

Role of the Advocate

In the "Philosophy and Ethics of Advocacy" we discussed what an advocate is. Here we will examine briefly the different character advocacy may assume, depending upon the nature of the advocate. Gradually, we will develop these categories to provide more information.

A. The Parent Advocate (advocacy for one's own child) every parent of a child with disabilities in school should think of themselves as their child's premier advocate. Our system of exceptional education invites and empowers parents of children with exceptionalities to participate in the education of their child as that child's advocate and spokesperson. As parents we have the responsibility to take our place at the table and help plan our children's educational plan. We have an important role in monitoring and evaluating our children's educational program. We need to be prepared to represent our children's best interest as effectively as possible.

B. The Volunteer Advocate (advocating on as a volunteer) The struggle for appropriate education for children with disabilities is too daunting for most parents to take on alone. If we are to see significant changes in the educational environment it is going to take teamwork. Across the country, individuals are stepping up and coming along side parents to help them advocate for their children. In many places these volunteer advocates are the backbone of a massive grassroots effort to make schools responsive to the special needs of children with disabilities.

C. The Professional Advocate: Some advocates have developed their knowledge base and their advocacy skills to the point where they can offer their services on a professional basis. This is not to suggest that volunteer advocates might not be as knowledgeable or skilled, but the professional advocate has made a career decision to dedicate his/herself to developing educational advocacy as a profession and business.

D. The Paralegal/Advocate: Some advocates or paralegals work in the environment of a law office. These advocates or paralegals usual work as an essential interface between the attorney and the educational processes. These advocates will usually have responsibilities for:

- Interviewing and consulting with the clients
- Developing the client file, including the work of obtaining all existing student records.
- Managing the client file, keeping it up to date and organizing the work to be done.
- Attending school meetings, including IEPs.
- Obtaining necessary evaluations and assessments.
- Preparing the case file for trial, if litigation is necessary.
- Preparing witnesses for trial,

- Attending trial, helping with document management and trial duties.

E. The Attorney Advocate: It is not necessary to make any major distinction between attorneys and advocates. This is particularly true where, as Mark does, the attorney actively advocates for the child, rather than dealing only with litigation. One could argue, in fact, that an attorney cannot effectively represent his clients, unless he personally advocates on the level of the school and district, or at least works with an advocate or paralegal who fulfills this role.

Attorneys working with and through non-attorney advocates can be a particularly powerful alliance. This is true, whether we are talking about parents advocating for their children, advocates offering professional services, volunteer advocates or paralegals. The non-attorney advocate can efficiently deal with the hundreds of vital and fundamental tasks essential to the work of advocacy, while the attorney focuses on seamlessly providing the legal services necessary to obtain appropriate education of the child.