



PROTECTION & ADVOCACY
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P&A FACT SHEET

ADVOCACY TIPS FOR MEETING WITH SCHOOL OR DISTRICT OFFICIALS

The parent of a student with a disability will be asked to attend lots of different types of meetings. Such meetings with the school's principal or the Individual Educational Program (IEP) team can be stressful for any parent. If the student is having trouble in school or the parent disagrees with the services or placement that the school district is proposing, the level of stress increases.

A parent should receive reasonable notice for any meeting, and the school district must try to schedule the meeting at a mutually agreed on time and place with the parent. This fact sheet offers parents advocacy tips to help prepare for the meeting, tips to use during the meeting, and tips for after the meeting has ended. Most meetings will be conducted in person and this is best. It may be necessary for a parent to attend a meeting by telephone call. The same tips apply to either kind of meeting.

Advocacy Tips for preparing for the meeting:

#1---Know the purpose of the meeting. If the student's IEP team or Section 504 committee is meeting, you should receive a "Letter of Invitation" or written notice that tells you the reason the meeting is being held. If it is a meeting with the school's principal, you will most likely receive written notice only if it is to discuss a disciplinary issue. (See P&A's "Discipline of Students with Disabilities" fact sheet)

#2---Know who will be present at the meeting. If it is an IEP meeting, the invitation should list the names and positions of the people invited. If the Section 504 committee is meeting then the notice may also list this information. You should make sure that the necessary people are invited to the meeting. Example: if school bus matters will be discussed, ask that district transportation staff be present.

#3---Know what issues you want to discuss at the meeting. The invitation may tell you only what the school district wants to discuss with you, but the meeting is also an opportunity for

you to discuss your concerns with them. It is often helpful to make a list of your issues and carry this list with you to the meeting. This way you won't forget to talk about what is important to you.

#4---Make a list of service providers or persons who may be able to help. Consult with the student's health care provider or mental health counselor. If needed, invite them to participate in the meeting or ask them to write a note about the student's diagnosis, symptoms, or needs at school. (See P&A's "Health Needs of Students Attending Public Schools" fact sheet)

#5---Bring your copies of records to the meeting. It is important to bring copies of any information you may need to refer to during the meeting. This includes copies of the student's current IEP, most recent evaluation, grades, doctor's notes, and whatever else you would like to have the team or committee review and consider. It is also a good idea to bring along your invitation to the meeting so you can make sure everyone invited is present.

#6---Review your student handbook or guide to special education services. It is important that you know what rules or procedures the school will be following and what your rights are if you disagree with the meeting's outcome. Additionally, look into public trainings, books, or search the internet to help you learn your legal rights.

#7---Bring along another person. Whenever possible, it is a good idea for both parents to attend IEP or Section 504 meetings. If that is not possible, then you should feel free to bring along anyone who is knowledgeable about the student or special education process. This person can help you take notes and help you voice your concerns at the meeting. If you intend on bringing an advocate or an attorney to a meeting, you should notify the school district in advance. This will help you maintain a good relationship with the school district.

Advocacy Tips for during the meeting:

#1---Make sure accurate notes are taken. If it is an IEP or Section 504 meeting, ask that someone from the school district take notes during the meeting. It's also important that you write down your own notes, including what you asked for and what people said they would do. You may also want to consider bringing a tape recorder to the meeting. Some school districts will insist on having their own tape recorder as well if a parent brings one to a meeting. Federal special education regulations do not require districts to allow all parents to have a tape recorder. However, school districts have a duty to take whatever action is necessary to ensure that a parent understands an IEP meeting. So if a school district at first refuses to let you bring a tape recorder, you may want to explain to them that it is necessary so that you can understand the meeting.

#2---Make sure that introductions are made before the meeting begins. Ask everyone to state his or her name and position. This helps you to know whether the necessary people are participating in the meeting. If someone attends that you object to participating in the meeting, make your objection known to the group.

#3---Remain calm, speak clearly, and be courteous. State your concerns, but also be willing to listen. This can be very difficult to do when you disagree with what is being said.

#4---Stay focused. Once again this can be very difficult during a tension-filled meeting. Use your list of issues to help keep yourself focused and keep the meeting on track.

#5---Make sure that there is a discussion of the student's strengths and abilities. This is true whether it is a meeting with the school principal, IEP team, or Section 504 committee. This is often a good way to start the meeting.

#6---Ask for Prior Written Notice. This tip is only for use at IEP meetings. If the school district wants to make changes to the student's special education program or will not agree with what you want for the student, then you can request a written explanation. This written explanation is called Prior Written Notice. (See P&A "Prior Written Notice" fact sheet)

#7---Ask that your notes be reviewed by others present and included in the official record of the meeting (such as the meeting minutes or conference summary). You may also wish to ask that the meeting minutes be read out loud. If you think anything should be changed or added in the meeting minutes, make that wish known. These notes should reflect both the school district's understanding and your understanding of what was said during the meeting.

#8---Always read everything that you are asked to sign. This includes Attendance or Sign-in Sheets. **If you don't agree with the information stated on the paper, then don't sign it.** This is especially important when attending an IEP or Section 504 meeting.

#9---Ask for copies of the meeting notes and anything else that you were asked to sign. Keep a copy of everything that you give to the school district or that is given to you at the meeting. They may come in handy in the future if you and the school district cannot agree about what was said at the meeting. It is usually a good idea to make a file of these documents and keep them for at least three years. For example, you may want to organize your file by year or by topic, like medical records or discipline records.

#10---Know what happens next. At the end of the meeting, make sure you and the school district know what is supposed to happen next. If you are not sure who is supposed to do what, ask before the meeting comes to a close. You may want to set a completion date for any goals.

Advocacy Tips for after the meeting:

#1---Write a follow-up letter. This is a very good way to confirm what was said during phone conversations. This letter is very important and should be written soon after the meeting or phone call ends. It should state what was said, who is supposed to do what, and when that task is supposed to be completed.

#2---Get a signed receipt if you deliver documents to a school or district office yourself. If you take your letters to a school or district office, then ask the person in the office to write

“received” on your copy along with the date and that person’s signature. Never give away your records or documents. Make copies as needed, but keep your own records.

#3---Follow through. It is very important that you follow through with your part of any agreement as soon as you can. Also, you should stay in touch with the school district until the services you requested have been provided.

#4---Know who can help. If you do not agree with the decisions made at the meeting or if you have questions that are not answered, then you should contact an attorney or contact the advocacy organizations listed in your guide to special education services. If you do not get what you want the first time, do not be shy about asking again.

Sources for the information in this fact sheet:

20 United States Code § 1401 (et seq.) Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, “IDEA 2004”
34 Code of Federal Regulations Part 300 (et seq.) U.S. Department of Education Regulations for IDEA 2004 (effective as of October 2006)

Cross References:

P&A fact sheet, Discipline of Students with Disabilities
P&A fact sheet, Health Care Needs of Students Attending Public School
P&A fact sheet, Prior Written Notice

This fact sheet has been prepared based on the law at the time it was written. This publication provides legal information, but is not intended to be legal advice. The information was based on the law at the time it was written. As the law may change, please contact P&A for updates.

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