CHAPTER TWO

Why Do We Need Responsive Teams?

"When I think about the most important piece of an IEP meeting, it's the concept that families are equal decision-makers. There are so many instances where a parent or family member isn't equal to the team because they don't have the same information, cultural context, or formal education. The most important aspect to the IEP process is for IEP team leads/chairs to create an environment where collaboration is the standard."

—O. Sophia Johansson, Massachusetts
Families Organizing for Change

GUIDING QUESTIONS FOR THIS CHAPTER

- What are some of the hidden factors that impact team dynamics?

- What is the primary problem being addressed by 504 and IEP teams?

- How does a responsive teaming approach address this problem?

When we gather at the table to consider a referral and to plan for a student identified as having a disability, we come as people with diverse backgrounds. Yes, everyone involved cares about the child, yet the care that is expressed comes from different insights regarding the child, as well as different beliefs, values, and hopes for the child. Responsive teaming means that people listen actively, with a sense of curiosity and respect, to one another's perspectives and priorities. The purpose of listening

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is to understand and empathize in order to identify questions, look at data that responds to these questions, and then make decisions together that respond to the data. When teaming is responsive, all voices are heard, team members feel understood, and the decisions made reflect available data and a robust vision of the child as a learner and a unique person, in and out of school. See Chapter 9 for QR codes linking to our **Responsive Teaming Survey** to measure these outcomes with your team. This tool is also available on our companion website.

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COMPLIANCE AND RESPONSIVE TEAMING

As we join together at the planning table, federal regulations require that we think, talk, and make decisions as a team. The regulations for Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act require that elementary and secondary schools ensure that a team of people who have knowledge of the child and evaluation tools make decisions about eligibility and placement (34 C.F.R. 104.35(c)(3); OCR, 2020). Similarly, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) 2004 regulations require an IEP team that consists of the following people:

- The child's parents/guardians
- At least one of the child's general education teachers
- At least one of the child's special education teachers
- A representative of the district
- People who are qualified to interpret evaluation results, including related therapists
- "Whenever appropriate, the child with a disability" (34 C.F.R. § 300.321)

Guidance about the team process emphasizes the need for this team to consider the needs of the child together, to pool their expertise and knowledge, and to partner to "design an educational program that will help the student be involved in, and progress in, the general curriculum" (OSERS, 2019). Whether groups are gathering to consider eligibility, program planning, and placement of children with disabilities under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or under IDEA 2004, decisions must be made by teams of people who know the child.

COLLABORATION AND RESPONSIVE TEAMING

This all sounds great; however, as most of us know, the work of collaborating, particularly when the cultures, feelings, mindsets, roles, and responsibilities of team members are diverse, has implications that extend far beyond a compliant process. While the regulations tell us what to do—to partner as a team—there is no guidance in the regulations that will help us understand how we can collaborate effectively. And as many of us who have experience with teamwork understand, the "how" of teaming is where an effective partnership happens.

This is why we need responsive teams. We need to know not only who is on the team, and what their relationship to the child is, but also how to connect with one another. We need to know how to engage in a process that builds a *team* rather than a mere collection of people who hold a child in common. We need to remember that team members have a significant investment in the child and also have significant investments in their roles as parents/guardians, educators, and community service providers. We need a process that promotes mutual respect, that inspires people to wrestle honestly with problems and barriers, that compels team members to join together to find and strengthen the fit between the child and schooling, thereby helping to design and implement an effective educational program. We need a process in which the people who are sitting at the team meeting table have a shared understanding about the decisions that the team is required by law to make; a shared understanding about the data that will be used to inform decisions; and a shared understanding of all of the people who are coming together to educate and care for the child. Our teams need to be responsive to the legal requirements of the 504 or IEP process and, more importantly, to each other as people. We must collaborate as we comply because compliance and collaboration are intertwined.

CASE STUDY: ALBERT'S TEAM

We will use our names whenever we present case studies throughout this book. The specifics of the cases come from our experiences in the field. We are committed to protecting

the confidentiality of all team members, so using our names and the names of family members seemed like the easiest way to ensure that even our unconscious biases don't influence the selection of pseudonyms. We know you understand, and we thank you! Now, let's dive into our first case study:

Imagine Albert, a student who is in ninth grade. It's March 1, and Albert moved into his current school district two years ago. Before this time, he was educated in Germany; however, he is multilingual and his family speaks fluent German, Russian, and English in the home, depending on the extended family who live with them. His father is from Germany, and his mother has lived in the United States and abroad throughout her life. She was educated outside the United States until entering college. Albert's parents have had consistent concerns about him since moving into the district, particularly about his reading.

Albert's high school teachers are also concerned about him. The problem is Albert's behavior in class, particularly in English and world history. Teachers report that Albert is disrespectful and disruptive when he is in the room. He often interrupts teacher lectures. He will not take notes and instead turns to neighboring students and wants to talk with them while the teacher is speaking.

During small-group work, Albert listens actively to peers and seems to enjoy debating and discussing his ideas; however, he won't take on assigned roles in the groups and will not read or write if given the responsibility to do these activities. Instead, he excuses himself and requests a pass to the guidance office.

When asked to remain in the room, Albert raises his voice, joins other groups, or sometimes simply puts his head down and refuses to participate. These behaviors happen at least once a week in English and history—sometimes more frequently.

In January, Albert began taking health class, and his health teacher has just reported similar concerns to guidance. Albert's math, science, world language, and physical education teachers report no concerns and find Albert a joy to have in class.

After receiving a call from the guidance counselor in mid-February, Albert's parents have requested a "comprehensive evaluation to determine whether Albert is eligible for special education."

WHY DO WE NEED RESPONSIVE TEAMS?

If you're reading this book, you know Albert's story, or one that is similar. It's clear that Albert, his parents, and his teachers (and likely his guidance counselor and maybe even the principal) are all striving and struggling with the fit between Albert's profile as a learner and schooling. Maybe this is not how you thought about Albert's case. That's OK. Usually, when hearing a story like Albert's, people tend to identify with one or more of those in the story. Maybe you are the parent of a child with a disability and you connect with Albert's parents. Maybe you are (or were) a student who found ninth grade less than compelling and you connect with Albert. Maybe you are a high school teacher and you connect with the English, history, and health teachers mentioned in the story. Maybe you're a guidance counselor or the principal or assistant principal (AP) in a school and you can relate to these people.

One reason we need responsive teams is because of the intersection between legal requirements and personal relationships that happens every time a referral for evaluation is made. We'll come back to Albert's story later in this chapter after offering some thoughts on this intersectionality.

In this book, we offer an approach to teaming in which compliance and collaboration are equally important. We propose that teams can respond to the law and to the people involved in designing and implementing educational programs for students with disabilities. Based on our work in the New England region of the United States, we know that it's possible to engage teams to create an experience of partnership.

Our proposal is that all teams should focus on these three tasks (see Figure 2.1), which recur throughout the processes of determining eligibility, designing educational programs, and determining placement:

- *Identifying questions* that inform the group's collection and review of data and the group's decisions

Figure 2.1 • Responsive Teaming Cycle
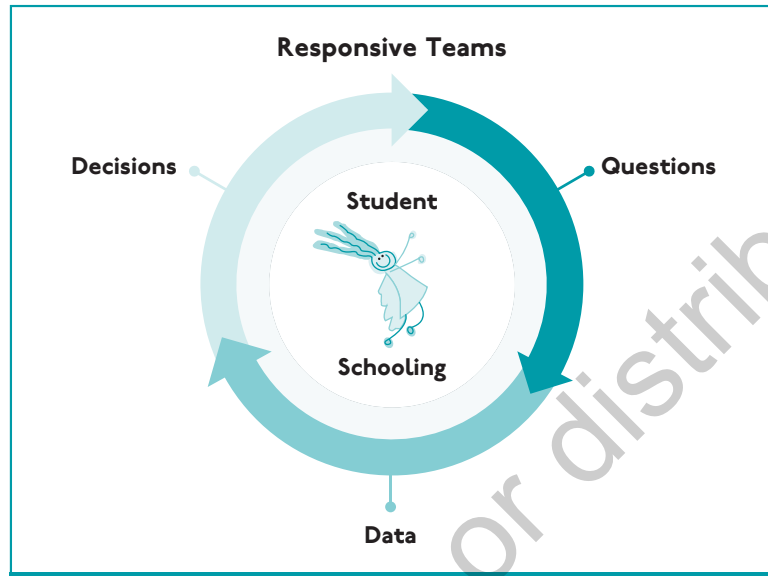
- *Looking at data together* to understand the fit between the student and schooling in relation to the questions

- *Making decisions* anchored in the data using facilitation and a problem-solving approach

We propose that teams engage in these three tasks together, rather than completing activities related to each task individually or independently of other team members. Here's a bit more about how these three tasks can be accomplished in a way that establishes and supports the growth of responsive teams.

IDENTIFYING QUESTIONS THAT INFORM TEAM DATA COLLECTION AND DECISIONS

We propose a process in which teams begin their work by clearly identifying and discussing the questions that will guide compliant IEP and 504 team processes. As noted earlier, some questions will arise from IDEA and Section 504 criteria. For the purpose of this book, we will focus only on federal criteria because free and appropriate public education (FAPE) and least restrictive environment (LRE) are enforced in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. We urge

you to follow a similar process to identify any jurisdiction-specific questions with your teams as well so that there is a shared understanding from the point at which a team forms about the "rules" that must be followed.

In the remaining chapters of this book, we will discuss specific questions that correspond to processes related to initial referral and eligibility determination, planning or program design, placement decisions and progress monitoring, and responsive teaming over time with attention to manifestation determinations, reviews, and reevaluations.

Teams identify questions in response to specific criteria. A criterion is a specific requirement or piece of guidance that comes from federal regulations or from specific guidance documents issued by the U.S. Department of Education Office of Special Education and Rehabilitation Services (OSERS) or by the U.S. Office for Civil Rights (OCR). One example of a group of criteria that all team members should understand and discuss are the federal definitions associated with eligible students with disabilities. These definitions are available in the regulations; however, we often find that members of teams charged with identifying eligible students do not have shared awareness of these terms and their regulatory definitions.

Understandably, acting on a team that is charged with determining eligibility without knowledge of the terms that define eligibility can be confusing and stressful. As you read Chapter 3 and Chapter 4, you'll learn more about these criteria and the ways that you can make them available and understandable for all members of the teams in which you participate.

RESEARCH TO CONSIDER

IDEA and Section 504 criteria will likely provoke questions. Why is it important to ensure that team members pose questions to build shared understanding of these federal criteria? There are several answers to this question. One is that it can be difficult for team members to understand the difference between what is legally required and what is being recommended (Zirkel, 2020). Another is that research shows that school-based team members often have limited fluency with

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the requirements of regulations and tend to rely on other people rather than primary sources to understand the requirements for teams serving children with disabilities (Militello et al., 2009; O'Connor et al., 2016; Schimmel & Militello, 2008). A third reason is that teachers, parents, and administrators often feel frustrated and unclear about how to navigate the required process (Chaisson & Olson, 2007). We know from brain science that when people lack knowledge, feel confused, or experience frustration, their availability for decision-making and self-regulation decreases. This may explain why people sometimes experience the team process as difficult, cumbersome, and ineffective.

The good news is that any team member can do something to change this. In preparing for Section 504 and IEP team meetings, it is important that all team members have access to key criteria and that they have an opportunity to pose questions and build understanding about how these criteria will be used by the team to collect and interpret data and make decisions. This means that access to the criteria and discussion of their meaning, related recommendations, and how the team will use key criteria to respond to the child's needs must consider each team member's multiple identities. For example, individuals' educational experience, personal beliefs, and potential anxieties related to these criteria must be uncovered and welcomed in the conversation.

Further, an understanding of how key concepts, such as *disability, disorder, eligibility*, and *delay* or *impairment*, are conveyed in team members' heritage language(s) will help the team anticipate and "short circuit" misunderstandings and apprehension. Taking the time to build a shared understanding about key criteria, as well as a shared understanding of what these criteria mean *emotionally* to all team members, is important to equip team members with the information they need to analyze data and resolve differences in perspectives and values before making decisions on behalf of the child. We'll share more about how to use questions as the foundation of establishing a responsive team in the chapters ahead.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

- Discuss, print, and share key criteria with team members at the very start of the team process. Have these available for reference during team meetings as they are defined and discussed. Use these reference sheets during conversations about data and when making decisions.

- Create short information briefs (2–5 sentences) with visuals to allow team members to quickly reference and recall important criteria. Be sure to translate these into the heritage language(s) of all team members.

- When a team is considering difficult questions or experiencing "big" feelings, take a break, use questions carefully and intentionally to build trust, and approach problems with a sense of curiosity rather than solutions or opinions about what should happen. Invite team members to articulate their feelings with phrases such as, "I worry that . . ." or "I'm afraid that . . ." and hold space for team members to be heard and understood.

In Albert's Case . . .

Suppose that when the district representative (maybe the special education director, maybe the principal, maybe a team leader, school psychologist, 504 coordinator, or guidance counselor) reaches out to Albert's parents about their request for a "comprehensive evaluation" the conversation goes something like this:

District representative:	Hello, Mr. & Mrs. J-M. This is Sharon calling from Albert's school. How are you today?

[*Sharon listens to Albert's parents and inquires about any specifics before continuing the conversation.*]

District representative:	I'm interested in learning more about your request for a comprehensive evaluation. Can you tell me what's happening and how you want the school to help?
Albert's parents:	We are so worried about Albert. Since we came to the United States two years ago, he's really hated school. He loved school in Germany—it was so easy for him and he had so many friends. Soccer was his life, and he was such a happy child. Now, we've been here two years and he's ready to drop out. We think it's because he's struggling with reading and he's ashamed. We hate to have him evaluated, but something is really wrong, and we have to get him help!

District representative:	Wow! I had no idea that things had been so difficult. I'm so sorry to hear about how hard school has been for Albert, and I'm really glad that we're talking about this now. Is there anything else you think I should know about what's happened so I can understand the fit between Albert's learning and what's happening at school?
Albert's parents:	Well, we've previously shared our concerns about Albert with his guidance counselor. Also, we just got a call from the guidance counselor saying that Albert's teachers feel as if he's disruptive and disrespectful in class. What?! Albert?! We have raised him to respect adults, and now you're telling us he's disruptive? We're telling you he can't read! Why isn't anyone helping him?

[*Warning: Here's where responsive teaming kicks into high gear!*]

District representative:	Whoa! I am so sorry that you've gotten this message about Albert. I met him last week, and I have to say that I found him to be a very articulate and respectful young man. What I heard you say is that you're concerned about reading and that your concern has lasted for several years. Is that right?
Albert's parents:	Yes! Thank goodness someone from school is finally listening!
District representative:	Did you know that there is a whole team of people who are listening at our school? I can tell it might not have felt like it before, but I want to fill you in about the team and how we will be working with Albert and your family to get some answers to your questions about reading. Can you tell me what you know about the "comprehensive evaluation" process?
Albert's parents:	Well, we know that kids get evaluated and then get special help—extra tutoring and services. Is that right?
District representative:	I'm glad you are aware of your right to request an evaluation. I can see why you did this. There are actually laws and

regulations that surround two different approaches that we might take to this evaluation. No matter where we begin, it's important that you understand that not all students get evaluated to determine eligibility for special education before getting help. At our school, we can offer some help to any student, and I can share some of the extra help that's available right now to assist Albert with reading and schoolwork. Only students who are suspected of having a disability are entitled to a "comprehensive evaluation." So if you want to proceed, we will need to talk about the definitions of different disabilities and the characteristics that Albert might be demonstrating as a learner. I have some material to show you, and I want to be sure you understand some of the basic rights that protect Albert and you before we decide whether to get your written consent for an evaluation. Can we meet to look at some information together so we can decide how to proceed?

We hope you can see how Albert's parents and the district representative are already engaged in building shared understanding about the regulations and aspects of a compliant process while building a collaborative relationship. This is why we need responsive teaming—so that we give equal weight and priority to compliant and collaborative approaches to team decision-making.

We also hope that you can see that responsive teaming involves cultivating a thoughtful approach to communicating. There are some important guiding questions to keep in mind, particularly during the early stages of becoming a team. While Albert's parents may or may not have in-depth knowledge about their rights, the district representative is typically familiar with the rights of parents and the steps in a compliant response to a parent referral for evaluation. What matters most at this point in the process is keeping the conversation headed in a direction that builds the team by cultivating relationships. Here are the questions to keep in mind at this stage:

- Is there a shared understanding between the person referring and the district about "suspected areas of

disability" and the learner characteristics that may be associated with these disabilities? If not, what is the best way to introduce and build a shared understanding?

- Is there a shared understanding about the evaluation and eligibility determination process? If not, what is the best way to introduce and build this shared understanding?

- What are the needs of the student being identified in this conversation? How can these be clarified so that they can be clearly communicated when they are shared?

- What are the needs of other team members being identified in this conversation? How can these be named, acknowledged, and supported to strengthen the relationships among team members?

While it's not possible to script all of the details and nuances of a responsive approach to teaming, we hope that these guiding questions and the case study in this chapter give you a sense of the opportunities for strengthening collaboration within a compliant process from the very first conversations about the fit between the student and schooling.

LOOKING AT DATA TOGETHER TO UNDERSTAND THE FIT BETWEEN THE STUDENT AND SCHOOLING

Just as teams need support to build a shared understanding of, and fluency with, key questions or criteria, it is critical that all members of the team have equitable access to the data that is used to inform decisions. This involves a shift from having individual team members hold on to data as their area of expertise toward identifying, gathering, and sharing meaningful data that can be understood by all team members before the group gathers to make decisions.

A responsive team approach does not necessarily mean that we will change the way we evaluate students. It may be that a teacher is gathering information about a student in the classroom when other team members are not present. An evaluator may be working directly with a student in a one-to-one testing setting. Certainly, parents/guardians may be at

home talking with their child about school when other team members are not there. All of this is important and should be expected; however, it is also important that after a critical observation, a norm-referenced testing session, or a key conversation at home, team members have the opportunity to gather and share this data with all other team members in a way that leads to a complete and shared understanding about what happened and what it tells us about the child's profile as a learner. Responsive collaboration means that all data is treated as equally important because it enriches team members' understanding of the child's learning profile. No piece of data is privileged above others because of its type (e.g., testing result, observation record, significant anecdotal note) or because of the identities or roles of the collectors/reporters.

A responsive team approach does mean that we will certainly change the way we share the results of evaluations. While formal evaluation reports will likely continue to be produced due to professional recommendations and the needs of students and schools, these reports may be linked or referenced in summaries of evaluation results that are offered in language that is accessible to all members of the team. In addition, it is critical that the results of evaluations are explained and interpreted with a focus on understanding the student's profile as a learner—meaning assets, challenges, learning preferences, and the fit between the child and the interventions that have been provided at school.

It is interesting to note how a child's performance compares to other children of the same age or grade level; however, care must be taken when describing scores and tasks, particularly on norm-referenced tests, so that all team members understand how the scores explain what a child can or cannot do when learning in a classroom. Any piece of data should be available and *accessible*, meaning useful and understandable, to each member of the team to support a shared understanding of the fit between the child's unique learning profile and schooling. This means that any piece of data that is presented to the team should be useful and understood by all members of the team. Data that is not useful and understandable to all team members is likely not to be helpful in supporting team-based decision-making. These considerations of equity in availability and accessibility of data are crucial to responsive collaboration.

RESEARCH TO CONSIDER

Why is it important to consider the ways we gather and share the data that we use to support team decisions? One reason is that in order to be effective with data-based decision-making, teams must be able to use data to understand and solve new problems (Bolhuis et al., 2016). A second reason is that there is a great deal of debate about whether tests associated with processing and cognition provide data that is associated with improved outcomes for students (Powers & Mandal, 2011). One more reason is that parents, students, and general educators are required to participate as part of the group that makes decisions based on data, yet they are often unable to participate fully due to lack of advance access to evaluation data or lack of understanding about what the data means in terms of the student's learning profile or classroom instruction (Lo, 2012; Nagro & Stein, 2015; O'Connor et al., 2016). A responsive team approach might mean that we gather different types of data. This approach might also mean that we present data in a way that more easily allows members of the team to use it to understand the profile of the student and to support claims about eligibility, instructional planning, and placement.

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

- Activity for personal reflection: Review several evaluation reports for a child and highlight the specific data points that you understand in green. Next, highlight the data points that you definitely don't understand in pink. What do you notice? Could this data be made more useful for you? How?

- Reorganizing data activity: Use the **Summary of Evaluation Data Template** to reorganize information for your next team meeting. If you're not sure how to sort a particular data point, write down a question for the evaluator or team to consider. This tool is linked in Chapter 9 and is available on our companion website. online resources

- Needs assessment activity: Interview or survey members of your teams either in person or via Google forms. If you use a survey, let people know that they will complete it anonymously and ask them for honest feedback. Ask team members questions such as these: Do you understand the data in our IEP or 504 evaluations? Does it help you to have them read at a meeting? What would help you to understand the data better? What would help you to use the data to

make decisions about eligibility, supports and services, and placement? Be sure to include general educators, principals, special educators, parents/caregivers, students, and community provider agency representatives in your interviews or surveys. Let people know that your goal is to understand their perspective and think about how to make data more accessible for everyone on the team.

In Albert's Case . . .

Fast forward to the meeting with Albert's parents regarding their referral for evaluation. Here is the conversation as it might unfold, with a particular focus on the identification of criteria and data that could be included on an evaluation consent form.

District representative:	Thanks for taking the time to meet with me so that we can plan well for the next steps for Albert. I'm hoping we can talk a bit about the options we have for responding to your request for a comprehensive evaluation and also, if needed, identify areas of suspected disability in a way that we're required to. Finally, I'm hoping to share some written information about your rights in this process. Is there anything you're hoping to accomplish today? I'll make a list of what we want to get done on newsprint so we can stay on track if that's OK.
Albert's parents:	Yes, it's fine to keep a list of what we want to do. That will help. Also, I just want to understand this disability thing. Do you think Albert is disabled?
District representative:	No, I don't think Albert is disabled because I don't have any information to suggest that he is. That word, "disabled," is an important word for us to talk about. As I mentioned when we talked on the phone, by regulations, schools are required to do comprehensive evaluations only for students who are suspected of having a disability. It's a legal term, not a term that

	suggests anything about Albert's potential as a person. Are you comfortable talking more about this? Is there anything I can do to explain it better?
Albert's parents:	So for us to get a comprehensive evaluation, we have to say Albert is disabled?
District representative:	Not really. What we need to do is figure out whether we think Albert might have a disability. We also need to figure out whether we think Albert needs access or needs services to make progress in school. It's about the fit between Albert's profile as a learner and how school works for him. Maybe we could start by looking at some definitions from two different regulations that schools have to follow. Once we get into these definitions, we might be clearer about how to move forward. Is that OK with you? I'm open to other ideas.
Albert's parents:	Sure. Let's have a look.
District representative:	[*Shows the definition of "disability" from Section 504 on a laminated page or projected on a screen*] Let's start with this definition from Section 504. Section 504 is a civil rights law that protects children who might have a disability and ensures that they have equal access to school.

Here's the definition: "Section 504 protects qualified individuals with disabilities. Under this law, individuals with disabilities are defined as persons with a physical or mental impairment which substantially limits one or more major life activities. People who have a history of, or who are regarded as having a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits one or more major life activities, are also covered. Major life activities include caring for one's self, walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, working, performing manual tasks, and learning."

When you and I talked, you mentioned that you have been concerned for several years about Albert's reading. If you believe that Albert's reading is substantially limiting his ability to learn at school, that means that you suspect that Albert may

qualify for protection under Section 504. We don't know this for sure yet. The reason we have to evaluate Albert is to collect data so we can decide as a team whether Albert does have a qualifying disability. Does this make sense?

Albert's parents:	So if we believe that reading is the problem, we should evaluate to find out?
District representative:	That's right. And we want to evaluate and find out not just whether Albert has disabilities; if he does have disabilities, we evaluate to find out about how to get a better fit between Albert's profile as a learner and the way we help him in school.
Albert's parents:	You keep saying "Albert's profile as a learner." What does that mean?
District representative:	[*Shows the parents a **Student Profile Template**, linked in Chapter 9*] Here's a tool that we'll use when we meet together after the evaluations are complete. We use the information from evaluations as well as any information that you and other team members bring so that we can get a good picture about Albert's strengths and needs, your family's culture and Albert's vision for the future, and steps we've already taken to support Albert at school. This information is what we'll use to decide whether Albert has qualifying disabilities and, if he does, to start planning next steps.
Albert's parents:	This is great. We'll have a lot of information when we're done. When do we start?
District representative:	Well, first we need to think about whether we are evaluating to figure out if Albert is eligible under Section 504 or whether he has disabilities that could result in the need for special education and related services. The definitions of "disability" are more specific under special education regulations than they are under Section 504. Let's get a look at these definitions before we decide what to do next.

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[*The district representative shares definitions from IDEA 2004 for specific learning disabilities affecting reading, other health impairment, and communication. After discussion of the definitions, the parents report that Albert was always considered a slow reader in Germany, but they partnered him with another student in his classes who read aloud to him and would scribe answers if needed. Albert's parents thought this happened for children who needed it in all schools*.]

You've just shared some important data with me. The story about Albert's school in Germany and how he was supported is qualitative data—just the kind of thing the team needs to know about in order to understand Albert's strengths, needs, and what's worked for him in school in the past. We will need to gather additional information using qualitative and quantitative methods so that we get a comprehensive understanding of Albert's strengths and areas of need.

The information you've shared tells me a lot about the fit between Albert and schooling. I know the team will want to hear more from you as we move through the evaluation process. We will also use tools that compare Albert to children who are his age. We'll look at his speed of reading, how smoothly he reads, and whether he understands what he has read after reading aloud and silently. We'll also do some testing of his writing, and we'll look at samples of his responses to chapter questions, reading prompts on statewide tests, and other classwork from English, history, and health classes. Depending on what evaluators notice during testing sessions and what we discover today, we may also look at Albert's abilities related to attention, executive functioning, and understanding and use of language. Are there other areas that you think might be important so that we can understand the fit between Albert and school? We want to be sure to address all areas of suspected disability and complete a comprehensive evaluation for Albert.

Albert's parents:	Well, it's all pretty overwhelming, but we'll think about it and let you know.
District representative:	It's OK. We'll be testing Albert for several weeks, and we'll be talking to you and to him and to his teachers to get more information. We just need you to sign a consent form before we start testing. I'll put it together for you right now, and you can

take it home to read it more closely. Please get it back to me as soon as you're ready so we can begin testing. You can accept the consent as I write it. You can also reject it if you don't agree or if you change your mind. You can also accept parts of the evaluation and reject other parts. Here's a brochure that explains your rights, and I'm happy to sit with you to answer any questions or talk about changes to the consent form if you'd like to do that.

You get the idea. This meeting doesn't have to be long—maybe 30 minutes. It could be done remotely or in person, as long as it's possible to share documents and information. We don't recommend doing it by phone because there could be difficulty communicating and getting shared understanding about the definitions and decisions. No matter what happens, the outcome of this meeting is a decision—after the relevant criteria and data have been discussed—about whether an evaluation consent will be offered by the district and signed by the parent.

If parents come in with more knowledge than Albert's parents had, a meeting like this one could be an opportunity for an extended talk about the data that will be collected, to identify tools and expectations about the process, and to build a shared understanding about what's involved in the review of evaluations and participation in the eligibility determination meeting. Ultimately, the parents and the district have built a shared understanding about why the child is being evaluated, the area(s) of suspected disability, and the next steps in the process. Hopefully, there is also a feeling of partnership and mutual support as well. When this happens, the team is poised for responsive practice!

MAKING DECISIONS USING FACILITATION AND A PROBLEM-SOLVING APPROACH

Often, when the time to meet as a team arrives, members come with specific claims or ideas in mind. This happens because team members have invested a great deal of time and thought in understanding the child. Several members of the team have spent time in formal observation or testing. Other team

members have reviewed schoolwide data and have gathered work samples for the team to consider. Several team members have spoken with the child, observed the child informally, or have ideas about how to help the child based on their own experience and expertise. While a compliant process avoids decisions made outside of the team process, it is simply not reasonable to expect team members, all of whom are invested in the child's success and overall well-being, to come without specific opinions or ideas about what could happen next.

Team members' claims, opinions, or ideas about next steps on behalf of the child can reflect their explicit and implicit assumptions about everything related to the team's process. These assumptions likely connect to each member's multiple identities. For example, a parent or caregiver who is an immigrant to the United States might come with notions of shame and dishonor attached to a confirmation of a disability or a placement outside the general education classroom. An upper elementary, middle, or high school student might bring a similar fear of being ostracized because of placement outside the "regular" class. It is also possible that a parent/caregiver or student might welcome a placement outside the general education classroom if it appears to provide a better opportunity for success. Responsive practice invites team members to ask and listen for *personal meaning*: "What does this process mean to you?" "What does [a given term, idea, or possibility] mean to you?" Members of a responsive team are always aware that a particular determination, a specific element in a plan, and a particular placement can carry different meanings for different stakeholders. And members of a responsive team are always asking about and listening for this meaning.

A responsive team approach takes advantage of this situation by encouraging each member of the team to come prepared with ideas based on the data. Before the team convenes around the table, responsive teams have gathered, organized, and shared a great deal of data. This may happen formally, or it may happen as pieces of data merit the attention of one or more members of the team. A key commitment of responsive teaming is ensuring that every member of the team has access to all of the information that they need, in a format and language that they understand, with enough time to think and consider how the data connects to the questions or criteria and the decisions that the team is required to make. By the date on which the team convenes, every team member should know and understand the criteria that will guide a compliant process, the data that the team will be looking at and analyzing

together, and the decisions that will need to be made together by the end of the meeting.

If this sounds like a lot of before-the-meeting work, it is. The payoff for this pre-meeting effort is this: By ensuring that each member of every team comes to the table well prepared, we are ensuring a process that builds trust, strengthens partnership, and ultimately improves outcomes for students (Cadieux et al., 2019). Based on feedback from all team members, our work in New England suggests that as teams engage in increased preparation before team meetings, one added benefit is that meetings are shorter, more efficient, more effective, and more satisfying for all team members.

During the meeting, we can use specific facilitation tools and strategies that support open participation by all members of the team. We can also support one another as team members to share impressions and recommendations only after we have engaged actively in looking together at data and using it to map out the fit between the child as a learner and the way schooling has happened. Responsive teams follow a problem-solving approach that carefully reviews data as a group in order to construct the child's profile as a learner. The team's collaborative decisions about the child's program and placement respond directly to this learning profile. Using facilitation techniques and mapping out the learning profile of the child first, as a team, are keys to effective team decision-making.

RESEARCH TO CONSIDER

Why is it important for the team to join together using facilitation techniques and a problem-solving approach to review data and map the learning profile of a child before making team decisions about eligibility, instructional planning, and placement? Facilitation techniques are recommended to ensure that all members of the planning team are able to participate actively and contribute equitably to decision-making (Beck & DeSutter, 2020). A number of studies suggests that school-based teams often struggle to use data effectively to understand and resolve problems, largely because there is not a coordinated approach "about how to use data and available research to craft, implement and evaluate evidence-based

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solutions for the problems that they identify" (Algozzine et al., 2014). Finally, facilitation and problem-solving approaches are critical to the early identification and resolution of differences and areas of dispute. "Early dispute resolution strategies not only help stakeholders avoid conflicts arising from mistrust and miscommunication, but they also help resolve substantive disputes so that expensive and adversarial due process hearings or litigation can often be averted" (Feinberg et al., 2002).

STRATEGIES TO CONSIDER

- Create and share a detailed agenda for the 504 or IEP team meeting (see our **Sample Meeting Agendas**, linked in Chapter 9 and available on our companion website). [online resources] Include specific questions that the team will be required to answer. Include important criteria that the team will consider. Share this agenda well before the meeting occurs. You might even share it when the consent to evaluate is signed. Be sure to invite other team members to make changes, ask questions, or sort out any confusion about the agenda before the time to convene arrives. Be open to suggestions to improve the agenda for everyone.

- Use a Data Wise approach to reviewing data. This approach is modified based on the work of Kathryn Parker Boudett and her colleagues at the Harvard University Graduate School of Education. Basically, instead of reading reports or "presenting" information during a team meeting, the group around the table spends time looking at data together and identifying, together, the "high points" and "low points" that they see. The group begins by pointing out specific elements of the data and avoiding any analysis, opinions, or conclusions. This "round" of conversation allows all team members to look directly at results of evaluations, work samples, schoolwide data, or other information about a student. Identifying "high points" and "low points" together levels the playing field and ensures that all members of the team have looked at and understood the data before moving on to conversations about eligibility determination, planning, or placement. For more information about this approach, see https://www.gse.harvard.edu/ppe/data-wise-massive-open-online-course-mooc-offered.

- Create a Student Profile Data Wall. This approach is modified based on the work of Douglas Reeves at the Center for Performance Assessments. In this model, the room in which the team convenes becomes a gallery. The walls are lined with newsprint (Jamboard works in virtual meetings). Team members review data individually or in small groups and sort the data by placing single important data points on separate Post-its and then organizing each Post-it onto newsprint sheets (or Jamboard pages) with these labels:

- o Student Superpowers

- o Student Strengths

- o Student's Solid Skills

- o Student's Areas in Need of Support

- o Student's Possible Disability-Related Needs

- o Interventions That Work Well

- o Interventions That We Tried That Aren't Working Well (Yet)

Once each team member or small group of team members has found all of the important data points, each data point is placed on a single Post-it and placed on the newsprint where the team member or group believes it belongs, and then the group does a gallery walk to see what others are thinking. Finally, the group sits together at the team table and creates the child's learning profile by agreeing about key strengths, areas of need, and best interventions. Only after this work is completed can the team begin to answer eligibility determination, planning, and placement questions.

In Albert's Case . . .

Let's go back to the initial meeting between Albert's parents and the district representative. So far, Albert is out of the loop and has not been brought into the process. The involvement of the student is another important aspect of responsive teaming—one that can provoke big feelings in different members of the team. We feel very strongly that the student should take an active role if a team is truly going to embrace a responsive approach. This does not mean that the student is present during every moment of the time that adults meet. What matters most is how the student is brought in and supported during the process. Different students will benefit from different approaches to involvement in the team. For many students, particularly those in secondary schools, being referred for evaluation is stigmatizing. Responsive teams acknowledge and lean hard against this so that students have a strong, positive understanding of the referral, evaluation, and eligibility process well before a team meeting is held.

Here's an example to show how the conversation among Albert's parents, the district representative, and Albert might go in order to set the stage for responsive teaming:

District representative:	Now that we know we're referring Albert for an evaluation under IDEA as a student who might have a specific learning disability affecting reading, with possible concerns related to attention, executive functioning, and communication, I'm hoping that you'll agree to have me call him down to talk with us.
Albert's parents:	What? Does Albert know we're here doing this? He is going to flip!
District representative:	No, Albert doesn't know anything yet. That's why I want to bring him down. We are a team—the both of you, lots of other people here in the school, and Albert. We're all going to be in this process together. That's why I'm hoping you'll be OK with having Albert come down right now, before you have signed the consent or even gotten it from me. I don't want Albert to feel that this is something being done to him. I want him to understand and, hopefully, agree that what we've talked about is what he wants and needs. Are you OK with this? Do you have any questions, or is there anything I don't know that you want to tell me?
Albert's parents:	So you're up for telling him about this now? You're going to help us tell him?
District representative:	I'm offering to have us tell him about the process together. I also want to give him a chance to share how he feels and what he thinks before we do anything. This evaluation is going to involve a lot of time and cooperation from Albert. If we end up having a plan, or offering him help in any way, he's going to have to agree to take the help. That's really what I want to talk to him about. I also have some ideas about ways we might help him now, while the evaluation is going on. I want to know what he's open to and interested in. OK?
Albert's parents:	OK. This is weird for us. We're used to dealing with Albert on our own, and it's not always easy. He's a great kid . . . it's

	just that school is not his favorite place these days.
District representative:	I hear you. I want to hear Albert. Maybe, together with Albert, we can do something about that.

[*The district representative leaves the parents and goes to get Albert from class. For some students, there could be a need for advanced warning; in those cases, the district representative would have gotten permission from the parents during the original phone call, and Albert would know he was going to be coming to a short conversation about how to make school a better fit and that his parents would be there too. Either way, Albert arrives on the scene with the district representative.*]

Albert's parents:	Hey, Albert. How are you?

[*Albert says nothing. He sits in a chair near the back of the room and folds his arms.*]

District representative:	Albert, thanks for coming down with me. We have a problem we're hoping you can help us with. We're looking for your advice. Will you help us?

[*Albert looks up. Nods. Says nothing.*]

District representative:	Thank you. I was hoping you'd agree because without your advice and help we're not going to be able to solve this problem. We need you.
Albert:	What do you mean? Do you mean *I'm* the problem? Is that what you're trying to say?
District representative:	Actually, no, you're not the problem. I hope you never feel like you're the problem, Albert. I'm sorry if anyone here has made you feel that way. Actually, the problem is school. All of us at school haven't figured out how to work with you well, and that's on us. So we need you to fill us in, give us information, and help us figure out how to make school different— better—for you as a learner. So I guess I'm wondering first about school. What are your thoughts?

[*There's a long silence—literally two minutes. Albert's parents start to talk, and the district representative asks them to wait. It's uncomfortable. It's awkward. It's long.*]

Albert:	Seriously? You really want to know what I think? I'll bet my parents don't want to know.
District representative:	[*Helping the parents to wait . . .*] I won't speak for them. But I will speak for me. You and I don't know each other very well, but I'm on your team and I can't be a good team member if I don't know what you think. So can you tell me anything about school?
Albert:	It sucks. That's what I can tell you.
District representative:	Really? All of it sucks? That's funny because I just saw Mr. Che, and he told me that you are the superhero of Algebra II. He's planning to recommend you for AP Trig next year if you're interested.
Albert:	No . . . you're kidding, right?
District representative:	Nope. Not kidding. You don't have to do it. You'll decide. So tell me what else is working at school for you. I'm not totally believing the "everything sucks" story.

[*Albert continues to share information about sports, friends, and even mentions a clip from a video in world history that led to a pretty cool discussion that he enjoyed.*]

District representative:	Can I ask you another question? [*Albert nods.*] Do you have plans for what you're going to do after high school? [*Long pause . . . again*] You know—like, what would be *great* if it happens when you're done here?
Albert:	Well, it will be great to have a diploma and be out of here!
District representative:	So a diploma is something you want? [*Albert's parents smile. Albert nods.*] You'll walk across the stage . . . prom . . . graduation parties . . . and then . . .
Albert:	Well, I'm thinking about engineering, but I don't know if I have four more years of school in me. I love the math and the idea of designing things. It's just the school . . .

District representative:	What about the school? Math is great for you. Why not more school?
Albert:	You know, all the reading and writing and all the time and work—it's too hard. People just want me to read, read, read all this crap. And even at a school for engineering I'm going to have to take a bunch of classes that I hate—like more English and history and stuff like that.
District representative:	I hear you. It sounds like the reading and writing make school hard. And maybe it's harder when the work isn't interesting. Is that right? Did I hear you right?
Albert:	Yeah. It's because I suck at reading. [*Silence*]
District representative:	Can I say something? [*Albert nods.*] Do you want to get better at reading? [*Silence*]

I think you see how this unfolds. The parents join in eventually. The district representative suggests some technology that can be added to Albert's Chromebook right away and tells him that one of his team members (a reading specialist) will meet him in the library whenever they can set up a good time for both of them (e.g., before school, after school, during lunch, or during a class) to get a look at what the technology can do in terms of accessing text. They talk about headphones and when these could be helpful (or not) and what other kids will think. In the end, the district representative helps Albert to understand the specific learning disability (SLD) definition and how his job will be to give feedback about the technology that gets tried out, to share work samples with and without technology, and to do the evaluations with team members to the best of his ability. Albert agrees, albeit reluctantly. His parents are thrilled that they didn't have to convince him to participate. Already, the early stages of responsive teaming are a success.

OVERALL ROLES AND RESPONSIBILITIES OF SECTION 504 AND IEP TEAMS

As we mentioned in Chapter 1, it's difficult to understand some of the important differences between teaming for students with disabilities under Section 504, a civil rights law

prohibiting discrimination, and teaming for students with disabilities under IDEA 2004, a law requiring the provision of special education to students with disabilities. In each chapter, we offer a summary chart that shares some of the important differences that impact members of 504 and IEP teams as they work together. Key differences in 504 and IEP team roles and responsibilities are shown in Table 2.1.

TABLE 2.1   Summary of Section 504 and IDEA 2004: Team Roles and Responsibilities

KEY ELEMENT	SECTION 504	IDEA 2004
What are the general provisions of each regulation?	Discrimination prohibited. (a) *General.* No qualified handicapped person shall, on the basis of handicap, be excluded from participation in, be denied the benefits of, or otherwise be subjected to discrimination under any program or activity which receives federal financial assistance. 34 C.F.R. 104.4(a)	The purposes of this part are as follows: (a) To ensure that all children with disabilities have available to them a free appropriate public education (FAPE) that emphasizes special education and related services designed to meet their unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living; (b) To ensure that the rights of children with disabilities and their parents are protected. 34 C.F.R. 300.1
Who is protected?	*Handicapped persons* means 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. 34 C.F.R. 104.3(j)(I) *Physical or mental impairment* means (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;	"Child with a disability" means a child evaluated in accordance with §§300.304 through 300.3II as having an intellectual disability, a hearing impairment (including deafness), a speech or language impairment, a visual impairment (including blindness), a serious emotional disturbance (referred to in this part as "emotional disturbance"), an orthopedic impairment, autism, traumatic brain injury, any other health impairment, a specific learning disability, deaf-blindness, or multiple disabilities, and who, by reason thereof, needs special education and related services.

KEY ELEMENT	SECTION 504	IDEA 2004
	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. (ii) *Major life activities* means functions such as caring for one's self; performing manual tasks; walking, seeing, hearing, speaking, breathing, learning, and working. 34 C.F.R. 104.3(i)	34 C.F.R. 300.8(a)(I)
Who is on the team?	The team includes a group of persons, including persons knowledgeable about the child, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options. 34 C.F.R. 104.35(c)(3)	The IEP team for each child with a disability includes (I) The parents of the child; (2) Not less than one regular education teacher of the child (if the child is, or may be, participating in the regular education environment); (3) Not less than one special education teacher of the child, or where appropriate, not less than one special education provider of the child; (4) A representative of the public agency who— (i) Is qualified to provide, or supervise the provision of, specially designed instruction to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities; (ii) Is knowledgeable about the general education curriculum; and (iii) Is knowledgeable about the availability of resources of the public agency. (5) An individual who can interpret the instructional implications of evaluation results, who may be a member of the team described in paragraphs (a)(2) through (a)(6) of this section;

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KEY ELEMENT	SECTION 504	IDEA 2004
		(6) At the discretion of the parent or the agency, other individuals who have knowledge or special expertise regarding the child, including related services personnel as appropriate; and (7) Whenever appropriate, the child with a disability. 34 C.F.R. 300.32I(a)
What are the major responsibilities of the team?	Evaluation and Placement: (c) *Placement procedures.* In interpreting evaluation data and in making placement decisions, a recipient shall (I) draw upon information from a variety of sources, including aptitude and achievement tests, teacher recommendations, physical condition, social or cultural background, and adaptive behavior; (2) establish procedures to ensure that information obtained from all such sources is documented and carefully considered; (3) ensure that the placement decision is made by a group of persons, including persons knowledgeable about the child, the meaning of the evaluation data, and the placement options; and (4) ensure that the placement decision is made in conformity with I04.34. 34 C.F.R. I04.35	Individualized education program team or IEP team means a group of individuals described in §300.32I that is responsible for developing, reviewing, or revising an IEP for a child with a disability. 34 C.F.R. 300.23

This table does not address all requirements and provisions of Section 504 and IDEA 2004. It is meant to introduce you to some of the important aspects of these two laws. We strongly recommend that all team members refer directly to the regulations whenever questions arise. These tables are meant to assist you to find key elements and guide you to starting points for your review.

SUMMARY

Why do we need responsive teams? In addition to all of the ideas, research, and strategies we've shared in this chapter, we hope you understand that we need responsive teams, now more than ever, because our modes of educating students have changed. Recently, all schools across the country have reconfigured teaching and learning to provide in-person learning, hybrid learning, and remote learning options. We have also had the opportunity to consider remote and hybrid modes of evaluating and convening teams. We've accomplished much over the past few years, and we have many opportunities for growth and change, particularly as we consider what's best and what's possible for students with disabilities. We've also learned about the importance of parental support and input into the educational process for all students, and especially for those whose learning profiles challenge us.

If these recent years have taught us anything, it's that we need each other. We have to partner in order to effectively educate children. We have to know and respect one another, help one another, encourage one another, and support one another. We have to pull in the same direction. A responsive team approach is about learning how to do this, especially as members of educational teams serving children with disabilities. If you'd like to take a first step, you can begin by looking at the **Establishing a Responsive Team Checklist** (see Appendix). Whether you use this tool for personal reflection about your participation on teams or you use it as a way to assess needs with a group of other team members, we're sure it will provide some strong initial questions to help jump-start your journey toward a more responsive approach to teaming. We wish you well, and we're here to support you on your way!