



New to Section 504? Use these tips to make sure first meeting is a success

As a new Section 504 coordinator, going into your first meeting can be daunting. Each one is different, and if you don't have a lot of experience, you may feel apprehensive about making a mistake that could possibly lead to legal compliance issues for your district. Maintaining a good relationship with parents and caregivers through 504 meetings is a great way to mitigate potential legal claims.

"You'd rather have a parent bring an issue up to you than bring a claim against the school district," said Jeffrey Weiss, attorney with Harris Beach PLLC in Buffalo, N.Y., who represents public school districts in special education matters. Weiss offered advice on how to ensure a successful first Section 504 meeting and avoid a legal claim.

- **Before the meeting:**

Check your district's 504 policies. As a Section 504 coordinator, you should intimately know your school district's policies and procedures. Check for flexibility to make sure you are in compliance when it comes to creating timelines for evaluations, meeting with your teams, and reevaluating after the meetings.

When you understand the policies for when and how often meetings are to occur, you can then begin to focus more on each Section 504 plan itself than on adhering to strict schedules.

Bottom line, when prepping for your first 504 meeting, make sure you know your own rules inside and out. "You don't want to learn about your district's policies from a parent's attorney, especially during litigation," said Weiss.

Don't make promises or predeterminations. Weiss said that when going into a Section 504 meeting with a parent who has specific concerns for their child, there might be a temptation to discuss the 504 plan with a parent before the meeting occurs. However, as a general rule, don't have pre-meeting conversations about the 504 plan with the parents. By doing this, you are creating a claim where it otherwise wouldn't exist. If a parent insists on an answer, try to be as empathetic as possible. Assure them that completing evaluations and discussions with the whole 504 team will mean a smooth meeting that is complete with accurate information.

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- **During the meeting:**

Be prepared and empathetic. Sometimes, tensions can be high with parents during Section 504 meetings. Always enter into the meeting understanding that these tensions can exist, but it's your job to be professional, accurate, and empathetic. The worst misstep you can make is to aggravate a situation in the moment. Sometimes a parent's expectations for the 504 plan are not met, which can elicit emotional reactions.

Weiss offered that the best thing to do in this situation is to respond professionally. Try to see where the parent is coming from and listen to concerns. Weiss said that in some cases, parents have the best solution for their child, but the student is not entitled to that solution at that time. The best answer for these parents is one that takes their thoughts into consideration and suggests that their solutions could be implemented in the future during an annual reevaluation of the student's 504 plan if the student fails to make sufficient progress.

- **After the meeting:**

Meet needs, build relationships. When the meeting is over, the work is far from done. While implementing the 504 plan and annual reevaluations, you want to make sure that the relationships you are developing with students and parents are only getting stronger.

As a Section 504 coordinator, you will have a relationship with these students and their parents most likely for years to come. Weiss said the way you handle yourself in 504 meetings will set the tone for your relationship going forward.

- **Going forward:**

Final thoughts on planning 504 meetings. It is the Section 504 coordinator's responsibility to ensure communication and uniformity among your 504 plans and meetings. You set the tone as an administrator with your staff. Build good communication with teachers as issues arise with students. Check in with your staff and gather good information to help you with the reevaluation of students' 504 plans.

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In the beginning, navigating the world of 504 plans as a coordinator can seem daunting. Finding a peer group and other administrators in the same position as you, especially those with more experience in Section 504, will allow you to hopefully gain more training, learn from their insight, and be more open minded for planning 504 meetings.

Not every 504 meeting will be the same. At the end of the day, the goal of any 504 meeting is to meet the needs of the student within the scope of his or her disability and provide the student with a free and appropriate education.

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July 13, 2022

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