



Preparing Your Child's Accommodations for High School

Moving from middle school to high school can be both exciting and challenging for students. It's a time when they will be meeting new people, learning from multiple teachers, participating in different clubs and activities, and gaining more independence. For teens with disabilities, the transition will go more smoothly if parents plan ahead to make sure all of their accommodations are in place when they arrive at their new school as a freshman.



When to Begin Planning for High School

If you are the parent of an eighth grade student, a good time to get the ball rolling is in January. Whether your child has an Individualized Education Plan (IEP) or a 504 Plan, now is the time to begin contacting your child's high school to learn who will manage the IEP or 504 Plan process for your son or daughter. Middle schools will often initiate the transition process, but you shouldn't wait around assuming this will automatically occur. Find out whether both schools have a formal transition plan where they work together with you to establish an effective high school education plan. Try to schedule a date to meet with the high school and middle school jointly if possible. Find out exactly who will be part of the IEP or 504 Plan team and which representatives will be present at the first high school meeting.

Begin Gathering Your Information and Documentation

Hopefully your child's IEP or 504 team in middle school was understanding and accommodating, but now you are entering into uncharted waters with a new team. While every family's experiences are different, ask other high school parents what to expect. Don't be afraid, but do be prepared. You want to arrive at your first meeting with a positive attitude and make it known that you are looking forward to beginning a new partnership with the high school to help your child succeed.

Prepare a folder that contains current copies of your child's IEP or 504 Plan, their most recent report cards, progress reports, homework, correspondence with teachers, doctors' letters, health records, standardized tests, evaluations, medication lists and instructions, as well as your own notes and observations about your child's academic performance and behavior. Once you schedule your first team meeting, consider inviting your spouse or advocate and ask them to reserve the date on their calendar. By now you are likely an expert on helping create your child's plan, but again, you are meeting with a new group of people who will be creating an important educational roadmap for your child's high school career.

If you do not currently have another child attending the high school, ask for a copy of the student handbook and schedule a visit to tour the building and its classrooms before your team meeting. If your child has a physical disability, you'll want to observe any accessibility and safety concerns in the building so you can address all of them at the first meeting.

Evaluate What Additional Accommodations May Be Needed

This is your chance to identify any needs that are currently not being met so new accommodations can be written into your child's high school education plan. While your middle school may have been flexible with absences due to chronic illness, find out what the high school's attendance policies are and whether a shortened schedule may be an appropriate option. Use the following questions to determine whether your child's new IEP or 504 Plan will meet all of their needs:

- Is my child currently struggling in school, and if so, in what areas?
- Will my child be required to meet all graduation requirements? Do any of these requirements need to be modified or waived (i.e. P.E. classes).
- What goals do you want your child to reach?
- What methods will be used to measure my child's progress?
- Should my child attend school for all or part of the day? What does his or her doctor recommend?
- Will my child require a personal aide for some or part of the day?
- What transportation accommodations are needed?
- Will my child's strengths and weaknesses be considered when being placed in core classes and elective classes?
- Will my child be able to take breaks if needed? If so, what staff member should he or she report to and where will those breaks occur?
- What accommodations will be made for my child to participate in extracurricular activities?

- Is my child currently struggling in school, and if so, in what areas?
- Does the high school have a full-time nurse on staff? Who dispenses medication if needed and what is the process?
- What behavioral and discipline methods are used by teachers for students with special needs?
- Should I sign any school release forms granting them permission to speak with my child's doctor or medical team? NOTE: You do not need to agree to do this. Giving your school permission to do so removes any control you may have over their conversations. On the other hand, doctors can provide validation for your child's diagnosis and can make recommendations for accommodations, so weigh your decision carefully.

Encourage Your Child to Participate in the Meeting

Depending on your child's disability and maturity level, you may want to consider bringing them to the first IEP / 504 Plan meeting with the high school which may take place at their current school. This is an opportunity for your child to practice self-advocacy skills and to discover that they do have a voice in shaping their future. If this doesn't sound like a good idea right now, trust your instincts and wait another year or two. However, recognize that by age 16 a student needs to know how to advocate for himself or herself, communicate their needs, and ask for help in order to be successful in high school and beyond. When students transition to college, parents are no longer invited and are often not permitted to participate in the accommodations process. At the post-secondary level, students must work with their college's student disability office to provide documentation and make their own request for accommodations. IEP and 504 Plans do not carry over to college but can be used as a documentation source.

Find Ways to Involve Your Child in the Transition

From high school orientations to personal scheduled tours, take advantage of every opportunity to familiarize your child with their new school. During the summer, arrange a visit with your child's teachers to reduce any anxiety they may have about attending high school. Help them navigate the hallways and locate restrooms, water fountains, the guidance office, the nurse's office, the resource room, and any other important areas of the building. If you know their locker number and combination, have them practice using it that, too. Introduce your child to the principal and administrative staff so they become familiar with his or her needs.

Ensuring Your Child's Success

Because of the growing number students who have IEPs and 504 Plans and the length of each plan, it can be difficult for teachers to stay on top of all of their students' accommodations. If you feel your child's plan is not being adhered to at the high school level, start by talking to your child's teacher. If the issue is still not resolved, then approach the school's administration.

Your child's educational rights are protected under law and you always have legal options if necessary to advocate for those rights. If you need help navigating the complexities of education law, consider reaching out to your state's Department of Education or Protection and Advocacy Center before contacting a lawyer.

Conclusion

Start making arrangements about halfway through your child's eighth grade year to create the very best education plan for their success. By planning ahead and working as a partner with your child's high school, you can make sure all of the appropriate accommodations are in place so your child's transition to high school will be a smooth one.