

Skills for Effective Parent Advocacy

1. Understand Your Child's Disability

- Connect with disability organizations, parent groups, and professionals to gather information. Research with books and reputable websites.
- Identify what your child needs based on their disability. Share your knowledge with the Individualized Education Program (IEP) or Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) Team. Your child's needs should be the starting point for the team.
- Communicate your child's Strengths, Preferences, Interests, and Needs (SPIN) with the team. We all build our lives based on our SPIN.
- Your vision and high expectations for your child's future are powerful – research shows that high expectations do have an impact on your child's success at school and after exiting school.

2. Know The Key Players

There are decision makers involved in your child's education. Know who those decision makers are and the chain of command if there is an issue. When you have concerns start with the person closest to the issue.

Collect contact information from key players. Gather the names, titles, supervisors, phone numbers, and emails of team members. Ask each the best method and time to connect.

3. Know Your Rights and Responsibilities

Your "rights" are contained within a document called Procedural Safeguards. Procedural safeguards include rights like having your privacy protected, reviewing records, resolving disagreements, and consenting to (or declining) services.

If someone says "it is policy" ask politely for a copy of that policy or rule if you are questioning the accuracy of the information. This will allow everyone to have an accurate understanding of the policy or rule.

4. Be Organized

Record Keeping: Have a method to organize current and previous IEPs / IFSPs, evaluations, and progress notes.

Communication Log: Record the date and discussion points of meetings, hallway conversations, and phone calls.

Email and Text: Send a follow up email summarizing entries in your communication log. Consider a separate folder in your inbox to organize communications about your child.

5. Use Clear and Effective Communication

When you're talking:

- Stay focused on your child and their needs
- Work from a list of your questions and concerns
- Brings a friend or family member to help you take notes and stay organized
- Restate your concerns if you feel you weren't heard the first time

When you're listening:

- Is the speaker expressing opinions or is data being shared?
- Take notes
- Wait to ask questions
- Ask clarifying questions or restate what you heard to confirm understanding
- Write down an action plan and share with the team

When you're writing:

- Send to the person who can make the change
- Focus on one or two issues
- Limit length
- Set a deadline if you expect a response
- Include the date, your name, and contact info
- Keep a copy for yourself

Always put it in writing when making a request, asking for clarification, clarifying, asking for a decision, or documenting a verbal conversation. If you have a dispute with the school, it's important to have written documentation to support your position.

6. Know How to Resolve Disagreements

Informal meetings keep the people closest to the problem, solving the problem and can be the fastest way to solve problems. Start the conversation with the person you are having a disagreement with to try to explore possible solutions. If you are not able to reach an agreement, you can also climb the internal ladder. Informal meetings allow you to discuss your concerns and issues relating to your child's education with the IEP team and by reviewing or revising your child's IEP as needed, you do not need to wait for the annual IEP meeting.

Facilitated meetings can be any structured special education meeting with a trained, neutral 3rd person to facilitate the meeting. The facilitator can keep the discussion focused on the student's needs, address and diffuse conflict and makes sure that all voices at the table are heard. Facilitation is voluntary, both the parent and school district must agree to the use of a facilitator. The facilitator can be provided for free through Special Education Mediation Services (SEMS, 1-833-KIDS-1ST).

Mediation can help resolve disagreements related to the student's educational program, including topics not specified in the federal special education law, IDEA, such as communication. During mediation, a neutral third-party mediator guides a confidential

discussion of the issues. Mediation is voluntary and requires both parents and the school district to agree to participate in mediation. The desired outcome for Mediation is a legally enforceable written agreement. Whether there is an agreement reached depends on the participants. If an agreement is reached, the written agreement addresses how that disagreement will be resolved. A Mediator can be provided through Special Education Mediation Services (SEMS, 1-833-KIDS-1ST); they use mediators trained in special education law through local Dispute Resolution Centers.

A **State Complaint** is a written, signed statement that alleges a public agency (your school) has violated the requirements of IDEA, the MARSE, or the Michigan Revised School Code, related to special education programs and services. Anyone can file a State Complaint. When filing a State Complaint, you are alleging that the school district has violated state or federal special education rules or regulations. Therefore, Michigan Department of Education's (MDE) determination will be whether the district was in compliance or not in compliance. Final decisions are issued within 60 days of receiving the complaint.

Due Process Complaints/Hearings address issues related to identification, eligibility, evaluation, placement, Free Appropriate Public Education and Manifestation Determination Review (MDR) decisions. Due Process Complaints can only be filed by a "parent" or the public agency, remember that can be your school district, and must be filed within two years of the alleged violation.

Due process will involve the school's attorney, submitting documents and oral testimony, and cross-examination of witnesses during a hearing in front of an Administrative Law Judge. Parents may choose to have an attorney assist them, but it's not required.

The Administrative Law Judge issues a written decision and an Order.

As You Have Questions

Reach out to your Michigan Alliance for Families Regional Parent Mentor, 800-552-4821 (Español 313-217-1060). We are here to help make sense of all things special education.