

What is a Special Education Advocate?

An advocate is someone who helps a parent or family to understand the special education process.

Advocates can provide information about special education options and requirements, and can help you to seek a specific service or program for your child.

An advocate can help you carefully read your child's school records, testing information, and Individualized Education Program (IEP). If you wish, an advocate may attend Team meetings with you.



A skillful advocate who knows local schools and resources can often see solutions not immediately obvious to other people.

An advocate—most importantly—can help you to become a better advocate for your own child.



For more information
or to locate an advocate
in your area, please
contact the
Federation for Children
with Special Needs,
and ask for an
Information Specialist.

Call 617-236-7210
or toll free
in Massachusetts:
1-800-331-0688
Visit our website:
www.fcsn.org

Developed cooperatively by the
Federation for Children with Special Needs (www.fcsn.org)
and the Massachusetts Department of Education
(www.doe.mass.edu/sped).

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A Parent's Guide to Selecting a Special Education Advocate in Massachusetts



FEDERATION FOR CHILDREN
WITH SPECIAL NEEDS

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A GOOD ADVOCATE:

IS WELL-TRAINED AND KNOWS THE LAW

- Ask what kind of training the advocate has received. When? From what organization(s)? How much experience does he/she have?
- Consider asking the advocate specific questions about special education laws and regulations. Does the advocate give clear explanations?

Finding the right advocate for your family means asking the right questions. Try to interview at least three advocates before hiring one.

UNDERSTANDS SCHOOLS

- Discuss what the advocate knows about teaching methods. Ask the advocate to explain how to measure your child's progress in school, and to show how this information can be helpful in developing the IEP.
- Find out how the advocate plans to obtain positive results for your child, while maintaining a productive working relationship with your child's school.

TAKES TIME TO KNOW YOUR CHILD

- If possible, arrange for the advocate to meet and spend time with your child. Your child's education must be individualized to meet his unique needs; an advocate should get to know your child as an individual.

- Make sure the advocate understands the facts of your child's situation. If you would like the advocate to see your child's school records, the school will require you to sign a release form.



EMPOWERS YOU

- Find out how the advocate will try to educate and empower you to become a better advocate for your child.
- Find out when the advocate is available, and how much time he or she will be able to spend with you. Is the advocate willing to attend meetings at your child's school?



UNDERSTANDS DISABILITIES

- Find out what the advocate knows about your child's specific disability.
- Ask if the advocate has experience with other children who have the same type of disability, and consider if that is important to you in obtaining an advocate.

ACTS PROFESSIONALLY

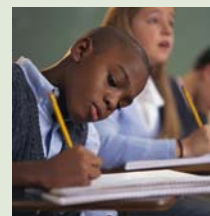
- Ask the advocate to explain how he or she was able to work out a solution with and for other families in the past.
- Consider asking for references from the advocate's previous clients.
- Consider drawing up a written agreement of what the advocate will do for you.
- If the advocate charges a fee, make sure you know what the advocate's fee and/or the retainer amount will be. Agree to these specifics up front and in writing.
- Decide when or if the advocate can speak to the school without your permission.
- Ask that the advocate return all materials when you are finished working together.

It's important to know that there is no formal certification or licensing process for advocates. Most advocates are not trained as lawyers. A well-trained advocate will help you know when you need advice from a lawyer.

Advocating for Your Child

Effective advocacy starts with educating yourself. Make sure you understand your child's disability and learning style. Become knowledgeable about your child's school program, and learn about your rights and responsibilities under the law. As a key member of your child's Team, your goal is to work collaboratively with teachers and other professionals.

Begin to inform yourself by looking at the Federation for Children with Special Needs website at www.fcsn.org, or contact us at 1-800-331-0688 to find out about our workshops and trainings. Other great resources are the



National Dissemination Center for Children and Youth with Disabilities at www.nichcy.org, or disability-specific organizations such as the National Center for Learning Disabilities, www.nclcd.org, the National Down Syndrome Congress,

www.ndsccenter.org, or the Autism Society of America, www.autism-society.org.

If you are concerned about your child's progress in school, talk with your child's teacher, principal, or IEP Team leader. It is also helpful to speak with other parents, especially the members of your town's special education Parent Advisory Council (PAC). At the Federation for Children with Special Needs, information specialists can also answer your questions. If you have a specific question about laws or regulations, or if you believe the school is doing something they should not do, you can call the Program Quality Assurance office of the Massachusetts Department of Education (1-781-338-3700).

You can also hire a special education advocate to assist you. Successful advocates get good results for students by working cooperatively and openly with parents and schools. The Federation for Children with Special Needs provides training for special education advocates and maintains contact information for all persons who have successfully completed their training.