

Advocacy Competencies

The educational advocate has a vital responsibility of working with parents to obtain essential educational services for children with disabilities. The weight of this responsibility should push the advocate to develop her/his advocacy competency to the highest degree. Consider here some of the basic competencies an advocate should develop:

1. Working knowledge of federal law and regulations as well as state law and regulations. As indicated in the prior section, understanding educational law is a complex and time-consuming undertaking. While the advocate is not seeking to be an attorney, her/his knowledge of basic special education law should be as thorough and fundamentally sound. This is a very attainable goal and COPAA exists for the purpose of helping each of us access all that is necessary to develop the fundamental and essential knowledge of special education law. The truly competent advocate is the one who understands that no one KNOWS the law, because it is a continually evolving and changing body of knowledge.

2. Knowledge of the general principles of education and the psychology of learning. A thorough knowledge of educational and learning principles is as vital to an educational advocate as knowledge of the law. The ultimate objective of the advocate is to ensure that the student has an appropriate educational program. Good educational programming is a matter of applying educational and learning principles. The law is but a tool for implementing those principles. This means that the blind application of legal rules and procedures cannot result in good education. We have to start with our knowledge of the child's educational needs and use the law to obtain what the child needs.

There are a number of valuable resources for learning about disabilities and education.

The parents: Parents have lived with their child's disability for a long, long time. In most instances they have made it their business to study and learn all about their child's disability and the child's educational needs. Listen to them and you will learn a lot.

Reference texts and conferences: There are literally hundreds of books which fully explain almost any disability that you might encounter. In addition, there are frequent conferences on autism, behavior management, ADHD, learning disabilities, etc. There are texts and conferences on how to successfully teach children with every kind of disability.

Internet: Today the internet is a vast resource library on every known disability. Numerous sites are dedicated to not only teaching about disabilities, but also providing information how to teach children with disabilities.

3. Working knowledge of the educational planning and implementation process specific to your state or region. While there are some general guidelines (procedural safeguards) that all school districts must follow, every district will have their own permissible, specific procedures. It is a good idea to ask the districts you will be dealing with to provide you with a copy of their “Standards and Procedures” document. This document will often spell out in detail the District’s current procedures. Try your state education agency. They often publish technical advisory papers and even books to help educational professionals and parents understand the procedures. Finally, collect copies of the most current forms being used by the Districts. Do not be surprised if these change frequently (that is as much of a frustration for the educational professionals as it is for advocates).

Practice Note: Know the basics. The thing to remember is that regardless of the many different forms and procedures used by various school districts, each of them must conform to certain absolute norms. If you know the basics that must be respected in Notices, IEPs, Evaluation Consent forms, etc., you will be able to competently work even with forms you have never seen before.

Practice Note: Do not be captive to the school district’s forms. Frequently the district’s forms will not have the space to include the information you feel needs to be included that is where you pull out a sheet of paper to “expand” the IEP. This typically happens where there is insufficient room to write useful “present levels of performance.” It is also useful when the district’s form only has a “check list” for accommodations. Most students need accommodations spelled out in clear detail.

4. Working knowledge of disabilities, service options, delivery models and where to access further in depth information. It is important for an advocate to understand the child’s disabilities. No one starts out knowing and understanding all disabilities. Experienced advocates often run into new disabilities. This is why good advocates are always in learning modes. The parents probably know their children’s disabilities better than anyone else. They are usually willing teachers and will often provide you with more books, articles, and internet sites than you could possibly use. Be a seeker of knowledge. Your ability to translate the disability traits and requirements of the child into effective educational strategies will probably be the strongest contribution you can bring to the table.

Let the school district teach you about their services options and delivery models. While legally schools are not supposed to make the child fit their programs, the reality is that schools do not in most

circumstances develop new programs for one child. Knowledge of what programs the district has and where they are can be a major help in securing whatever program the child that you are serving, needs.