabilities. This requirement is called the child find system.

Nondiscriminatory Identification and Evaluation.
Schools must use nonbiased, multifactored methods of evaluation to determine whether a child has a disability and, if so, whether special education is needed. Testing and evaluation procedures must not discriminate on the basis of race, culture, or native language. All tests must be administered in the child's native language, and identification and placement decisions cannot be made on the basis of a single test score. These provisions of IDEA are known as protection in evaluation procedures.

Free, Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).
All children with disabilities, regardless of the type or severity of their disability, shall receive a free, appropriate public education. This education must be provided at public expense—that is, without cost to the child’s parents. An individualized education program (IEP) must be developed and implemented to meet the unique needs of each student with a disability. The IEP specifies the child’s unique educational needs, states present levels of performance, identifies measurable annual goals and short-term objectives, and describes the specific special education and related services that will be provided to help the child attain those goals and benefit from education.

Least Restrictive Environment (LRE).
IDEA mandates that students with disabilities be educated with children without disabilities to the maximum extent appropriate and that students with disabilities be removed to separate classes or schools only when the nature or severity of their disabilities is such that they cannot receive an appropriate education in a general education classroom with supplementary aids and services. IDEA creates a presumption in favor of inclusion in the regular classroom by requiring that a student’s IEP contain a justification and explanation of the extent, if any, to which a child
will not participate with nondisabled peers in the general academic curriculum, extracurricular activities, and other nonacademic activities (e.g., lunch, recess, transportation, dances). To ensure that each student with disabilities is educated in the least restrictive environment appropriate for her needs, school districts must provide a continuum of placement and service alternatives.

Due Process Safeguards.
Schools must provide due process safeguards to protect the rights of children with disabilities and their parents. Parental consent must be obtained for initial and all subsequent evaluations and placement decisions regarding special education. Schools must maintain the confidentiality of all records pertaining to a child with disabilities and make those records available to the parents. When parents of a child with disabilities disagree with the results of an evaluation performed by the school, they can obtain an independent evaluation at public expense. When the school and parents disagree on the identification, evaluation, placement, or provision of a free, appropriate public education and related services for the child, the parents may request a due process hearing. States are also required to offer parents an opportunity to resolve the matter through mediation by a third party before holding a due process hearing. Parents have the right to attorney’s fees if they prevail in due process or judicial proceedings under IDEA. The law also includes provisions that allow the court to award reasonable attorney’s fees to the prevailing school district against the attorney of a parent, or the parent who files a complaint that is frivolous, unreasonable, without foundation, or filed for any improper purpose, such as to harass. Although “due process hearings are a last resort to resolve conflicts or problems between school districts and parents” (Getty & Summey, 2004, p. 40), they occur with increasing frequency. The majority of due process hearings are over placement or program issues (Newcomer & Zirkel, 1999). In cases contesting placement issues, parents were seeking a more restrictive educational setting 67% of the time (Havey, 1999).

Parent and Student Participation and Shared Decision Making.
Schools must collaborate with parents and students with disabilities in the design and implementation of special education services. The parents’ (and, whenever appropriate, the student’s) input and wishes must be considered in IEP goals and objectives, related-service needs, and placement decisions.