

Parent Roles on School Committees



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It's that time of year! Schools are desperately reaching out to parents to provide extended services that may include:

- Volunteering in your child's classroom or lunchtime supervision support
- Fundraising for the school or a student group
- Driving for field trips or sports activities
- Acting as a leader for the Parent-Teacher-Student Association
- Serving on a school or district advisory team for curriculum adoption, school plan development, special education services, English language learner services, Title I services, gifted or talented services, or local education bond oversight
- Providing added after school or weekend services

Support Your Children's Schools

Parents should seriously consider how they can best support each of their child's school activities when considering their added job and family support needs. Many families struggle with accepting too many responsibilities at one school and not having any more time for the demands from another school. It is better to talk with each child to determine how they want their parents to support them. For example, could another family member offer more help? As grandparents, we provide carpool and homework help for the younger grandkids. Older grandkids may invite us to attend special sporting events as they prefer to carpool with their friends to most events.

Classroom parent volunteer help may include:

- Organizing and helping at special events
- Creating curricular units for a classroom teacher
- Listening to students read in small classroom groups
- Reading to children and managing an art or social studies activity that supports a story
- Helping students with their small group math assignments
- Sitting near challenged students to give encouragement and help them focus on assignments

School leadership activities that may incorporate parents' special talents may include:

- Writing public relations stories for the school
- Organizing and leading fundraising activities

- Organizing and leading school events
- Organizing parent carpools for field trips or sporting activities
- Recruiting parents to serve on school leadership and advisory groups
- Helping with the after school childcare services

Consider Leadership Opportunities with Various Countries

When a parent has immigrated from another country or attended a different type of school, they can offer teachers a wider variety of culturally rich activities. Many parents are reluctant to become involved in their children's classroom activities because they may have had limited experiences in the American school systems. Some parents from different countries help classroom teachers by sharing their cultural practices through cooking, art projects, storytelling, social studies projects, and plays. A few parents lead cultural history days. Several parents volunteer in classrooms during the Thanksgiving holiday season by talking about their holiday cultural practices. Others may lead students with various acts of kindness. They may host a fundraising event for cultural communities in need or adopt a school from another country with letter writing activities.

Grow Your Volunteer Leadership Talents

As parents become active in their children's schools,

many will gain leadership skills that can benefit their jobs. Others may explore new skills as they learn how to fundraise for a project or write a public relations story. Some may manage the social media platform for the school. The talents gained from these experiences may lead a parent to run for their local school board, substitute teach, work as a lunch time supervisor, or return to school to become a teacher. My own parent volunteer activities led me back to college many years ago to become a teacher and an educational leader. Please share your own leadership journey as a parent volunteer in the comments section under this blog.

What Are the 6 Principles of IDEA?



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One of the most important aspects of special education is understanding the law. It's big. It doesn't make sense, but it's the cornerstone of everything I do as a professional. It doesn't matter which state you live in or which district your school is in these 6 principles are EVERYTHING! (Don't worry I'll share more on these later, and give you more details.)

The 6 Principles of IDEA are what school districts are held accountable for funding. They must adhere to these principles and concepts or risk losing funding. And knowing these core special education concepts helps you as a parent with a child with a disability. If you have IEP issues and are having trouble defining them, chances are that issue will fit into one of these 6 buckets. First, a little background.

What is IDEA?

IDEA is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. It was enacted in 1975 and was re-authorized in 1990 and 2004. Ideally, it is supposed to be updated as appropriate every 10 years, but you can see that doesn't

happen. IDEA was authorized by the federal government to ensure that all children with disabilities are provided with “equality of [educational] opportunity, full participation, independent living, and economic self-sufficiency.” Meaning an IEP is to prepare a child for further education, employment, and independent living.

To get special education services for a child, you have to follow a legal process. The most important law for this process is the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). It gives rights and protections to kids with disabilities. It covers them from birth through high school graduation or age 21 (whichever comes first). Parents and legal guardians also have rights under the law.

The IEP process should exhibit all of these principles. Trouble starts when something is left out. Everything from an IEP fits into one of these principles.

Of course, there often is an overlap of issues. For example, if a team does not include your parent concerns on the IEP or does not provide you with Prior Written Notice (PWN), you could correctly claim one or all of the following:

Your child was denied a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE).

You weren't allowed meaningful parent participation. They didn't put your concerns on a PWN.

The purpose of an IEP is to prepare a child for further education, employment, and independent living. This is

IDEA law.

Free Appropriate Public Education

Under the IDEA, every child with a disability is entitled to a Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). The IDEA emphasizes special education and related services, which should be designed to meet a child's "unique needs and prepare them for further education, employment, and independent living."

The courts have held that the IDEA requires schools to prepare Individualized Education Plans, which provide "meaningful educational benefit" to children with disabilities. The "meaningful educational benefit" requirement includes a focus on raised student expectations, appropriate progress, and transition into postsecondary education and independent living.

Public schools and local school boards are responsible for ensuring that every child with a disability receives a FAPE.

Appropriate Evaluation

The Law requires that schools conduct "appropriate evaluations" of students who are suspected of having a disability. An appropriate evaluation must be implemented by a team of knowledgeable and trained evaluators, must utilize sound evaluation materials and procedures, and must be administered on a non-discriminatory basis. If your primary language is not English than the team must use evaluations that take

this into account.

An appropriate evaluation must determine and make recommendations regarding a child's eligibility for special education services in a timely manner. This means evaluations should be specific to the concerns surrounding the suspected disability. Evaluations should not be the cookie-cutter approach where everyone gets the same set of assessments.

To receive FAPE, each child needs the appropriate evaluations. Your child is entitled to the appropriate evaluations to determine if there is a disability as defined under IDEA.

Individualized Education Plan

The Individualized Education Plan (IEP) was established by the IDEA to help ensure every child's access to a Free Appropriate Public Education. The IEP is a written document, developed and drafted by an IEP team, which is based on the evaluation information to address the student's strengths and needs.

Under the IDEA, an IEP must include information regarding a student's present levels of educational performance, annual goals, services and supplementary aids to be received, and a detailed explanation of instances where your child is not participating in the general classroom and why.

An IEP is also required to include information regarding consistent reporting on student progress as well as

“transition” to adult life. Finally, it is required that an IEP account for the planning concerns of all stakeholders including you and your child, the strengths of a particular child, and the specific “academic, developmental, and functional needs” of the child.

The plan that your child receives must be individualized to their needs.

Least Restrictive Environment

Under the IDEA, a student is guaranteed placement in the Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) possible. Therefore, the IEP team must explore a number of alternatives for enabling your child to participate in the general education classroom. These may include classroom modifications, supplemental aids, and services, and alternative instructional methods, etc.

LRE is a concept that was decided by a Supreme Court case affecting Special Education. The main point of LRE is this: “You must be educated in the least restrictive environment to the maximum extent possible, and you cannot use budget issues as an excuse not to do it.”

If an IEP team determines that your child’s needs are such that they can’t be addressed in the general education classroom, then the team must make responsible efforts to determine the LRE for that student outside of the general classroom.

Parent Participation

IDEA itself spends a lot of time addressing parent participation. It is your right, as well as your responsibility, to participate in the IEP process. Under this provision, state educational agencies and schools must ensure that the parents of a child with a disability are members of any group that makes decisions regarding the placement and LRE of that child.

You have the right to equal and meaningful participation in this process and are entitled to notification of a planned evaluation, access to planning and evaluation materials, and involvement in all meetings regarding your child's placement. IDEA explicitly establishes your role as an equal participant and decision-maker.

Procedural Safeguards

The law establishes procedural safeguards to help parents and students enforce and understand their rights under federal law. The primary purpose of this requirement is twofold: safeguards protect your access to information pertaining to placement and transition planning, and procedures are put in place to resolve disagreements between you and schools regarding the placement of a student. For your own peace of mind, you want to read them before you need them.

Under the IDEA procedural safeguards, you have a right to review all educational records pertaining to your child, receive notice prior to meetings about your child's evaluation, placement, or identification, and to

obtain an Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE) for consideration at such meetings.

If disagreements arise, you have the right to request mediation or due process hearings with state-level education agencies, and beyond that may appeal the decision in a state or federal court.

Look for more specific information in the coming weeks about each one of these very important points from IDEA. This law encompasses of everything within special education. Do you have additional questions or want me to share a specific topic send me an email at: alison.whiteley@toad-allyexceptionallearners.com

How our School Nurtures Students' Positive Behaviors



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Our students are encouraged to reach their fullest potential in their social, emotional, and academic skill development. Sakamoto School created the following system of support for three tiers of student growth needs (see PBIS: Positive Behavioral Intervention & Supports at www.pbis.org):

Tier 1 intervention provides *Quality First Instruction* for all students. Students are given added academic support with afterschool academic camps, Saturday programs, peer projects, and individualized strategies that nurture growth.

Tier 2 supplemental programs include a pull out five day a week reading program for students who need added support in how to effectively comprehend what is being read at grade level instruction. Many of these students test at one to two grade levels below their current grade levels.

Tier 3 students are given individualized tutorial support. These students also receive comprehensive help in their beliefs about their abilities to excel over time. Some students struggle with focusing in class. Others may eventually qualify for a resource specialist in reading. Many speak more than one

language and need extra support to process reading sound decoding in English. Some are lacking the self-confidence that reading is challenging and become easily frustrated. When we simplify the learning process for these students, they start to feel more confident in their learning abilities. Over time, these students develop the skills and self-confidence required to adapt to challenging reading assignments.

Throughout the school year, our teachers are expanding innovative instructional strategies. Their classroom level programs continue to expand as we meet the individualized learning needs of more students.

In the comments section below, share how your child's school effectively meets students' learning needs.

Advocating for Your Child's Special Education Needs



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Being a parent of a special needs child is not easy. Working with a new team each year is hard. It's hard even when the only thing that changes is your general education teacher.

As a special education teacher, parents, you play a critical role part in your child's education. Advocating is empowering and HARD. By actively participating in your child's education and collaborating with educators and professionals, you can ensure that your child receives the support and resources they require to thrive. In this blog post, I will share 8 valuable insights and practical tips to help you become a strong advocate for your child and their needs.

Educate Yourself

Knowledge is power! Take the time to familiarize yourself with special education laws and regulations in your country or state. Understand key terms and acronyms commonly used in special education, such as Individualized Education Program (IEP), 504 Plan, and Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE). Learn about different disabilities, accommodations, and

instructional approaches that can support your child's learning. Understanding these concepts will help you to communicate and collaborate with teachers and school administrators. (I'll share more on each of these soon.)

Build Relationships

Developing strong relationships with your child's classroom teachers, therapists, and administrators are essential. Attend parent-teacher conferences, IEP meetings, and other school events to establish open lines of communication. By fostering positive relationships, you can create a supportive network that works together to meet your child's unique needs.

Maintain Communication

Effective communication is the cornerstone of successful advocacy. Regularly communicate with your child's teachers to stay informed about their progress, challenges, and any emerging concerns. Share your observations, insights, and goals for your child's education, IEP, and post-high school. Collaboration ensures consistency between home and school.

Document Everything

Maintain a record of all correspondence, meetings, evaluations, and assessments related to your child's special education. Keep copies of IEPs, progress reports, and any relevant documentation. This documentation can help you track your child's progress, identify patterns, and support your advocacy efforts.

Be an Active Participant in the IEP Process

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) is a vital tool for ensuring your child's educational needs are met. Actively participate in the development and review of your child's IEP. Share your insights, goals, and concerns, and be prepared to negotiate and collaborate with the school team to create an effective plan. Remember, you are your child's voice during these meetings.

Know Your Child's Rights

Familiarize yourself with your child's rights under special education law. Take the time to read them and ask questions if you don't understand your Parent Rights and Procedural Safeguards. Understand the services and accommodations your child is entitled to and ensure they receive them. If you encounter any challenges or obstacles, advocate for your child's rights respectfully but assertively, seeking guidance from organizations or parent support groups if necessary. (If you are not sure where your copy is, go to your state department of education, download, and read it.)

Seek Additional Support

Don't hesitate to seek additional support from professionals, advocacy organizations, or parent support groups. These resources can provide guidance, mentorship, and valuable insights to help you navigate the complex world of special education. Share your

experiences and learn from others who have walked a similar path.

Foster a Collaborative Approach

Remember, you and the school team share a common goal—your child's success. Approach advocacy as a collaborative effort, working together to ensure your child receives the best possible education. Maintain open lines of communication, listen to different perspectives, and find common ground to create a supportive and inclusive learning environment. Explore differentiated instruction techniques, such as varied assignments, flexible grouping, or modified assessments. Collaboratively find ways to adapt the curriculum to meet your child's individual needs.

Advocating for your child's special education needs is a powerful way to ensure their educational journey meets their unique abilities and challenges. By educating yourself, building relationships, maintaining communication, and actively participating in the IEP process, you can effectively advocate for your child. Remember, you are your child's greatest advocate.

Raising an Athlete



Raising an Athlete

Sports!! From fall to winter, spring to summer, I have always loved the cycle of sports. It is extremely exciting to watch a family member play in competitive sports. Being an enthusiastic follower of my daughter as an all-star softball player, I really had to let go of my instinct to be a mom-coach. I quickly learned how to become a silent and compassionate partner when my daughter competed in championship games. I discovered that the stakes were high. And maybe a bit too high for my daughter and her team to relax, focus, and enjoy their sport.

As a typical parent, I initially tried to encourage my child while being positive. This strategy failed, however, when my daughter and her team felt the pressure during the playoffs. Suddenly, the pressure was so great that the joy of the sport was lost. The team froze and became exacerbated. Then our talented team lost their

focus. Finally, they lost the win of their championship game.

What I Learned as a Parent

When I reflect back on what happened, this is what I learned about parenting an athlete:

It is my job to stay present and supportive regardless of how my child is responding to the coach and her team.

When the game becomes tense, I must diffuse my energy with a calming smile and be there as a positive force of energy for my child and the team.

I must remember that the most important lesson for my child is not the outcome but the process. She is there as part of a team. My job is to encourage positive teambuilding through support, compassion, and concern for every team member.

When there is tension, it is important to refocus the team with a timeout of support and positive energy. My job is to give my daughter the space she needs to regroup and find her center of focus. Healing happens through individual choice.

After a major game upset, it is important to give my daughter the space she needs to regroup and relax. Some athletes need to vent about what went wrong during the game. Others need the space to self-reflect. That is when I need to be quiet and take the cues from my daughter.

Showing up matters!

What I Learned from the Coaches

Once a team member makes an error, it is past history. The coach must restore motivational energy among team members.

No good is ever generated from shame discussions. Players are aware of their limitations. Each needs their own reinforced coping skills when they fail. Players rebuild their skills and potential through acknowledged growth and full potential of the team. An effective coach is a reservoir of inspirational strength and skill development strategies for every team member.

Much success as a parent who supports their child athlete and team to their next victory of self-growth as an effective team member.