



**Maryland Developmental
Disabilities Council**

EMPOWERMENT • OPPORTUNITY • INCLUSION

Senate Education, Health, and Environmental Affairs Committee
SB 504: Office of Attorney General – Special Education Ombudsman

February 18, 2020

Letter of Information

The Maryland Developmental Disabilities Council (DD Council), a statewide public policy organization led by people with developmental disabilities and their families, works to advance the inclusion of people with developmental disabilities in all facets of community life and seeks to ensure that people with developmental disabilities have the same rights, opportunities, choices, and protections as other citizens. **While the DD Council supports efforts to empower families with more information and resources, an issue SB 504 seeks to address, there are numerous existing systems and structures that already exist.**

According to SB504, “the purpose of the Ombudsman is to serve as a resource to provide information and supports to parents, students, and educators regarding special education rights and services,” and work to ensure that the special education system works as intended, identify patterns of complaints made by parents of students with disabilities and inform the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) of any such pattern, and serve as a general information and referral resource for disability-related issues. **All of this is critical for students with disabilities and their families, however resources exist at MSDE and with other statewide organizations to assist with many of these.**

MSDE resources includeⁱ:

- **The MSDE’s Division of Early Intervention and Special Education Services (DEI/SES) has a dedicated Family Support Services Section** with staff that engage directly with families and have created high-quality, parent-friendly documents for families on their rights and responsibilities, procedural safeguards, dispute resolution options, and other resources.
- **Facilitated IEP team meetings, which are available across the State. is intended to help parents and school personnel avoid misunderstandings or disagreements** when it is believed that discussions at the meeting may become challenging. It is not mediation, and parties must agree to participate.
- **Family Support Services Coordinators exist within each school district and serve as a bridge to facilitate relationships between schools and families of children who receive special education.** They are typically parents of children with disabilities who receive early intervention and special education services, who are hired and trained by the school district to support families. They provide workshops, events, one-on-one supports, and create networking opportunities for parents. In addition, Family Support Services Coordinators may attend IEP meetings as a support mechanism, not in the role of an advocate, when invited by parents.
- **High quality information, resources, policies, and procedures to ensure families and school staff understand and use their rights and responsibilities in the special education process.**

Other resources include:

- The Governor's Office of Educational Accountability receives and attempts to resolve complaints from parents of students with disabilities and others with concerns about special education in Maryland.
- The Parents' Place of Maryland, the state's parent information and training center federally funded by the United States Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs, provides support, information and training about the special education process to families of students with disabilities.

Maryland does; however, lack a designated central person to track trends in complaints or to make referrals to available state and federal services and programs. **If a Special Education Ombudsman is created, it should be required that the Ombudsman coordinate and collaborate with these existing services and resources.**

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ⁱ *Study of the Individualized Education Program (IEP) Process and the Adequate Funding Level for Students with Disabilities in Maryland: A Research Study by WestEd.* December 2019.