

Basic Tips for Effective Educational Advocacy

1. **Create relationships with school staff and others who can help.**

In an ideal world, schools, families and communities are working together to provide the best for each student. This is not always the reality, however, and relationships can go sour when different issues arise. Try to maintain a positive, helpful approach in dealing with all school staff, from teachers and aides to supervisors and managers, including principals and superintendents. It is important to:

- Attend parent teacher conferences and other meetings regarding your child, as well as school events.
- Check in with teachers regularly, not just when there's a problem. When problems arise, follow up, and respond to all school communications promptly.
- Ask the child or young person how things are going, and suggest ways to help the child to communicate effectively with teachers and staff.
- When problems do arise, always ask for and listen carefully to the school's side of the issue.

2. **Be persistent, yet flexible.**

An advocate should rarely accept "no" for an answer. Moreover, the educational advocacy role should continue as long as the child remains in your home. Yet the advocate must also recognize that in some circumstances a change in the goal for a child may be necessary. Knowing when to compromise, and when to shift goals for a child is a challenging task. Finding other foster parents or others with advocacy experience to provide advice and counsel can be very helpful in making these decisions. Case worker or social worker involved with a child or youth can also be an important ally.

3. **Be prepared.**

The parent or educational surrogate has the right to inspect and review a complete copy of the educational records of a child. It is important to:

- Review the entire record carefully, including special education records. If your child has a disability, know about it, how it affects the child in school, and what interventions are in place.
- If there are parts of the records that are unclear, ask school staff for an explanation.
- For many children or youth in care, the school records may be incomplete or inaccurate, because the child has moved several times. The school should make an effort to locate records and have them transferred from other schools. Inaccurate parts of a school record should be corrected (social worker should work on this as well).

4. **Keeping records - and making a record.**

Keep homework, tests, and other school work that a child brings home. Organize everything into files or even a three ring binder, with material under each topic in chronological order. It is also very useful to keep an ongoing log of all contacts with school staff, reports received from a child, and other developments concerning a child's educational experience.

Put all requests in writing, and confirm telephone requests or oral requests made at a meeting with a letter. Always keep a copy of letters you send to the school. One useful strategy is to hand deliver a letter to the school, and ask school personnel to sign and date your copy, acknowledging receipt.