



Can't we just get along? Take steps to resolve parent conflicts in 504 meetings

There several individuals involved in a Section 504 meeting, and disagreements between staff and parents are bound to occur. Sometimes, this can be the result of a parent's misunderstanding how the 504 process works or on how the team reached its decision on what is right for the child.

Having solid strategies for Section 504 team members to follow when discussions get heated will allow the 504 team to come back to the common goal of helping the student access her education. While the team is not required to agree with parents on the 504 plan, the team should seek to provide parents the opportunity for meaningful participation. Afterall, the parents are key members of the team. Neglecting to contain conflicts in meetings could weaken the relationship between the parents and the school and take the 504 plan off track. A school attorney shares how to approach disputes in a 504 meeting.

Prepare team for potential contentious meetings

If a 504 team leader is aware of a potential upcoming meeting becoming contentious, having a preparatory meeting could help remind team members of how to communicate professionally, how to allow the parent to participate meaningfully, and how to get the team to come to the right conclusion for the student.

"If [the team goes] into a meeting prepared, that will help to de-escalate a lot of contention that happens when a family questions the team," said Sherry Culves, school attorney at Parker Poe in Atlanta, Ga.

A preparatory meeting is not for the team to make any predeterminations about the student's 504 plan. The goal is not for team members to enter the planned 504 meeting with a closed mind but to be ready for discussion.

When people start talking over each other or when emotions escalate in people's voices, then it's time to take a break, Culves said.

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"Obviously, when there's direct confrontation that's not productive [or] that's accusatory, then we all need to step back, take a break, and reestablish norms. And that's on all sides of the table," she said.

Demystify 504 meeting process for parents

Section 504 meetings can be full of acronyms and specialized jargon that parents might not understand. To alleviate concerns that parents have, 504 teams should seek to make the process clear to them. Explain the purpose of the meeting, what will happen during the meeting, and how the whole process will work.

"Remember that these meetings can be frightening to those individuals that don't work in this space day in and day out," Culves said. "These things really come down to human interaction and treating others like you would want to be treated."

By identifying each parent's perspective, teams can be better equipped to handle potential disagreements that may arise. Be open to answering parents' questions so that they feel like their voice is heard. Teams can ask parents to identify topics or concerns that they have ahead of the meeting, so the team can be prepared to address them.

Explain rationale behind decisions

If the team makes a decision that the parents disagree with, team members should explain the reasoning behind the recommendation instead of stating what the team plans to do and leaving it at that.

"We need to, to the extent possible, try to build buy-in with transparency, explanations of what has happened to date, what was tried, and what our rationale is for doing things. All of those things will go along way toward forming consensus," Culves said.

Emphasize common goal with parents

Teams should work to build relationships with families right away. Culves said she tends to see the most conflict later on when parents don't think that the plan has worked for their student.

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Some parents don't understand the process, and the real issue is just a lack of understanding. 504 teams should help parents realize that everyone at the meeting is trying to determine the right way to educate the child.

"If we can come to the fact that we have the same end goal, and we just have different lenses that we're looking through in terms of an approach, that's another way to reset [the tone]," she said. "We're all here for the same thing; we're just expressing different experiences along the journey and different strategies on how to get to the end destination."

[Janiece Branson](#) covers *Section 504 and other special education issues for LRP Publications*.

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