

BE THE NUMBER ONE ADVOCATE FOR YOUR CHILD

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Sending your child off to school for the first time is an emotional experience. Your hopes and expectations are that the child will strive and do well in the educational environment. Unfortunately, this is not always the case. Some children encounter great difficulty socially and academically at school. It is critical that the reasons the child is struggling are identified and addressed. However, do not depend on the education system to automatically do this. It is crucial that you become the number one advocate for your child. In the next few paragraphs, I will provide information which will help you be an effective advocate.

As professional advocate, Karen Robinson, states on her website (www.afase.com), “Advocating for your child can be an emotional and frustrating experience. However, only parents who are the best advocates will get the necessary services and programs for their children”. In other words, regardless of the stress factor, do your homework and become actively involved.

The first step is to arrange psychological and psycho-educational assessments for your child. These assessments can be scheduled by the school board which is required by the Ontario Education Act, “to implement procedures for early and ongoing identification of the learning abilities and needs of students.”

Once the assessments are completed it is time to request an Identification, Placement, and Review Committee (IPRC) meeting be held. The IPRC is the body responsible for reviewing all information pertaining to a student including not only the results of the assessments but the input of the parents, teachers, SERTS and possibly others. At the conclusion of the meeting, the IPRC recommends placement of the student and services to be provided. Never walk into this meeting unprepared. At least ten days prior to the meeting, the board is responsible for delivering a copy of its Special Education Parents’ Guide. Make sure they do so and read it cover to cover. It is also advisable to arrange a meeting with a member of the board’s staff for a preliminary discussion. As most parents have no clue what to expect, you are allowed to bring a person to represent you before the IPRC. My suggestion is to do so. If you do not agree with the IPRC’s decision concerning your child’s placement you have thirty days to launch an appeal. If you fail to do so, the recommended placement will take place. Also, there are many choices as to placement. Therefore, gain an understanding of the options prior to the IPRC.

The next step is to develop an Individual Education Plan (IEP) for your child. You should be a major player in its development. The plan should state your child’s strengths and weaknesses, the programs and services to be provided and list goals and expectations that are specific, achievable, measurable and observable. Once the IEP is in place, closely monitor the implementation of the programs and services. Always remember that the IEP is a living document. It should be reviewed and modified at least annually.

One of the tools that help many struggling students is Assistive Technology computer applications. This software is available in most schools across the province. You should request that your child be given access to these programs and taught how to use them. Unfortunately, many educators do not know how to use these programs effectively. Therefore, you should check to see if this training is available elsewhere within your community.

By following the steps I have described, you will help your child receive the support he or she needs. Remember, your child deserves the chance to reach his or her full potential.