

5 Ways to Advocate for Educational Success

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When the 1st-grade teacher of one of the children I advocate for notified me of an upcoming Admission, Review and Dismissal meeting, I knew I had to attend. I am glad I did, as I negotiated one extra occupational therapy session in a six-week period. It was difficult for me to accept the school's goal of "adequate" progress when I wanted "maximum possible" progress. One 30-minute session was not a big victory, but it was a victory nonetheless.

Volunteer advocates and parents frequently have questions regarding how best to advocate for a child's educational needs, which are sometimes overlooked. Below are a few pointers on how to help children improve their educational stability and enjoy a high-quality school experience:

1. Make education a top priority.

Talk with the child about the importance of school in their lives. For younger children, you can explain the vital link between what they learn in the classroom (English) and real life work (writing a report for your boss). Or the connection between science and preparing a meal for yourself. For older youth, talk about the "million-dollar ticket"—not a lottery ticket but a high school diploma. Studies show that having high expectations for a youth's educational achievement is the single most important factor in a child's educational success. Be a cheerleader for the child. Go to their school play, choir concert and volleyball game. Becoming involved demonstrates how important you consider school.

2. Develop good relationships with school personnel.

This includes the teacher, of course, but also the secretary who answers the phone, the principal and the counselor. They may have a special understanding of the child; if so, they can support you in helping the child deal with any problems. For example, ask the teacher to send home a written note describing a child's behavior problem, such as acting out, rather than relaying the day's events verbally in front of the child. This saves the child embarrassment. With a little bit of information, school personnel may be more understanding of particular behaviors. Develop and encourage open communication between yourself and the school; email is a wonderful tool for this purpose if you and the teacher are comfortable with it.

3. Talk directly to teachers about their classroom expectations.

The teacher is your ally in a child's education. To be a knowledgeable, effective advocate for the child, you should be assertive yet courteous and respectful of educational professionals. Know the child's rights, and request the proper services firmly yet not combatively. Be a resource for the teacher—you may be the only person who knows the child's educational history. Understand that the teacher has other children in the classroom to consider as well.

4. Ensure that the child has an educational portfolio.

The parent or guardian should maintain a variety of documents for the child. These include enrollment



Questions for Volunteers to Ask Teachers

1. What are this child's strengths in school?
2. What are his weaknesses in school?
3. Are there gaps in her education? At what grade level is she performing? Is she on target? Is this an appropriate grade level for this child? If not, what is the appropriate grade level?
4. Is he failing classes?
5. Has she ever been retained?
6. Does he receive/need tutoring? If so, in what subjects?
7. Did she receive any special services at her previous school?
8. Does he have behavior problems at school that affect his learning?
9. Does she have attention problems at school that make it difficult to learn? Has she been diagnosed with ADD/ADHD?
10. Has he been diagnosed with (or is he suspected to have) any of the following disabilities that might affect his education: autism, auditory impairment, visual impairment, speech impairment, traumatic brain injury, orthopedic impairment, mental retardation or emotional disturbance? If yes, what special education services are available?

Adapted from Casey Family Programs


records (birth certificate, social security number, immunization records, withdrawal forms from previous schools), report cards and progress reports. Any special education records should be kept as well. Examples are Section 504 plans, most recent Full and Individual Evaluations, Individual Education Programs and Behavior Intervention Plans. Also include standardized test scores, list of medications taken during the school day, school photos, referrals, notices and correspondence (emails, notes on phone calls or meetings), awards/honors and student handbooks. For older children, parents and guardians will also want to understand the school's requirements for graduation

and SAT registration dates. Youth need support and preparation to make the transition from high school to college or employment. Is there a workshop or conference the parent or child can attend?

5. Ensure that someone is serving as the child's educational advocate—whether that be you or someone else.

Many children in the US receive special education services at some point in their schooling. Consult with your student and the teacher, review the educational records, and attend any meetings. At these meetings, be sure to read through and thoroughly discuss all paperwork. Ask lots of

“why” questions, and make sure your student's goals and objectives are specific. Learn about community educational resources available to meet the needs of the child.

As you can see, there is much you can do as an advocate or parent to help children access a stable and productive education. Your active participation can make a lifelong difference for a child. 

Editor's Note: A more extensive version of this article is available online. From nationalcasa.org, click on “Volunteer” and then on “Support for Volunteers.” The “Tips” link appears at the top of the right-hand column.