

The Role of the Advocate

This short article reviews some of the ways an advocate can serve parents and children with disabilities. It is worth keeping these roles in mind as one studies and prepares for advocacy. The breath of responsibilities that may fall on an advocate's shoulders must push each of us to continue striving to expand our knowledge and skills.

1. General case evaluator – The advocate needs to develop skill at evaluating a case and helping parents determine their precise issues and concerns. In most instances the parent only knows that something is wrong, that something doesn't work. The advocate needs to be skilled helping the parents organize and prioritize their own objectives.

2. Interpreter of reports, evaluations, school data and information. Most of this information is a mystery to parents and the advocate can help the parent organize the material so that it makes some coherent sense. Where the parent lacks them, the advocate can help the parent obtain all the student's educational records.

3. Source of referrals: In most cases the parents do not have all the information necessary to make educational determinations. The advocate can play a valuable role in providing referrals to expert evaluators and educational consultants.

4. Source of legal and educational rights information: While the advocate does not practice law and does not give legal advice, the advocate can help the parents learn about their child's educational rights. The advocate can serve as a valuable guide to the educational system and procedures and can help the parent's protect their child's educational rights.

5. Educational Planner – The advocate should be able to help the parent understand how to develop effective educational plans, including present levels of performance, goals and objectives, related services, accommodations, placement, etc. In addition to participating at the table in the educational planning process, an advocate is often a strategic planner. With the parents, the advocate plans how to bring the necessary resources and information to bare on the process in order to obtain the educational services the child requires.

6. Communicator – Effective educational planning requires clear communication of the parents concerns and issues. The advocate can help the parent effectively communicate with the school district, either by communicating directly or by helping the parents edit their own communications.

7. Meeting Support/Intervener – The advocate needs to be able to attend school meetings, including IEP meetings with the parents. The advocate can help the parents focus on their objectives, communicate more effectively with the IEP team, and participate more fully in the development of educational plans. The advocate can be an experienced advisor and protector of the child’s procedural safeguards.