

Section 504 Policies and Procedures Handbook

For Parents and Students



Five Town CSD/MSAD #28

Student Special Services Office

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Section 504 Policies and Procedures Handbook

INTRODUCTION

This handbook is intended as a resource for students, parents and school district staff regarding the requirements of Section 504 as they relate to students. Questions or concerns about specific students should be addressed to:

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WHAT IS SECTION 504?

Section 504 is part of the federal Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which was enacted by Congress to combat discrimination against individuals with disabilities in services, programs and activities administered by any entity that receives federal funds, including public schools. Section 504 states in pertinent part:

No otherwise qualified individual with a disability in the United States...shall, solely by reason of his or her disability, be excluded from the participation in, be denied the benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving federal financial assistance....

THE ADA AND MAINE HUMAN RIGHTS ACT

The Americans with Disabilities Act (“ADA”) also prohibits discrimination based on disability, but it is broader and applies to all public entities (including schools), whether or not they receive federal funds. The ADA also prohibits disability-based discrimination in employment by employers (public or private) with 15 or more employees, as well as in places of “public accommodations” such as stores, hotels, restaurants, day care centers, and private non-religious schools. The Maine Human Rights Act also prohibits disability-based discrimination in a variety of contexts, including employment and educational programs and activities.

IS SECTION 504 A SPECIAL EDUCATION LAW?

No. While all special education students who qualify for services under federal and state special education laws (i.e., the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act or IDEA) may also qualify for services under Section 504, Section 504 students are not necessarily covered by special education laws. To qualify for special education, there must be evaluations and observations showing that the student has one of a number of specific, listed disabilities; that the student’s condition has an adverse effect on his/her educational performance; and that the student requires specialized instruction to ensure a free appropriate public education (FAPE).

To be eligible under Section 504, a student must demonstrate that he/she/they is a qualified individual with a disability under standards that are different from special education students. Students eligible under Section 504 often require some type of accommodation or related aids and services that are necessary for the child to access his or her educational program, to be provided with an equal educational opportunity, and to gain access to a free appropriate public education. Generally speaking, students who qualify only under Section 504 will not receive direct instructional services of a specialized nature and, in many cases, their related aids and services are provided in a regular education setting. Students with disabilities who require specialized instruction because of that disability will more often be served through special education.

WHICH STUDENTS QUALIFY FOR COVERAGE UNDER SECTION 504?

Section 504 and the ADA provide specific protections for “qualified individuals with a disability.” There are three categories that may qualify someone as an “individual with a disability.” These are:

- 1) A person who has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities;
- 2) A person who has a record of such an impairment; or
- 3) A person who is regarded as having such impairment.

Most of the student situations that schools encounter involve students with actual current impairments that substantially limit a major life activity. These students may need specific services and accommodations in order to access the school program, but it may occasionally also be true that an eligible child under Section 504 is not in need of any interventions at the present time. Protection under the second and third categories listed above generally does not require providing special accommodations or services. Instead, the second and third categories generally protect against negative, discriminatory actions by the school or school officials.

For a student to be identified under Section 504, in most circumstances, the school must conclude that the child has: (1) a physical or mental impairment that (2) substantially limits (3) a major activity. Each of these three concepts is briefly discussed below.

Physical or Mental Impairments

The regulations define “physical or mental impairments” through examples. Physical impairments include “any physiological disorder or condition, somatic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more” listed body systems. These include neurological, musculoskeletal, special sense organs, respiratory or speech, cardiovascular, reproductive, digestive, genito-urinary, hemic/lymphatic, skin, and endocrine body systems. Mental impairments are “any mental or psychological disorder.” The identification categories in the DSM-IV Psychological Manual can be a useful guide for identifying mental impairments, although those categories are not legally binding.

For a physical or mental impairment to substantially limit a major life activity, the impairment should limit that activity to an ample or considerable degree. It should be more than a minor limitation. Generally, the substantial limitation should be expected to last more than six months in length. The substantial limitation should be in comparison to the average student in the general population. Conditions that are episodic or in remission still might qualify, as long as they substantially limit a major life activity when active. An impairment often will be viewed as substantially limiting when the student is:

- 1) Unable to perform a major life activity that the average person in the general population can perform; or
- 2) Substantially restricted as to the condition, manner or duration under which an individual can perform a particular major life activity as compared to the condition, manner or duration under which the average person in the general population can perform that same major life activity.

The following factors may be useful in making the determination:

- The nature and severity of the impairment;
- The duration or expected duration of the impairment; and
- The permanent or long-term impact, or the expected permanent or long-term impact, of or resulting from the impairment.

Section 504 and the ADA state that when determining whether an impairment is substantially limiting, the beneficial effects of any “mitigating measures” the student may be receiving, or could receive, should be ignored. The law defines “mitigating measures” to be factored out of the eligibility decision as including:

- 1) Medication; medical supplies, equipment, or appliances; low-vision devices (which do not include ordinary eyeglasses or contact lenses); prosthetics including limbs and devices; hearing aids and cochlear implants or other implantable hearing devices; mobility devices; or oxygen equipment and supplies;
- 2) Use of assistive technology;
- 3) Reasonable accommodations or auxiliary aids or services; or
- 4) Learned behavioral or adaptive neurological modifications.

Thus, if a student seems fine as a result of some medication, accommodation or assistive technology the student receives, but without it he or she would be substantially limited in a major life activity, the student will likely be a qualified person with a disability under Section 504 and the ADA. Please note that if the impairment is well controlled by virtue of some mitigating measure, the student may not need any interventions and supports in a 504 Plan, even though the student is considered disabled under the law. As a general matter, typical supports or interventions provided by regular education teachers to any student in the classroom, whether or not the student has a disability, are not considered a “mitigating measure.”

Major Life Activities

Major life activities are defined as activities considered important to daily life. The law includes a long list of major life activities, but it is not exclusive. The listed categories are:

- | | |
|----------------------------|---|
| • Caring for oneself, | • Speaking, |
| • Performing manual tasks, | • Breathing, |
| • Seeing, | • Learning, |
| • Hearing, | • Reading, |
| • Eating, | • Concentrating, |
| • Sleeping, | • Thinking, |
| • Walking, | • Communicating, |
| • Standing, | • Working, and |
| • Lifting, | • The operation of a major bodily function. |
| • Bending, | |

The “operation of a major bodily function” at the end of the list above includes, but is not limited to, the operation of the following bodily functions:

- Immune system function,
- Normal cell growth,
- Digestive,
- Bowel,
- Bladder,
- Neurological,
- Brain,
- Respiratory,
- Circulatory,
- Endocrine, and
- Reproductive function.

Eligibility / Determination

The determination of whether a particular impairment qualifies for Section 504 protections can be complex and *must be made on a case-by-case basis* in accordance with district policies and procedures. In all cases, however, there must be a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity.

HOW DOES THE SECTION 504 PROCESS WORK?

The district has established a set of procedures and forms that guide the Section 504 process to ensure that the school meets its Section 504 responsibilities to students. A summary of that process follows:

Initial Referral

Any parent, legal guardian or school staff member may initiate a referral of a student who is believed to be a child with a disability under Section 504. An adult student of eligible school age also may initiate such a referral for him/her/themselves. At this time the parent/legal guardian or adult student will receive a copy of the *Section 504 Policies and Procedures Handbook for Parents and Students*.

A Section 504 Referral Form must be forwarded to the 504 Building Coordinator [or other designated person] who shall ensure that the district’s 504 Referral Form is properly filled out which will then initiate the 504 referral process. Based on the information on the 504 Referral Form, the 504 Chair [or other designated person] may choose to refer the child to the district’s special education process instead of the 504 referral process.

Initial Eligibility and Determination Team Meeting

The Section 504 Building Coordinator [or other designated person] will convene a team meeting with the person making the request within a reasonable time to consider the information gathered. An Advance Written Notice of 504 Team Meeting along with a copy of the Notice of Parent/Student Rights will be given to the parent/guardian or adult student prior to the meeting, notifying them of the time, place and purpose of the meeting. Whenever possible, the notice should be provided at least seven days before the meeting.

Members of the 504 Team should include the 504 Building Coordinator [or other designated person], the student’s 504 Case Manager, the school’s 504 Chair, and any other appropriate faculty who are knowledgeable about the student, the evaluation data and the placement options. This may include the school nurse when appropriate. The student’s parent/guardian will be invited to participate in the 504 Team meeting. The School or the parent/guardian may invite other individuals with knowledge about the child to the 504 meeting.

Eligibility Criteria and Determinations

All decisions regarding a student's 504 eligibility, placement and the provision of any necessary related aids and services will be made by the 504 Team and will be based on information from a variety of sources, with information from all sources being carefully considered and documented.

When determining a student's eligibility under Section 504, the Team will complete a 504 Eligibility Determination Form. A copy of the completed Eligibility Determination Form will be placed in the student's education records.

The Team may need to further evaluate the student to determine appropriate placement. The Team also may decide to refer the child to the district's special education process, or to access any available pre-referral process that may be operating in the school building.

Team decisions will be made by consensus. It is not appropriate to make eligibility, placement, or programming decisions based on a majority "vote." In the absence of consensus, the 504 Chair [or approved designee at the meeting] will make the final decision regarding a child's eligibility and, if needed, the placement and related aids and/or services that the child needs.

The Team must ensure that decisions about student eligibility or about significant changes in the student's program or supports are based on an evaluation of the child. If this evaluation is going to include specific testing of the child, the school must obtain written consent from the parent/guardian before conducting that testing. If a parent refuses to provide consent for an initial evaluation to determine a student's 504 eligibility, the school may, but is not required to, initiate a 504 hearing challenging the parent's decision.

The school unit must provide the parent/guardian with notice of the district's proposals or refusals, or both, regarding their child's educational program, and with notice that the parent/guardian have a right to seek resolution of any disagreements through the local grievance procedure or by initiating an impartial due process hearing as outlined on page 7 of this handbook.

A child may not receive initial placement in 504 services without the written consent of the child's parent/guardian. Consent by one parent with educational rights in relation to the student is sufficient to initiate the services in question and can be submitted by completing a Parental Consent for Initial Section 504 Placement form. If the student is an adult, the student shall be the person from whom the district must obtain the written consent. *Written consent is not required for subsequent changes in 504 services.*

504 Plan

If the Team determines that an eligible student requires accommodations and/or related aids or services, a 504 Accommodation Plan will be written.

If the Team determines that an eligible student does not currently require any accommodations and/or related aids or services, a 504 Accommodation Plan should be written specifying that no aids or services are needed at this time.

The 504 Coordinator will mail a copy of the 504 Plan to the parent/guardian and place a copy in the student's education records within a reasonable time after the 504 meeting.

The 504 Plan will be made available to all staff who have responsibilities under the Plan and should be reviewed at least annually, or sooner if requested. The 504 Team should meet at least annually to review even those 504 Plans that indicate no services are currently needed.

All 504 students must be reevaluated periodically, but no less than every three years, to determine their continued eligibility and, if eligible, their continued need for accommodations or related aides and/or services.

At any point in the 504 process, school staff or the parent/guardian or adult student may initiate a referral to consider the student's eligibility for special education.

STUDENT DISCIPLINE UNDER SECTION 504

It is important to understand that students who are identified as disabled under both Section 504 and special education laws are covered by the special education discipline rules.

A Section 504 student may be suspended for up to 10 consecutive school days as long as the suspension is consistent with the rules and procedures applied to non-disabled students. Unlike special education, there is no independent duty under Section 504 to provide alternative (or tutorial) services to 504 students who have received suspensions in excess of 10 cumulative days in the school year.

If the student is suspended or expelled for a length of time that would be considered a significant change of placement, the Section 504 Team must conduct a meeting to determine whether the misconduct was related to the student's disability. A disciplinary removal will be considered a significant change of placement if:

1. The removal is for more than 10 consecutive school days in a row; or
2. There is a series of disciplinary removals totaling more than 10 school days in the school year, and that series constitutes a pattern because the behavior is substantially similar to the previous incidents that resulted in the removals, and because of additional factors such as the length of each removal, the total removal time and the proximity of the removals to each other.

If the 504 Team determines that the misconduct is related to the disability, then any further programming or removal decisions must be addressed through the Section 504 Team Meeting process, based on a consideration of evaluative data, and must be calculated to meet the student's educational needs. If the 504 Team determines that the student should be served in a location other than his/her/their regular school setting, services must be provided to that student that are reasonably likely to provide the student with a FAPE.

If a determination is made that the misconduct was not related to the disability, then the student may be treated in the same manner as a non-disabled student. There is no requirement in this situation to provide any educational services during the suspension, if non-disabled students also would be denied educational services.

A Section 504 student who is found to have violated school policies and/or rules on the use or possession of drugs and alcohol, and also is currently using drugs or alcohol, may be disciplined to the same extent and degree as non-disabled students, without the need for a Section 504 Team meeting, manifestation determination or alternative services.

EXTRACURRICULAR ACTIVITIES

A disabled student is qualified to participate in non-academic services such as extracurricular activities if he or she “meets the essential eligibility requirements for the receipt of such services.” If the student meets the eligibility requirements for the activity, with or without reasonable accommodations, the district has an obligation to permit the student to participate on equal terms with non-disabled students and must provide any necessary accommodations at no cost to the student.

Most disputes regarding students with disabilities in extracurricular activities concern whether requested accommodations would be reasonable and necessary for the district to provide. These issues are complex and have been litigated extensively in the courts. A thorough review should be undertaken by the student’s Section 504 Team before any student is denied access to a desired activity.

IMPARTIAL HEARING AND GRIEVANCE PROCEDURE FOR PERSONS WITH DISABILITIES

Impartial Hearing

When a parent/guardian or adult student disagrees with the district’s decisions regarding the Section 504 process, they are entitled to request a hearing conducted by an impartial hearing officer from outside the school unit. Questions regarding how to request a hearing should be directed to the 504 District Coordinator.

Grievance Procedure for Persons with Disabilities

Five Town CSD / MSAD #28 maintains a grievance procedure to provide a process for persons with disabilities to raise concerns regarding the school is fully meeting its obligations under state and federal laws to protect persons with disabilities, including Section 504. This procedure is intended to meet the requirements of the federal Rehabilitation Act (34 CFR § 104.7(b)) and the federal Americans with Disabilities Act (28 CFR § 35.107(b)). The steps a person with an identifiable disability, or someone acting on that person’s behalf, can take to address any concern are as follows:

1. A person with an identifiable disability, or someone acting on that person’s behalf, may file a written grievance regarding compliance with state or federal disabilities laws with the building principal where the grievance arose, or with the 504 District Coordinator. If filed with the 504 District Coordinator, that person shall forward it to the appropriate building principal. No grievance will be heard if it involves actions that occurred more than 60 days prior to the filing of the grievance.

The building principal, after consultation with the 504 District Coordinator, shall respond in writing to the grievance within 15 working days of its receipt. Extensions of 15 working days may be allowed, if necessary, to address fully the issues in the grievance. The principal’s written response shall be forwarded to the grievant and to the ADA/504 District Coordinator.

2. If dissatisfied with the response, the grievant may obtain a review of the principal’s decision by the superintendent. The grievant must request that review within 15 working days of the decision by the principal. The Superintendent, after consultation with the 504 District Coordinator, shall respond in writing to the grievance within 15 working days.

Extensions of 15 working days may be allowed, when necessary, to address fully the issues in the grievance. The Superintendent’s written response shall be forwarded to the grievant and to the 504 compliance coordinator.

At any time, a person with an identifiable disability, or someone acting on that person's behalf, may seek redress for their concerns through other legal avenues, such as the Office for Civil Rights (see below), The Department of Justice, the Maine Human Rights Commission or the Maine Department of Education.

OCR Grievance Process

To make an inquiry or file a complaint under Section 504, an individual may contact Maine's Regional Office for Civil Rights:

Office for Civil Rights, U.S. Department of Education
5 Post Office Square, 8th Floor, Boston, MA 02109-3921
Telephone: (617) 289-0111, Facsimile: (617) 289-0150
[Email: OCR.Boston@ed.gov](mailto:OCR.Boston@ed.gov)

Questions about other legal avenues available for persons with disabilities should be directed to the 504 District Coordinator at 7 Lions Lane, Camden, Maine 04843, or 207-236-7812.

NOTICE OF PARENT/STUDENT RIGHTS

Five Town CSD/MSAD #28 has an obligation to ensure that parents receive notice of the procedural safeguards that apply under Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act for children with identified disabilities and their families. Families are provided notice of their 504 procedural safeguards through two forms of documentation:

1. A **Notice of Parent/Student Rights**, which lists the central procedural safeguards available to families of persons with disabilities and is distributed at the time of the initial referral as well as once any 504 Team Meeting has been scheduled; and
2. A **Section 504 Handbook for Parents and Students**, which includes a much more extensive discussion of the 504 process and procedural safeguards, includes the Notice of Parent/Student Rights and is distributed at the time of the initial referral. The Handbook is also available on the school website.

The following is a description of the rights granted by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act ("Section 504") to parents and their children who are identified as disabled. Five Town CSD/MSAD#28 is obligated to inform you of decisions about your child and of your rights if you disagree with any of those decisions.

You have the following rights:

1. To have your child take part in, and receive benefits from, public education programs without discrimination because of his/her/their disability.
2. To have the school district advise you of your rights under federal law.
3. To receive notice from the school with respect to the identification, evaluation, educational program or placement of your child.
4. According to the Department of Education's 504 Regulations, to have your child receive a free appropriate public education. This includes the right to be educated with non-disabled students to the

maximum extent appropriate. It also includes the right to reasonable accommodations, modifications, and related aids and services necessary for your child to benefit from his/her/their educational program.

5. To have your child educated in comparable facilities and receive comparable services to those provided non-disabled students.
6. To have decisions regarding your child's evaluation, program and placement based upon a variety of information sources, and made by persons familiar with the student, the evaluation data, and the placement options.
7. To have your child re-evaluated periodically, to the extent necessary, including before any significant changes are made to your child's educational program or placement.
8. To have your child receive an equal opportunity to participate in extra-curricular school activities.
9. To examine all relevant educational records relating to decisions regarding your child's identification, evaluation, education program, and placement.
10. To obtain copies of educational records at a reasonable cost unless the fee would effectively deny you access to the records.
11. To receive a response from the School District to reasonable requests for explanations and interpretations of your child's records.
12. To request amendment of your child's educational records if there is reasonable cause to believe that they are inaccurate, misleading or otherwise in violation of the privacy rights of your child. If the school district refuses this request for amendment, it shall notify you within a reasonable time, and advise you of your right to a hearing.
13. To file a complaint through local grievance procedures as outlined in the Section 504 Policies and Procedures Handbook regarding any alleged violation of the federal Rehabilitation Act.
14. To request an impartial hearing, to be conducted by a person who is not an employee of the school district, to dispute decisions or actions regarding your child's identification, evaluation, educational program or placement as a student with a disability. You and your child may take part in the hearing and have an attorney represent you at your own expense. Questions about how to request a hearing may be forwarded to the 504 District Coordinator listed below.
15. To have the decisions made by hearing officers or others reviewed in state or federal court.

The person who is responsible for assuring that the district complies with Section 504 is:

Section 504 District Coordinator
Valerie Mattes
Student Special Services
7 Lions Lane, Camden, ME 04843
(207) 236-7812
valerie.mattes@fivetowns.net

APPENDIX A – Glossary of 504 Roles and Forms

504 ROLES

504 District Coordinator: The Person responsible for assuring the District complies with Section 504

504 Chair: Building Assistant Principal

504 Case Manager: School Counselor or School Nurse (when appropriate)

504 Building Coordinator: Staff member who manages logistics throughout the entire 504 process

504 Team: Group consisting of 504 Chair, 504 Case Manager, 504 Building Coordinator, staff members knowledgeable about the student, School Nurse (when appropriate), and any additional outside practitioners at the request of the parents/legal guardians

504 FORMS

Section 504 Referral Form: Completed by any parent, legal guardian, adult student, or school staff member to request a 504 Eligibility Determination Meeting

Notice of Parent/Student Rights: Describes the rights granted by Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (“Section 504”) – given to parents/legal guardians once a referral is submitted to the school

Advance Written Notice of 504 Team Meeting: Completed by the 504 Building Coordinator and sent to the parents/legal guardians

Section 504 Eligibility Determination Forms: Completed by the 504 Chair or 504 Case Manager in the initial 504 Eligibility Determination Meeting

504 Accommodations Guidelines: A list of 504 accommodations and interventions to be reviewed by the 504 Chair and 504 Case Manager in the initial 504 Eligibility Determination Meeting

Parental Consent for Initial Section 504 Placement: To be signed by the parent or legal guardian to give consent to enact the 504 Plan

Manifestation Determination Checklist: Used during a Manifestation Determination 504 Team Meeting called due to any decision to change the placement of a child with a 504 disability because of a violation of a code of student conduct