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ABSTRACT

The pamphlet outlines provisions of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, which protects the rights of persons with handicaps in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance, including individuals with disabilities that may not be apparent. The pamphlet answers questions about the civil rights of students with hidden disabilities, describing: the disabilities covered under Section 504; types of hidden disabilities; responsibilities of U.S. Department of Education fund recipients in preschool, elementary, secondary, postsecondary, and adult education; and examples of how schools can address the needs of students with hidden disabilities. Appended is a list of the regional offices of the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. (JDD)

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**The Civil Rights of Students  
with Hidden Disabilities  
under Section 504 of the  
Rehabilitation Act of 1973**

**U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights  
Washington, D.C. 20202-1328**

## INTRODUCTION

If you are a student with a hidden disability or would like to know more about how students with hidden disabilities are protected against discrimination by Federal law, this pamphlet is for you.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 protects the rights of persons with handicaps in programs and activities that receive Federal financial assistance. Section 504 protects the rights not only of individuals with visible disabilities, but also those with disabilities that may not be apparent.

Section 504 provides that: **"No otherwise qualified individual with handicaps in the United States . . . shall, solely by reason of his handicap, be excluded from the participation in, be denied benefits of, or be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity receiving Federal financial assistance . . . ."**<sup>1</sup>

The U.S. Department of Education (ED) enforces Section 504 in programs and activities that receive financial assistance from ED. Recipients of this assistance include public school districts, institutions of higher education, and other state and local education agencies. ED maintains an Office for Civil Rights (OCR), with ten regional offices and a headquarters office in Washington, D.C., to enforce Section 504 and other civil rights laws that pertain to recipients of ED funds. (The addresses and telephone numbers of the OCR regional offices are included at the back of this pamphlet.)

This pamphlet answers the following questions about the civil rights of students<sup>2</sup> with hidden

<sup>1</sup>Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, as amended, 29 U.S.C. §794.

<sup>2</sup>Section 504 also covers the employment practices of ED recipients. For more information about this, see the OCR pamphlet, "Non-discrimination in Employment Practices in Education."

**disabilities and the responsibilities of ED recipients:**

- **What disabilities are covered under Section 504?**
- **What are hidden disabilities?**
- **What are the responsibilities of ED recipients in preschool, elementary, secondary, and adult education?**
- **What are the responsibilities of ED recipients in postsecondary education?**
- **How can the needs of students with hidden disabilities be addressed?**

## **DISABILITIES COVERED UNDER SECTION 504**

The ED Section 504 regulation defines an "individual with handicaps" as any person who (i) has a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities, (ii) has a record of such an impairment, or (iii) is regarded as having such an impairment. The regulation further defines a physical or mental impairment as (A) any physiological disorder or condition, cosmetic disfigurement, or anatomical loss affecting one or more of the following body systems: neurological; musculoskeletal; special sense organs; respiratory, including speech organs; cardiovascular; reproductive; digestive; genitourinary; hemic and lymphatic; skin; and endocrine; or (B) any mental or psychological disorder, such as mental retardation, organic brain syndrome, emotional or mental illness, and specific learning disabilities. The definition does not set forth a list of specific diseases and conditions that constitute physical or mental impairments because of the difficulty of ensuring the comprehensiveness of any such list.

**The key factor in determining whether a person is considered an "individual with handicaps" covered by Section 504 is whether the physical or mental impairment results in a substantial limitation of one or more major life activities. Major life activities, as defined in the regulation, include functions such as caring for one's self, performing manual tasks, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working.**

**The impairment must have a material effect on one's ability to perform a major life activity. For example, an individual who has a physical or mental impairment would not be considered a person with handicaps if the condition does not in any way limit the individual, or only results in some minor limitation. However, in some cases Section 504 also protects individuals who do not have a handicapping condition but are treated as though they do because they have a history of, or have been misclassified as having, a mental or physical impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities. For example, if you have a history of a handicapping condition but no longer have the condition, or have been incorrectly classified as having such a condition, you too are protected from discrimination under Section 504. Frequently occurring examples of the first group are persons with histories of mental or emotional illness, heart disease, or cancer; of the second group, persons who have been misclassified as mentally retarded.**

## **WHAT ARE HIDDEN DISABILITIES?**

**Hidden disabilities are physical or mental impairments that are not readily apparent to others. They include such conditions and diseases as specific learning disabilities, diabetes, epilepsy, and allergy. A disability such as a limp, paralysis, total blindness or deafness is usually obvious to others. But hidden disabilities such as low vision, poor hearing, heart disease, or chronic illness may not**

be obvious. A chronic illness involves a recurring and long term disability such as diabetes, heart disease, kidney and liver disease, high blood pressure, or ulcers.

Approximately four million students with disabilities are enrolled in public elementary and secondary schools in the United States. Of these 43 percent, are students classified as learning disabled, 8 percent as emotionally disturbed, and 1 percent as other health impaired. These hidden disabilities often cannot be readily known without the administration of appropriate diagnostic tests.

## **THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ED RECIPIENTS IN PRESCHOOL, ELEMENTARY, SECONDARY, AND ADULT EDUCATION**

For coverage under Section 504, an individual with handicaps must be "qualified" for service by the school or institution receiving ED funds. For example, the ED Section 504 regulation defines a "qualified handicapped person" with respect to public preschool, elementary, secondary, or adult education services, as a person with a handicap who is:

- of an age during which persons without handicaps are provided such services;
- of any age during which it is mandatory under state law to provide such services to persons with handicaps; or
- a person for whom a state is required to provide a free appropriate public education under the Education of the Handicapped Act.

Under the Section 504 regulation, a recipient that operates a public elementary or secondary

education program has a number of responsibilities toward qualified handicapped persons in its jurisdiction. These recipients must:

- Undertake annually to identify and locate all unserved handicapped children;
- Provide a "free appropriate public education" to each student with handicaps, regardless of the nature or severity of the handicap. This means providing regular or special education and related aids and services designed to meet the individual educational needs of handicapped persons as adequately as the needs of nonhandicapped persons are met;<sup>3</sup>
- Ensure that each student with handicaps is educated with nonhandicapped students to the maximum extent appropriate to the needs of the handicapped person;
- Establish nondiscriminatory evaluation and placement procedures to avoid the inappropriate education that may result from the misclassification or misplacement of students;
- Establish procedural safeguards to enable parents and guardians to participate meaningfully in decisions regarding the evaluation and placement of their children; and
- Afford handicapped children an equal opportunity to participate in nonacademic and extra-curricular services and activities.

A recipient that operates a preschool education or day care program, or an adult education program must take into account the needs of qualified handicapped persons in determining the aid, benefits, or services to be provided under those programs and activities.

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<sup>3</sup>For more information on this topic, see the OCR pamphlet, "Free Appropriate Public Education for Students with Handicaps: Requirements under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973."

**Students with hidden disabilities frequently are not properly diagnosed. For example, a student with an undiagnosed hearing impairment may be unable to understand much of what a teacher says; a student with a learning disability may be unable to process oral or written information routinely; or a student with an emotional problem may be unable to concentrate in a regular classroom setting. As a result, these students, regardless of their intelligence, will be unable to fully demonstrate their ability or attain educational benefits equal to that of nonhandicapped students. They may be perceived by teachers and fellow students as slow, lazy, or as discipline problems.**

**Whether a child is already in school or not, if his/her parents feel the child needs special education or related services, they should get in touch with the local superintendent of schools. For example, a parent who believes his or her child has a hearing impairment or is having difficulty understanding a teacher, may request to have the child evaluated so that the child may receive appropriate education. A child with behavior problems, or one who is doing poorly academically, may have an undiagnosed hidden disability. A parent has the right to request that the school determine whether the child is handicapped and whether special education or related services are needed to provide the child an appropriate education. Once it is determined that a child needs special education or related services, the recipient school system must arrange to provide appropriate services.**

## **THE RESPONSIBILITIES OF ED RECIPIENTS IN POSTSECONDARY EDUCATION**

**The ED Section 504 regulation defines a qualified individual with handicaps for postsecondary education programs as a person with a handicap who meets the academic and technical standards**



requisite for admission to, or participation in, the college's education program or activity.

A college has no obligation to identify students with handicaps. In fact, Section 504 prohibits a postsecondary education recipient from making a preadmission inquiry as to whether an applicant for admission is a handicapped person.<sup>4</sup> However, a postsecondary institution is required to inform applicants and other interested parties of the availability of auxiliary aids, services, and academic adjustments, and the name of the person designated to carry out the requirements of Section 504. After admission (including the period between admission and enrollment), the college may make confidential inquiries as to whether a person has a handicap for the purpose of determining whether certain academic adjustments or auxiliary aids or services may be needed.

Many students with hidden disabilities, seeking college degrees, were provided with special education services during their elementary and secondary school years. It is especially important for these students to understand that postsecondary institutions also have responsibilities to protect the rights of students with disabilities. In elementary and secondary school, their school district was responsible for identifying, evaluating, and providing individualized special education and related services to meet their needs. At the postsecondary level, however, there are some important differences. The key provisions of Section 504 at the postsecondary level are highlighted below.

At the postsecondary level it is the student's responsibility to make his or her handicapping condition known and to request academic adjustments. This should be done in a timely manner.

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<sup>4</sup>Except when a college is taking remedial action to correct the effects of past discrimination or taking voluntary action to overcome conditions that resulted in limited participation.

**A student may choose to make his or her needs known to the Section 504 Coordinator, to an appropriate dean, to a faculty advisor, or to each professor on an individual basis.**

**A student who requests academic adjustments or auxiliary aids because of a handicapping condition may be requested by the institution to provide documentation of the handicap and the need for the services requested. This may be especially important to an institution attempting to understand the nature and extent of a hidden disability.**

**The requested documentation may include the results of medical, psychological, or emotional diagnostic tests, or other professional evaluations to verify the need for academic adjustments or auxiliary aids.**

## **HOW CAN THE NEEDS OF STUDENTS WITH HIDDEN DISABILITIES BE ADDRESSED?**

**The following examples illustrate how schools can address the needs of their students with hidden disabilities.**

- A student with a long term, debilitating medical problem such as cancer, kidney disease, or diabetes may be given special consideration to accommodate the student's needs. For example, a student with cancer may need a class schedule that allows for rest and recuperation following chemotherapy.**
- A student with a learning disability that affects the ability to demonstrate knowledge on a standardized test or in certain testing situations may require modified test arrangements, such as oral testing or different testing formats.**
- A student with a learning disability or impaired vision that affects the ability to take notes in class may need a notetaker or tape recorder.**

- A student with a chronic medical problem such as kidney or liver disease may have difficulty in walking distances or climbing stairs. Under Section 504, this student may require handicap parking, sufficient time between classes, or other considerations, to conserve the student's energy for academic pursuits.
- A student with diabetes, which adversely affects the body's ability to manufacture insulin, may need a class schedule that will accommodate the student's special needs.
- An emotionally or mentally ill student may need an adjusted class schedule to allow time for regular counseling or therapy.
- A student with epilepsy who has no control over seizures, and whose seizures are stimulated by stress or tension, may need accommodation for such stressful activities as lengthy academic testing or competitive endeavors in physical education.
- A student with arthritis may have persistent pain, tenderness or swelling in one or more joints. A student experiencing arthritic pain may require a modified physical education program.

These are just a few examples of how the needs of students with hidden disabilities may be addressed. If you are a student (or a parent or guardian of a student) with a hidden disability, or represent an institution seeking to address the needs of such students, you may wish to seek further information from OCR. Please contact the OCR regional office serving your State as listed in the back of this pamphlet.

**U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION  
OFFICE FOR CIVIL RIGHTS  
REGIONAL CIVIL RIGHTS OFFICES**

**REGION I**

Connecticut, Maine, Massachusetts,  
New Hampshire, Rhode Island, Vermont

Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region I  
John W. McCormack Post Office and  
Courthouse Building, Room 222  
Boston, Massachusetts 02109-4557  
(617) 223-9662 TDD (617) 223-9695

**REGION II**

New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico,  
Virgin Islands

Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region II  
26 Federal Plaza, 33rd Floor, Room 33-130  
New York, New York 10278-0082  
(212) 264-4633 TDD (212) 264-9464

**REGION III**

Delaware, District of Columbia, Maryland,  
Pennsylvania, Virginia, West Virginia

Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region III  
3335 Market Square, Room 6300  
Philadelphia, Pennsylvania 19104-3326  
(215) 596-6772 TDD (215) 596-6794

## **REGION IV**

**Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi,  
North Carolina, South Carolina, Tennessee**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region IV  
101 Marietta Tower - 27th Floor, Suite 2702  
Mail To: P.O. Box 1705  
Atlanta, Georgia 30301-1705  
(404) 331-2954 TDD (404) 331-7816**

## **REGION V**

**Illinois, Indiana, Minnesota, Michigan, Ohio,  
Wisconsin**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region V  
401 South State Street - 7th Floor, Room 700C  
Chicago, Illinois 60605-1202  
(312) 886-3456 TDD (312) 353-2541**

## **REGION VI**

**Arkansas, Louisiana, New Mexico, Oklahoma,  
Texas**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region VI  
1200 Main Tower Building - Suite 2260  
Dallas, Texas 75202-9998  
(214) 767-3959 TDD (214) 767-3639**

## **REGION VII**

**Iowa, Kansas, Missouri, Nebraska**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region VII  
P.O. Box 901381  
10220 N. Executive Hills Blvd., 8th Floor  
Kansas City, Missouri 64190-1381  
(816) 891-8026**

## **REGION VIII**

**Colorado, Montana, North Dakota  
South Dakota, Utah, Wyoming**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region VIII  
1961 Stout Street, Room 342  
Denver, Colorado 80294-3608  
(303) 844-5695      TDD (303) 844-3417**

## **REGION IX**

**Arizona, California, Hawaii, Nevada, Guam,  
Trust Territory of the Pacific Islands,  
American Samoa**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region IX  
221 Main Street, 10th Floor, Suite 1020  
San Francisco, California 94105-1925  
(415) 227-8040      TDD (415) 227-8124**

## **REGION X**

**Alaska, Idaho, Oregon, Washington**

**Regional Civil Rights Director  
U.S. Department of Education  
Office for Civil Rights, Region X  
Mail Code 10-9010  
915 Second Avenue, Room 3310  
Seattle, Washington 98174-1099  
(206) 442-1636      TDD (206) 442-4542**