

Parent Information Center of Delaware
Thursday January 10, 2008 – 7:30 pm (Audio Conference)

EFFECTIVE ADVOCATES ARE NOT BORN, THEY ARE MADE

Two generations of child advocates share their perspectives, experiences and strategies that led them to move bureaucracies and create systems to benefit their and other children with special needs.

Ellen Coulston President, Board of Directors, Parent Information Center of Delaware
Co-Founder of the Brandywine Special Needs PTA
Parent of Christopher who has a learning disability

Marie-Anne Aghazadian Executive Director, Parent Information Center of Delaware
Parent of Stefan who has autism

Parents often ask us where they can find an advocate. Our response to them is that they are the advocates they are looking for, because they know their child best. They have dreams and hopes for their child and, most importantly, unlike schools, they are in it for the long term.

Parents, therefore, have a vested investment in guaranteeing that children receive an appropriate education. Once children leave the school system and haven't received an appropriate education, the teacher or special education director won't come to his home to help him balance his check book.

So, if it is so important for parents to advocate for their children, why are some parents better at it than others?

Here are their secrets:

Advocates gather facts and information

- They know about their local school district, they know who makes decisions and about the school district's philosophy regarding parent involvement and programs for students with disabilities (i.e. preschool programs, inclusion, funding, vocational opportunities, etc.)

Advocates know about their legal rights

- They know that a child with a disability is entitled to an *appropriate education, not the best* that maximizes the child's potential. They take advantages of all opportunities to learn about the law and regulations and how to follow procedures.

Advocates look at education as an outcome-driven process

- They have expectations of schools to teach their children the skills and knowledge that they'll need for a productive, meaningful and independent life as adults.

Advocates identify and solve problems

- They figure that if they are part of the solution, they may well get what they wish for. They use their frustrations, anger and upset to motivate them to developing strategies.

Advocates plan and prepare for meetings with school personnel

- They know what they want and have done their homework. They prioritize their wishes and always have a plan B in case plan A falls through.

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Advocates propose solutions

- They know that schools and parents often disagree on what a child's education ought to be. They always seek win-win situations.

Advocates keep written records

- They know that if a statement is not written down it doesn't exist.
- They resist the temptation to pick up the phone, but instead write a letter or email to share their concern.
- They stick to the issue at hand and don't go through a litany of wrongs.
- They are respectful, factual and follow-up with letters to document discussions events or, just thank those who have been helpful.

Advocates are persistent and single minded in their pursuit

- They have a vision to strive to accomplish goals.
- They know that an appropriate education is pivotal to their children's future and know that their effort is worth the prize.

Advocates are savvy

- They know that knowledge is power and they always use the power the law gives them, wisely.

Advocates also....

- Never blame or accuse. They put down the put-downs.
- They control emotions, but use them as a source of energy to keep moving forward.
- They are realistic and recognize that neither Rome nor an appropriate education were built in a day.

Advocates who wish to improve systems join or form parent groups

- Parent advocacy or disability specific support groups are a great source of information and comfort for parents. They also are powerful instruments for change.

Sources: From Emotions to Advocacy (Wrightslaw 2003) and "Advocate or Adversary?" (MA Aghazadian 2006)