



From the Outside In

THOUGHTS ON EFFECTIVE SPECIAL EDUCATION ADVOCACY

by Pat O'Connor

EFFECTIVE SPECIAL educational advocacy involves a student-centered, systematic, and organized approach to accessing appropriate support services for individuals within the school system with exceptionalities.

Every parent of a child with special needs within the school system has had moments of frustration and questions – oh, so many questions – about many aspects of the process.

- What can I do if I don't agree with my child's class placement in a self-contained ASD (Autism Spectrum Disorder) class?
- Can the school repeatedly suspend my 14-year-old son with Asperger Syndrome?
- Our 20-year-old daughter has autism and is about to leave the secondary setting. Does the school have to implement a transition plan?
- How do we get our input on the Individual Education Plan (IEP)?

Although the Ontario Ministry of Education indicates in the Shared Solutions document that "All parents have the right to advocate for their child" (p. 27), parents often do not feel empowered to do so. Further, the laws governing special education in the province of Ontario clearly indicate that children with special needs have the right to an appropriate education, but navigating the education system is challenging for even the most experienced.



As the parent of a child with exceptionalities such as ASD, you are the most knowledgeable person on the planet about your child. Really, you have expert status. You know their strengths, needs, likes and dislikes, personality characteristics, and you love them from the bottom of your heart! You have the greatest potential to advance their cause and be their advocate in the education system. The journey of becoming an effective educational advocate involves acquiring information, organizing a process, relaying information in a clear and concise manner and monitoring outcomes. Here are a few tips to assist you as you undertake this challenging but meaningful venture.

Know your child's disability

ASD is a complex disorder that requires support in many areas of functioning. I'm not saying you must know everything, but it is important to understand how the defining characteristics – communication, social skills and behaviour (self-regulation) affect your child. Sharing your understanding of your child's sensory needs and levels/causes of anxiety are essential for success in the school setting.

Identification and IEP development:

It is really important to have your child formally identified through the IPRC (Identification, Placement, Review Committee) process and that an IEP (Individual Education Plan) is developed. The IEP becomes the template for the student and the teacher program.

It represents how your child's program will differ from the regular program. Principals are legally required to ensure that parents are consulted in the development of IEPs and consultation must occur on any significant changes prior to implementation.

Know your rights

To ensure that your child accesses the services and supports that they require it is essential to know your rights. The Education Act as well as other policies and regulations assist in this regard. At the end of this article there are a few documents to track down on the Ministry of Education website.

Know the jargon

"There will be an SNC to discuss the IEP after we have the IPRC to identify your child as having an exceptionality - ASD." *Yikes, am I in a new world with an unknown language?* There are many acronyms to learn but once you learn to speak the language, life gets easier.

Understand the school board's process

In every large bureaucracy there is a chain of command and a series of people with a variety of roles and responsibilities. The first order of command is the teacher and/or special education teacher; the principal is the next link, followed by the area and special education superintendent. If the issue remains unresolved, the Ministry of Education is your final resting place. School boards will be very

clear that this chain must be followed and do not look kindly upon the person trying to jump the queue.

Constructive communication

The key to success: Be nice. If you are feeling really cranky, wait until later to put it in writing – at least the letter that you send to school board personnel. Be clear, concise and specific and request responses within timelines. Try to keep emotions in check. This is often easier said than done since it's your baby and it's their rights that we are talking about. Remember there are many great educators in the system that will attempt to solve issues as they arise.

Document, document, document!

Document all contacts with the school, not only formal letters but e-mails, phone calls, and meeting discussions which are often documented in SNC (Special Needs Committee) meetings. This documented history clearly identifies issues and outcomes. Your child's school career is lengthy and if your memory is anything like mine – it fades over time.

Persevere

Rome wasn't built in a day and the same rule applies to special education planning and implementation. Follow-up on the implementation of discussed outcomes is essential. Schools are busy places with competing priorities. They may need reminders.

Of course, not everyone has the time, energy or inclination to take on the advocacy role independently. There are many excellent resources to guide and assist. Autism Ontario is in the process of developing an Advocacy Associates Network to support families throughout the province. ■

Pat O'Connor's primary focus is on consultation; training, program development and advocacy for young adults with Asperger Syndrome transitioning to the work world and post-secondary through her company Integrated Autism Consulting. She can be reached at patriciaoconnor@rogers.com.

Helpful Resources

Ministry of Education

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca>

Special Education: General

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/speced.html>

Individual Education Plans

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/eng/general/elemsec/speced/iep/iep.html>

Policy/Program Memorandum No. 140: Incorporating Methods of Applied Behaviour (ABA) into Programs for Students with Autism Spectrum Disorders (ASD)

<http://www.edu.gov.on.ca/extra/eng/ppm/140.html>