

design by **greyson imm**
photo by **paige bean**

unaccommodated.

story by **caroline gould**

Students are concerned that teachers often ignore their 504 plans and IEPs

FOR **SOPHOMORE ISABELLE** Wilkinson, a 504 Plan is what keeps her in class. It's what provides her a quiet testing space for her ADHD. It's what excuses a five-minute tardy to first hour after waking up with high blood pressure due to her chronic autoimmune disorder. It's what allows her to miss school for life-saving doctor's appointments for her physical disabilities.

It's access to education for her.

A 504 Plan allows disabled students to receive learning accommodations and benefits in SMSD's programs and activities without discrimination enforced by federal law. However, some East students believe these accommodations aren't always respected or acknowledged by East's staff.

A student's 504 Plan is requested by a parent and drafted by medical professionals to tailor to a student's needs. In Wilkinson's case, it was a cardiologist, gastroenterologist, psychiatrist and therapist who together decided she should receive testing accommodations and extra time to walk in the hallways.

"The hope is that the 504 accommodates a student's learning so they can have equal access to education," Principal Jason Peres said.

Although Wilkinson has expressed her concerns to her 504 Plan manager and an associate principal twice this year, she doesn't attribute the lack of respect toward her 504 Plan entirely to higher-level administration, but also a lack of consistency amongst teachers.

"I had told my doctors what school I went to, and they all sighed and apologized," Wilkinson said.

And she isn't alone in this trend, even though teachers are reminded of these plans by 504 Plan managers and special education teachers at the beginning of each course and can access them in Skyward. In an Instagram poll of 59 students with 504 Plans or learning accommodations, 71% said that they felt that their needs were being ignored — whether that be a lack of modifications on assignments or extra time on exams.

Senior Anna Galvin's learning

disabilities in math and reading have been accommodated with an IEP — Individualized Education Program — since fourth grade through amended assignments and extended deadlines. In both district elementary schools and East, she has noticed inconsistencies in how teachers approach her IEP.

"I know some of the teachers at East who I have had are really good at managing [students with] IEPs, and I know some who haven't been," she said. "I feel like teachers should be trained more with IEPs and disabilities."

At least once a month she recalls reminding her teachers that she can benefit from the modified assignments and lengthened deadlines that her IEP entails when they expect her to meet the same requirements as her other classmates.

"Sometimes I do get scared to go up to my teacher and ask if I can get an assignment shortened or a deadline lengthened, and that kind of makes me upset," Galvin said.

Both Galvin and Wilkinson see mixed reactions when reminding their teachers about their differing needs. For Wilkinson, it may be her math teacher begrudgingly moving her to another room for a test. For Galvin, it's her teachers discouraging her from using the accommodations her IEP grants her and reluctance around asking for help.

"When my expectations aren't being met with my IEP, I feel like it's kind of being pushed aside, and they want me to try harder to not advocate on IEP, which I always try my best not to," Galvin said.

Although reactions differ, teachers with students who benefit from 504s or IEPs are informed at the beginning of each course by school administrators and expected to execute it, according to Peres.

"If students don't feel as though their accommodations are being met, I expect them to come to a case manager," he said. "I wouldn't like that, I would want them to tell us."

However, Wilkinson feels that she has communicated the issue to her case manager — twice this school year.

Psychology teacher Brett Kramer believes the issue is associated with forgetfulness more than harmful intentions. Although learning modifications for students with 504s and IEPs are clearly communicated to teachers at the beginning of each course, some teachers without many disabled students in their classes may forget to prioritize those needs.

"I'd rather believe that if kids fail to get the support they need that it's because of something a little bit less sinister [than ignoring the learning accommodations]," Kramer said. "It's wildly unprofessional to ignore those things."

But to Wilkinson, that forgetfulness can be harmful, and not just at the high school level. After her sixth-grade teacher ripped up doctor's notes detailing her absence due to her disabilities directly in front of her, she sees this lack of respect toward students with disabilities as a district-wide issue. The district's department of Student and Family Services said that instances like these should be met with informing an administrator, but declined further comment.

"I don't think our school doesn't care about people with special needs, it's the whole district," she said.

And with that, Wilkinson does believe there's a solution. Providing updated training for teachers on how to teach students with disabilities would make her feel more accepted and comfortable at school.

"[Having my 504 plan respected] and

having accommodations would make me feel better about going to school, and cared for and respected for and that my experience at school actually matters," Wilkinson said. "If I need a quiet space to do homework I can do that, if I need extra time on an assignment I can do that. It would make me feel less guilty about having a doctor's appointment that's really important to me."

follow the money

A look at special education services statistics in Kansas

schools receive \$4000-\$10,000 annually for special education services for students without physical disabilities

10% of special education funding comes from the federal gov't

40% of special education funding comes from IDEA funds

IEP **INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN**

- specific steps to aid students
- includes learning disabilities and gifted services

sizing up services

The difference between a 504 plan and an IEP

SECTION 504 PLAN

- ensuring equitable access to a safe learning environment
- focused on physical and mental health

504