



# PUBLIC EDUCATION FOR STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES: Fundamentals for the Parent Advocate

## Every Child Needs an Effective Advocate

An effective education for your child depends on your effectiveness as an advocate. As you work to obtain the special education and related services needed, at every formal and informal opportunity, there are (at least) ten tips you should follow:

# 1

### **SET GOALS**

Be proactive instead of reactive. Whether you're meeting formally with school officials and experts, or holding private conversations, it's important to have in mind basic goals and practical objectives for your child, and a clear vision of how the schools can help. Always act with positive vision and purpose.

# 2

### **DEVELOP A STRATEGY**

Know exactly what you want. Saying "I want my child fully included," says too little. Consider what needs to happen for your child to participate in the general class. Does your child need particular skills or special assistance to participate? Who can teach those skills? Lay out the steps required to reach each of your goals. Remember, it may take time and many meetings to get there.

# 3

### **GATHER INFORMATION**

You can never be too prepared. Use school records, your child's daily work, outside evaluations, records of decisions already made, descriptions of your child's activity and relationships outside of school, the law and the latest rules...all of the information that matters.

# 4

### **CONNECT WITH ADVOCACY PARTNERS**

Benefit from the experience of others. Take advantage of training and assistance available from outside groups and agencies. In meetings with school officials you can have a companion of your choice. A parent support group can provide you with emotional support; you can share information impacting your goals and strategies, and together you can identify systemic problems for all to address.

# 5

### **ESTABLISH YOUR PLACE IN THE PROCESS**

Use your authority. By law, you have authority over your child's education. You have a legal right to be heard in any major decision by school officials. You can refuse to consent to their decisions. You also can form alliances with others involved in the process. You are a full and equal member of the IEP team.



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# 6

### ASK QUESTIONS

Stay up-to-date. Always clarify the current situation. Make sure that you know what the issues are in each meeting or conversation, and have all the information that is relevant. Ask questions. Listen carefully to the answers, and take your own notes.

# 7

### ANALYZE

Reevaluate your strategy; be flexible. How do new facts affect your strategy? What is reasonable? Are there alternatives available that may work as well or better than your initial request? What steps do you need to take next?

# 8

### TAKE YOUR TIME

Don't be pressured by the clock. Meetings can always be rescheduled. If you have issues you know will need more time, notify your district. If you're not sure of your next steps, adjourn the meeting. Don't rush into something you don't agree with, or don't understand.

# 9

### MAKE SUGGESTIONS

Take the lead when necessary. Throughout the process, problems must be solved and plans may need to be changed. Sometimes, one suggestion can get everyone in the problem-solving mode! Help find solutions, not just problems.

# 10

### RESPECTFULLY DISAGREE

Be assertive, not antagonistic. Remember, you will still have to work with these folks, so choose your words carefully. Stand firm on what's essential, but don't make your requests personal. When necessary, there are formal procedures to decide how a conflict might be resolved.

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