







A Routledge Eye On Education
FREEBOOK

Advocating for Your Students

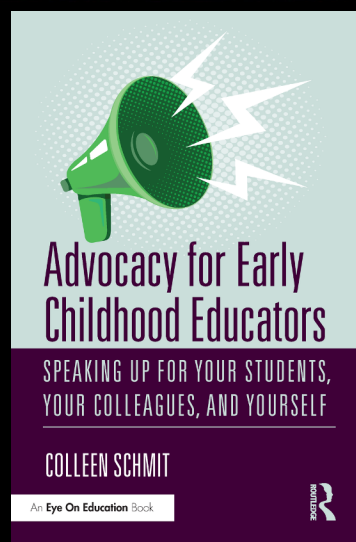
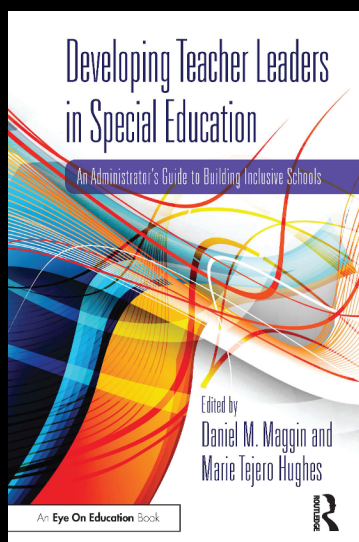
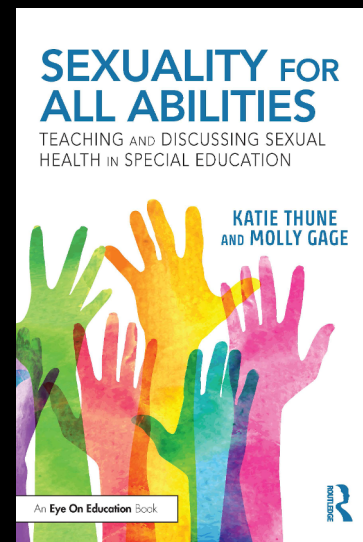
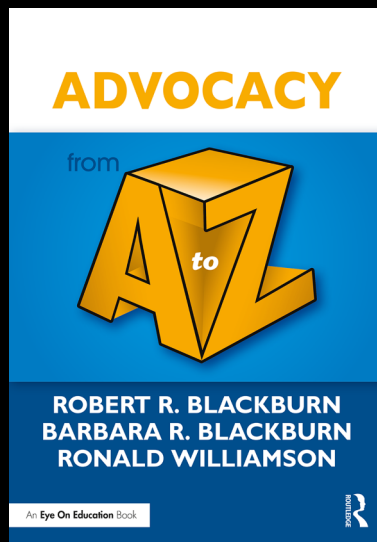
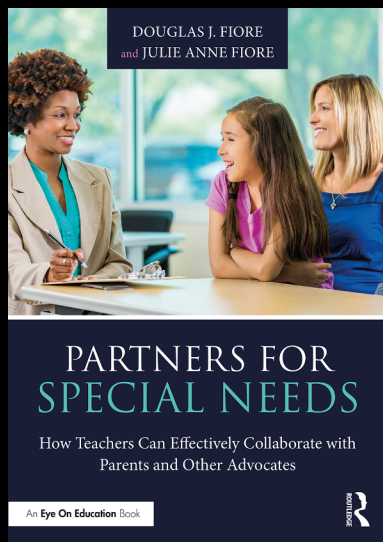
Classroom Strategies for All Abilities



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THIS FREEBOOK FEATURES CHAPTERS FROM THESE K-12 PROFESSIONAL DEVELOPMENT TITLES



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Introduction

Are you searching for strategies on how to advocate for your students? If you're interested in the value of relationship-building techniques in early childhood, how to make difficult choices on tight budgets and limited resources, and tips for establishing a climate of shared advocacy in your school community, explore these topics and more with this Educator Toolkit of chapters from bestselling Routledge Eye On Education books. We hope they help you into the new school year and beyond!

Featured Chapters

- “Advocacy: Classroom Expectations Are Important, but Relationships Are King” from *Advocacy for Early Childhood Educators: Speaking Up for Your Students, Your Colleagues, and Yourself* by Colleen Schmit
- “Managing Parent Attitudes” from *Sexuality for All Abilities: Teaching and Discussing Sexual Health in Special Education* by Katie Thune and Molly Gage
- “Gaining Support with Limited Resources” from *Advocacy from A to Z* by Robert Blackburn, Barbara R. Blackburn, and Ronald Williamson
- “Advocacy” by Catrina Dorsey and Kary Zarate, from *Developing Teacher Leaders in Special Education: An Administrator’s Guide to Building Inclusive Schools* edited by Daniel M. Maggin and Marie Tejero Hughes
- “Rule of Three: Working with Professional Advocates” from *Partners for Special Needs: How Teachers Can Effectively Collaborate with Parents and Other Advocates* by Douglas J. Fiore and Julie Anne Fiore

As you read through this FreeBook, you will notice that some excerpts reference previous chapters – please note that these are references to the original text and not the FreeBook



CHAPTER

1

ADVOCACY

CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS ARE
IMPORTANT, BUT RELATIONSHIPS ARE
KING



Advocacy for Early Childhood Educators

SPEAKING UP FOR YOUR STUDENTS,
YOUR COLLEAGUES, AND YOURSELF

COLLEEN SCHMIT

An Eye On Education Book



This chapter is excerpted from

*Advocacy for Early Childhood Educators: Speaking Up
for Your Students, Your Colleagues, and Yourself* by
Colleen Schmit

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ADVOCACY: CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS ARE IMPORTANT, BUT RELATIONSHIPS ARE KING

Excerpted from *Advocacy for Early Childhood Educators*

Let's delve into the heart of your classroom: relationships. To be a true advocate for early childhood education, you must value building positive relationships with the children you serve above all else. Without authentic and genuine relationships with the children in your care, nothing else may be accomplished. In other words, nothing else matters. Voicing to all stakeholders the value of relationship building is another must for a tool in your advocacy tool belt.

One of the biggest classroom elements we learn quickly as early childhood educators is the importance of having clear and consistent behavioral expectations in our classrooms. This is something that is ingrained in the coursework for preservice teachers and those earning their Child Development Associate Certification (CDA). When children know what to expect, they feel safe. This is a huge reason why we need to have positive, supportive relationships established in early childhood education classrooms. We need our children to feel safe and cared for.

I have a program evaluator BFF named Abbey, who uses a great analogy for classroom expectations. Abbey says, "Classroom expectations are the backbone of the classroom." I have always loved this metaphor and edustole it from her. I fully agree. Without solid expectations or strong organization in the classroom, the room falls apart just like a spineless body would be a puddle of jelly. Expectations are so important. If classroom expectations are the spine or the backbone of your classroom, then relationships are the heart. You absolutely cannot get anything accomplished if your students don't truly believe that you at least like them, if not love them.

When students feel secure and safe in the classroom, they will work for the teacher. I love the quote "Before we Bloom we must Maslow." This means if you want to implement higher order thinking skills from Bloom's Taxonomy in your room, you better make sure you have met students' needs from Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In other words, rigor is important, but relationships are king! Of course, we want to set the bar high for young learners. Yes, we want to push and guide children to grow academically, socially, and emotionally. In order to scaffold and guide children to increased learning outcomes, we must place our focus first on building relationships with the children we are serving.

My first year of teaching, I had a little girl in my class named Neveah. (All names of teachers and children have been changed for their privacy throughout the book.) Neveah was smart as a whip! When I met her, what stood out most were her big,



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brown eyes and above average language skills. She lived with only mom and had a new baby brother in her house. Often at school she would have a hard time interacting with the other children during center time or free play. She was unable to solve conflicts on her own and would require a lot of help from me to scaffold conflict resolution. Instead of using her words to express what was upsetting her, she would pinch or sometimes even bite the other children. I felt extremely underprepared on how to handle these types of situations. I tried my best to muddle through. At first, I thought consequences by isolating Neveah would be the appropriate response. I had watched lots of episodes of Super Nanny and thought timeout seemed like a logical consequence when children were biting or pinching.

I had something in my classroom called a “Care Chair.” If you were needing time to think about being caring, you could (or had to) sit in the Care Chair. It was timeout. Timeout can be disguised in many different forms. Sometimes it is called a Cool Down Zone or a Cozy Corner. You can call it whatever you want, but if you are forcing children to be isolated and take a break, you have timeout in your classroom. If you are using the Cool Down Zone or Cozy Corner as a choice to help children self-regulate, that is a different story and, in my opinion, totally appropriate.

Looking back, having timeout in my kindergarten classroom was an absolute ridiculous strategy to help promote a positive classroom environment. Guess what happened when I would place a child similar to Neveah who had difficulty self-regulating behavior in the Care Chair? The situation would completely escalate. She would become so angry! I remember one day when I removed her from the dramatic play center and sat her in timeout. She threw a tantrum of gigantic proportions. She removed her socks and shoes, put her sock in her mouth, picked up the Care Chair and chucked it across the room. I was nowhere near prepared in how to handle situations like this. I picked up the phone and called for the counselor to come down to the classroom to help.

Thankfully, we had a school counselor who valued social/ emotional learning (SEL), which, at the time in 2003, was a pretty far-out concept in elementary buildings. The counselor was so patient with me as a new teacher. She saw the Care Chair and started to gently give me some tips and advice on what SEL is and how to support SEL with appropriate strategies in the classroom.

First step, no more Care Chair. “Mrs. Schmit, have you ever considered that instead of isolating the children when a behavior escalates that being alone is not what



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the child needs. All behavior is a message. When Neveah bites or pinches, it is a sign that she needs help and can't cope with her emotions." I will be honest, at first her message sounded like foo foo nonsense to me. No! Children need consequences. I can't just let her pinch and bite. That is not okay. "You are right, Mrs. Schmit," the counselor responded. "Those behaviors aren't okay or fair to the other children. But instead of punishing the behaviors after they happen, you may want to try a more proactive approach. Focus on building a positive, safe relationship with Neveah. That is what she is craving—she wants to feel safe. When you use the Care Chair, you are sending a message that you are on your own and I am not available for you."

It took a few nights of contemplating this new way of thinking, but I decided to listen to the counselor's advice and remove the Care Chair from the classroom. I decided that what our school counselor said did make sense. I started to anticipate Neveah's needs. I was aware what her triggers were and could read her cues before she bit another child or reacted physically. I was proactive by being in proximity to her and helped to encourage her to use her words to express what she needed during play. I spent a lot of one-on-one time with Neveah and so did our school counselor. She had times each day that were special for her to go and practice more SEL in the guidance room.

The second major change that our school counselor helped me cope with was my very public behavior chart that hung on my chalkboard. I had a large circle divided into three sections. One section had a picture of a happy face, the next section had a face that looked like he was a little annoyed, and the final section had a very sad face drawn. I had a clothespin with each child's name on it. I had seen this behavior chart hanging in the classroom of another teacher who I was friends with and admired as a teacher. I thought, Yep! This looks so easy to make and if Mrs. C uses this strategy it must be good.

When the counselor saw my public behavior chart, she again had some questions for me, "How is that working for you?" Great! It is so easy to manage. "Are the same children always moving their clips?" Um. Yes. I suppose so. "Think of what happens when you move Neveah's clip. How does she respond?" She doesn't like it. It usually promotes a tantrum. "Do behaviors in your classrooms change?" No, I am constantly moving clips for the same kids who do the same things. "Would you like it if our principal had a large wheel like this during our staff meeting?" No. It would totally make me feel anxious.



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Again, the wise words from my SEL-savvy guidance counselor promoted me to take down our public behavior chart. I returned to focusing on building relationships with all my students and providing individualized and private behavior charts for students who needed or responded to that level of feedback. Recently, I had a conversation with Mrs. C. (the teacher who initially had the behavior circle in her room). We both were flabbergasted that we ever used such a public behavior management strategy. “I had a cooperating teacher who used that chart when I student taught so I thought that is what I should do too,” said Mrs. C. Well I saw you had one and made one too. “How awful were we?!” I think we really didn’t know any better. We can give ourselves a little grace and do better now.

Too often, we have a “monkey see, monkey do” mentality in teaching. If that strategy worked for that teacher, then it will work for me too. I have visited many schools who still use schoolwide behavior charts. These charts are public and in every classroom. When my oldest began school, her school had a schoolwide behavioral plan. The kids would start on green which was symbolic for on track or having a good day or meeting behavioral expectation. If a warning about behavior was given, the child would move their color to yellow. If the child was having an exceptional day conforming to the behavioral expectations, they could change their color to purple. My rule-following oldest child always felt that if she came home on green instead of purple, she must have done something wrong throughout the day. One day, she was chatty on the carpet and had to move to yellow. She bawled for about an hour when she told me about it at home that evening.

The same archaic behavior chart that was used at the elementary school my children attended is the same that behavior chart system I had growing up as a child. When I was in school, the teachers would threaten, “If you don’t listen you will need to change your color.” The children who changed their color several times a day were always the same few kids. Obviously, this form of behavioral correction was not working back then, so why in the heck do we still see it in classrooms today?

Recently I conducted a CLASS Observation from Teachstone in a first-grade classroom. The teacher scored extremely high in the Emotional Support Domain of the tool. She had so many supportive, positive interactions with her students. She could be the poster child of an educator who was aware of and responsive to students’ academic and emotional needs. When I sat down to debrief the scores



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with her, I asked, “Would you ever consider getting rid of the public behavior chart in the classroom? You don’t need it. You had clear behavioral expectations, positive relationships, and the children are extremely compliant to your expectations.” “Well, yeah. I guess so. I don’t hardly use it except as a form of positive reinforcement,” she replied. I shared the story about my rule-following daughter who felt like a failure if she didn’t make it to purple. “I guess I have always just had a chart. It is my 12th year teaching, and I learned it when I was student teaching. Sure. I am open to getting rid of the chart.”

After the guidance counselor had talked me into trashing my circle behavioral chart, I began to make more of a concentrated effort on developing social/emotional strategies with my children. My relationships with my kids were authentic and genuine. Our classroom was a supportive learning environment. I already was doing a fairly good job of meeting the individual academic needs of my students and now I was focusing on individualizing their social/emotional needs too.

Later that spring, Neveah and her baby brother were taken from their mom and placed in foster care. I remember when I learned this disturbing news and Neveah entered the classroom the next day. I instantly could tell a difference in the little girl. Her eyes sank and her naturally pale skin looked more like a gray tone. Even the way she stood or sat looked physically different. Foster families are meant to serve children and families. Many positive experiences can derive from foster care and supporting parents to get their lives back on track, but I will always remember the change in appearance and demeanor of my students who had been taken away from their mothers. I am forever thankful that our guidance counselor had advocated for social/emotional learning as a goal for me to have in the classroom. That first week, Neveah needed so much more love and attention for me. I was a big part of her normal. She would sit on my lap and cry or hug me or she would lash out again at the other kids with biting, hitting, or sometimes she would just scream. No amount of time in a Care Chair could have helped to redirect her behavior. She needed to feel safe again. She needed love, support, and someone to tell her that she was special, and it is going to be okay. So how do we build strong relationships with our students?

What types of social/emotional learning strategies can we implement in our early childhood classrooms? Well, for starters, make sure they believe you are a person in their corner. That is the groundwork that must begin to happen. The following are



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five other strategies on how you can begin to build authentic and genuine relationships with your students.

1. Make home visits and phone calls. I would highly suggest you make the time to either visit where your students live or make a phone call home to their parents/guardians. When I was teaching, I would carve out a week each summer before school began to go on home visits to every student I had the correct phone number for. I would allow 15 minutes per kiddo and go to their home to meet the family and read a short book. I was not paid extra money to go on these home visits, but I felt so strongly about the power they possessed that I did them anyway! The power of the home visit is it instantly starts the groundwork for building a positive relationship with the family and the student. You can learn a lot about a student's home life in a 15-minute visit. If home visits are not something you are able to do or are comfortable doing, I would suggest making phone calls throughout the school year. Make sure the intent of the phone call is only to share something positive about the students. "Hi, Mrs. Jones. I wanted to call to let you know that Jamal has been working so hard during independent work time. He has been on task all week!" Parents and students love to receive these phone calls and typically are shocked and delighted.

2. Be authentic and genuine. This may seem like a no-brainer, but I think we as educators need a good reminder to do this sometimes. Being authentic and genuine includes smiling, making eye contact, and having social conversations with students. Allow time for students to talk to you and you talk to them. Teaching can be hard and overwhelming. We often are so concerned and worried about meeting standards and preparing for assessments that we forget this very important part of our job! We must make the time to be sensitive and aware of not only the academic needs of our students but also their emotional needs as well! They are both equally important.

3. Play games, sing songs, team build, be silly. Making the time to build a classroom community is so important! Kids love to sing with you. If you aren't a singer and that's not your style, make sure you are doing other things to build your classroom team! Play games. Be silly. Remember 10–15 years ago when the buzz phrase for educators was creating lifelong learners? Guess what promotes lifelong learners? Kids who love learning. Make school fun! If your principal comes into your classroom and sees you playing games with your



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kids make sure and tell him or her that you are creating lifelong learners. What we need more of is creative thinkers instead of cookie-cutter thinkers! Fostering an environment where your students feel safe to take risks and have fun with learning will promote creative thinking. We need to bring joy back into our kids' journeys.

4. Allow students to have ownership of the room. Here is the deal: Pinterest-inspired decorated classrooms are lovely and fun. Classroom themes are cute. However, they in no way dictate if you are an effective teacher. They simply show if you're a crafty guy or gal. I would suggest allowing a large chunk of your classroom to be open for the students to decide how the space should be used. Make sure to leave plenty of room on your walls for student work! Instead of choosing a classroom theme, you may even want to allow students the opportunity to choose a fun theme. When students feel like they are valued decision makers in the classroom, they feel proud and will take better care of the materials and the room! It is a very doable way to give the students even more ownership of the classroom and their learning. It fosters an environment that says, "This is our class" versus "This is my class."

5. Develop classroom expectations together. This one fits right along with the previous strategy. It is about giving autonomy and ownership back to your students. Eliciting their ideas and views about appropriate classroom expectations gives the students more buy-in to how the classroom should run. Now, of course, there may be some expectations that you as a teacher or as a school already have in place and those expectations are nonnegotiable. That is fine! Just make sure you are still asking your students as a group what they see as valuable and reasonable expectations in the classroom. Most likely, your students are not going to suggest a public classroom behavioral chart that is meant to shame or make kids feel bad, so please consider taking this thing down if it is hanging in your classroom. Like I mentioned at the beginning, classroom expectations are the spine. We need them, just make sure you are appropriately supporting children's social and emotional well-being too.

How does building positive and authentic relationships with your students help to promote advocacy? Why does this strategy belong in this book? Just like I mentioned earlier, relationships are the heart of your classroom. You cannot accomplish anything without a solid foundation and structure. Realizing that relationships must come first allows you to be an advocate for all other facets of



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your role as an educator. In order to truly build genuine and authentic relationships, there is one element that we must have as educators: empathy.

Empathy is different from sympathy. Sympathy is when you feel sorry for someone. Empathy is the ability to put yourself in someone else's shoes and at least attempt to know what they may be feeling or going through. When I was a classroom teacher, I was placed at a Title I school. There are many stigmas and stereotypes that come with the label Title I. When I told other teaching friends from different schools or different districts that I had been placed at this particular school serving a certain demographic, they had weird responses, "Oh! Colleen. Those kids are so lucky to have you." "I cannot even imagine working there." "I am sure it is just so hard and heartbreaking." Even some of the teachers in my building had what were to me weird ideas about the children we were serving. "We just can't compete with those scores from those schools out West because after all we are Title I." These types of comments and attitudes are dangerous. They come from a savior mentality and do not support empathetic practices.

As an educator, you have a choice. You can see yourself as a savior or a servant. Make no mistake, you cannot be a savior and have empathy. Saviors have sympathy, and there is a difference. Saviors feel sorry for the children in their classroom. Empathetic educators see themselves as servants. Being a servant means you must genuinely want to understand and practice best ways to support children and their families. It means you value relationship building. When you are a teacher, your role truly is to serve children and their families. The savior mentality needs to go. We don't need teachers in classrooms feeling sorry for kids and families. We need empathetic educators who are empowering children and believing that their role is to support and guide, not to save and pity.

Since the school I taught in was a Title I school, and pity was something that I experienced often from friends and community member toward my students. We have placed a harmful stigma around children who attend Title I schools. It is time to end this narrative. Children who attend Title I schools or Title 20 programs are capable. They are smart. They have families who love and care about them. They do not need saviors. They need champions who believe in them. It turns out that in my classroom, the lucky ones were not the kids. The truly lucky one was me for being taught lessons on empathy and realizing the difference early in my career between serving and saving. I was lucky to realize that relationship building must be at the heart center of everything I do in the classroom.



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How to Advocate for Relationship Building in Your Classroom

1. Support relationship building with research. Research and data are often the love language of leadership. If your leadership comes into your classroom and wants to know why you are playing a classroom game or question why you are spending time on a social/emotional learning activity, be prepared to support your practice with research. There are several studies that support the importance of positive teacher-to-child relationships and how those relationship influence learning outcomes. A great source to start with is from Teachstone.

According to *Effective Teacher-Child Interactions and Child Outcomes: A Summary of Research on the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) Pre-K–3rd Grade*, emotional and academic learning outcomes are directly related to the level of positive relationships teachers develop with their children: “Children also benefit academically in classrooms with higher Emotional Support by demonstrating higher achievement in language and literacy, including early reading outcomes, vocabulary knowledge and print awareness, and expressive language. Children in classrooms with higher Positive Climate exhibit higher receptive and expressive vocabulary and perform better on rhyming tasks. Finally, research has revealed the adverse effects of low levels of Emotional Support. For example, children in lower-quality preschool classrooms have lower receptive vocabularies” (Teachstone, 2017, p. 7).

2. Share what works with others. Earlier in the chapter, I gave you my top five favorite strategies for building relationships. You may have even better ideas that you are already utilizing with your students! As an advocate, it is your responsibility to share what works for children with others. Hoarding ideas to make yourself look like a hero or better than others is not conducive to being an early childhood advocate. If something is working in your classroom and you have found a strategy that is effective, invite others into your classroom to watch you implement this strategy. Inviting others in and sharing is not being braggy. It is advocating for kids. All children in your building are your children. Heck, all children in the entire world are your children. Start sharing and collaborating with your colleagues so you can help all kids. This sharing can also take place in a newsletter, via social



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media, or in teacher support groups. It does not matter how you share, just make sure if you have a really great tool to build relationships with your kids you start to spread that message.

3. Ask for help. The same is true of the opposite! If you are in need of new or improved methods of building relationships with children, do not be afraid to reach out and seek support. After about five years into my teaching experience, a huge mistake I made was failing to ask for help when I really needed it. At that point in my career, I had been labeled a “master teacher.” What a silly term! Are we ever master teachers? No. Because amazing teachers know that we never stop learning and growing, no matter what amount of experience we have in the field. But since I had been labeled as a “strong teacher,” I felt like asking for help would negate that title. The following thoughts would float through my head anytime I was in need of help and did not know how to handle a situation. Particularly if I did not know how to effectively respond to behavior management issues in my classroom. How can I ask for help if they are sending in other teachers to watch and observe me? Aren’t I supposed to know how to do this by now? What if they think I am not as good as I appear to be? I don’t want to look stupid.

Oh my goodness. What a stupid and scary place to be as a teacher. Thinking you do (or should) know everything is a huge mistake. Being a “master teacher” does not mean you are perfect. Being a strong, effective teacher means you understand that you will never know everything about teaching and believe in changing and growing. The only constant in education is everything changes. The pendulum will swing from one side to the other. The key to maintaining your sanity as a teacher is to be able to roll with the changes and reach out for help when you need it. There is truly no such thing as a “master teacher.”

Interactions shape the nature of the relationships, and the outcome of those interactions are what form the basis for the connection between teacher and child. The outcome or result of our response to a child helps them to develop an expectation for how they will be treated. Will their teacher help them feel safe and free to try new



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things? When they are unsure or upset, will their teacher notice? Will their teacher help them navigate through the problem? Or will their needs be dismissed, resulting in a lack of trust? Teachers have many, many opportunities to build relationships with positive outcomes all day every day. What is important is to slow down, get to know your children, and follow their lead for what they need.

Mary-Margaret Gardiner
Teachstone Training, Staff
46 years' experience

Relationships and interactions play a huge part in academic outcomes. If you haven't met a child's basic needs for food, clothing, and shelter, they can't focus on learning. If you haven't built a relationship with a child, they will not feel safe with you. When a child doesn't feel safe with you, they can't and won't learn. Children are very perceptive. A child as young as infant age can tell if you are being genuine in your interactions. While you are interacting with the child, even during routine care you build relationships. Some examples of interactions you might have are greeting upon arrival, talking to them during diaper changes, talking to them during feeding times, or letting parents know something interesting about their child each day at pickup.

I cared for this little boy who had a hard time adjusting to the center environment. He wanted and needed a lot of face-to-face time and would not or could not soothe himself. He would screech, not just cry but ear-piercing screams. Anyone who has been around young children knows just how taxing this can be for everyone. I just reassured him, cuddled with him every time he would become unsettled. Soon he came to realize that I was a place of comfort and would seek me out to help him calm. I used deep breathing and meditation techniques to help him soothe. It was neat to see him learn to calm himself. It took time, patience, and a lot of repeating of actions to get him to the point of self-calming, but it was totally worth every minute.

Christina Sigbornson
Lead Infant Teacher
20 years' experience

Relationships matter—period! They matter between adults living their daily lives. They



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matter between pets and their owners. They certainly matter between humans and the relationships they have with the Earth and nature. However, few relationships matter more than the relationship between a teacher and a student and the culture that exists throughout their school.

The way these relationships grow, exist, and flourish all start with the principal. I've often likened the work we do to that of the critical work of a high-performing construction crew. Educators are in the growth business: growth of their students, growth with their colleagues, and personal growth. To build relationships, and to do so well, requires a strong foundation: a crew with varied skills willing to trust, listen, and collaborate, and willing to do the work! Educators are in the people business! Our people are young people and that makes it even more important and challenging to model functional relationship building every day.

Relationships start with curiosity, intrigue, challenge, and meaningful exchanges. The best teachers I've had the privilege to work with were masters in their development of each moving relationship. Providing a strong sense of care, empathy, and love allows a student to know they can challenge themselves, take risks, and always feel supported. This equation allows for a strong sense of character and success.

In a relationship-based climate, students are allowed to build camaraderie in the classroom, giving them the autonomy to lead themselves. I strive to create a climate of leaders who can build positive relationships throughout the school building. All adults, everyone in the school, includes critical people in leadership-driven positions, such as the cafeteria manager, the secretary, the custodian, all helping to drive the purpose and the mission.

Construction sites of today consist of construction crews who are well educated in all aspects of maintaining safety. You see this as you pull up to any new construction site touting itself as a "safety zone," complete with a sign featuring the number of days without harm or accident. You can also see this in the gear the workers wear from hard hats to neon-colored shirts.

In the "learning zone" of any school building there are similar attributes ranging from a visible security guard, to doorbells on main doors, to walkie-talkies with teachers and students outside for recess. These safety measures are certainly important, but most significant is the built-in security feature of a trusting relationship that can make all students feel safe.

The "KEE" to staff welcoming students as they begin their day is being Kind, Energetic,



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Excerpted from *Advocacy for Early Childhood Educators*

and Empathetic. The staff assigned as morning greeters help set the tone in a highly visible and intentional way: “How are you doing,” “Have a wonderful day,” “Ooh, I love your outfit.” These are the beginning statements necessary to bring a quick, special moment to students to start their day.

As the days pass in the beginning of the year, we encourage all staff to use the 2 × 10 strategy of relationship building—two minutes per day for 10 days straight to get to know our students at a deeper level—and then using the information gained by greeting the student with specific inquiries to strengthen the student’s sense of trust, care, and security. Plenty of research underscores that just one person, “a beacon of hope,” consistently caring for and developing a meaningful relationship with a student is a game changer. This is especially true when life outside of school is difficult. These relationships help students become grounded in hope and possibility.

Schools are the epicenters of building strong, personal relationships. At our foundation, we are building learners, dreamers, mathematicians, readers, problem solvers, artists, and citizens, while simultaneously modeling for students how to build strong relationships, empathy, resilience, trust, and friendships.

Greg Eversoll
Principal of Special Projects
29.5 years’ experience, 8.5 as a teacher

It is so important for the young brain to have joy in learning. The young brain is continually seeking safe and healthy relationships. These kinds of relationships actually open the brain for learning. If students do not like you, they will not trust you, and if they do not trust you, they will not learn from you. Rita Pierson said, “Every child deserves a champion: an adult who never gives up on them, who understands the power of connection and insists they become the best they can possibly be.”

Hal Roberts
Retired Superintendent
38 years’ experience, 32 years in leadership

Data talks! According to an Andrew Sokatch TED Talk, research suggests that if we



ADVOCACY: CLASSROOM EXPECTATIONS ARE IMPORTANT, BUT RELATIONSHIPS ARE KING

Excerpted from *Advocacy for Early Childhood Educators*

teach only academics, then we are giving children, our future, only half of what they need to be successful. This staggering statistic takes my mind straight to the Liberty Mutual television commercial that goes something like this:

You got a new car and owned it for four years. You named it Brad. And you loved Brad. Then you totaled him. When you got the check from your insurance company, sadly it only covered $\frac{3}{4}$ of the damages. What do they want you to do, drive $\frac{3}{4}$ of a car?

I envision employers asking us what we want them to do with only two thirds of an employee.

If we want to send passionate leaders to lead us wholeheartedly into the future, then we must teach the whole child from the start: mind, body, soul. We now know that what we used to call soft skills are the success skills that employers are looking for and, in fact, hiring for. Kids deserve to head into the workforce equipped and empowered to be the best World Changers they can be.

I love talking with our youngest learners about emotions and feelings to help foster self-awareness that, with lots and lots of practice, will lead to self-regulation and eventually to social awareness. We stop books when we're reading to discuss how the characters are feeling. Not only does this nurture SEL competencies, but it also elevates empathy, that glorious virtue that will help move us from "me" to "we." We made our ceiling tiles into Feeling Tiles to help give the youngest children a picture reference when their feelings overwhelmed and words wouldn't come. We sang about our feelings. We danced through our feelings. We processed our feelings mindfully walking around our Peace Labyrinth. We kept Feelings Journals so that we could draw and write about our feelings. We told Social Stories to spotlight our feelings; we role-played to get practice self-regulating our emotions. And, don't miss this: We reiterated over and over again that feelings are not good or bad, but rather easy or hard, big or small, comfortable or uncomfortable, so we let them visit as they chose to, and learned how to manage them as long as they needed to stay.

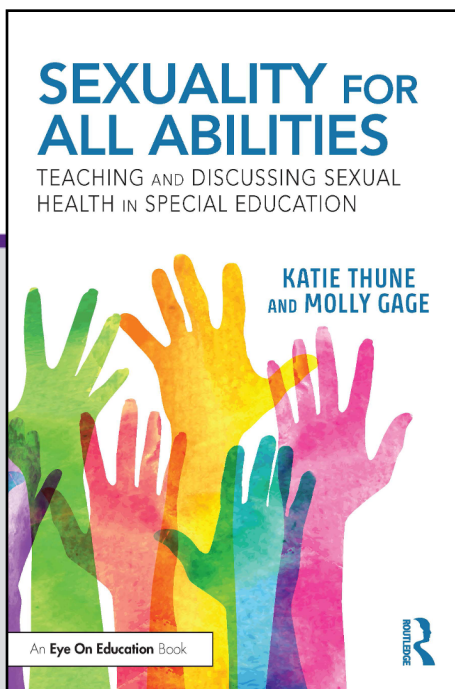
Barbara Gruener, B.S., M.S., M.S.
Counselor, Speaker, Author of *What's Under Your Cape?*
36 years' experience



CHAPTER

2

MANAGING PARENT ATTITUDES



This chapter is excerpted from

Sexuality for All Abilities: Teaching and Discussing Sexual Health in Special Education by Katie Thune and Molly Gage

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Excerpted from *Sexuality for All Abilities*

Given the foregoing material, it should be hard to argue with the common-sense observation that every person—regardless of age or ability—can benefit from receiving straightforward lessons in healthy relationships, safe and appropriate boundaries, personal safety, private and public behaviors and places, puberty, dating (or crushes), human reproduction, pregnancy prevention, risks associated with sexual activity, gender, and sexual orientation. Even without the argument I make in this book, classroom experience has already taught (or will teach) many teachers and educators that in the special education classroom, lessons in comprehensive sex education respond to students' needs, help advocate for students, and lay the foundation by which students learn to advocate for themselves.

As I discussed in Chapter 1 and at the end of Chapter 2 of *Sexuality for All Abilities*, however, teachers and educators face a number of obstacles when seeking to deliver these lessons. There are the widespread and seemingly insurmountable social and ideological obstacles, particularly as they relate to the myth of asexuality, the ignored curriculum, the hidden curriculum, and the general belief that so many things would be so much easier if we didn't have to deal with the messy gray area of sexuality, particularly as it is expressed among people with developmental disabilities. There are also the logistical obstacles: Teachers and educators of students with developmental disabilities are already responsible for so much that it can feel almost impossible to integrate another curricular component into the day or week.

In addition to these obstacles, however, community-based obstacles must also be navigated. What I mean by “community-based obstacles” are the sometimes-intangible obstacles, manifested yet again through the myth of asexuality, that are commonly put in place by administrators and, often more frequently, parents or caregivers. Unfortunately, it's not always enough for teachers and educators to understand the myth of asexuality and work to just “get comfortable” delivering lessons in comprehensive sex education to students in the special education classroom. Because few teachers and educators have been given instruction on or preparation for teaching this material, and because even fewer teachers and educators have been given opportunities for practicing delivering this material in the classroom or to individual students, teachers and educators who want to integrate the material into their curriculum must often do the work of advocating deliberately and loudly for the inclusion of these lessons in the first place.



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In this chapter, I provide support for teachers and educators who are ready (or want to be ready) to engage in this kind of advocacy work. Consequently, I discuss some of the most common administrative and community-based challenges faced by teachers and educators when they begin to prepare to implement lessons in comprehensive sex education in the special education classroom. I also discuss the steps teachers and educators should follow to help ensure that their administration is fully on board for and supportive of providing these lessons and this education, including how to promote parental buy-in, integrate parental support for classroom activities and for student work, and how to promote parental involvement in material that is just as crucial to student education as reading and math.

* * *

Teachers and educators of students with developmental disabilities likely know better than anyone that full and wide-ranging support can be a game changer for students. I remember working with a student, a young man with a developmental disability, whose mother was very hesitant to allow him to join my classes on healthy relationships and sexuality education in Highland Friendship Club, a community club for young adults with disabilities. We held these classes often, but she never signed her son up, even though teachers consistently (and persistently) recommended that he take part. Initially, she felt that her son would never benefit from the classes the way that the other young adults in the club would. She felt he wasn't ready for learning topics in comprehensive sex education and wouldn't understand it.

She eventually decided to join a combination class we offered in which students' caregivers were asked to participate in the course with the students. This parent surprised herself by loving the class. She told me that she wasn't sure what she was expecting, but she hadn't realized that certain topics, such as asking permission before touching, how to say no, how to tell someone if something makes you uncomfortable, and safe boundaries, were going to be part of the lessons. She said she didn't even think of these topics as part of "sex ed." While she was surprised to realize that she really enjoyed the class, she was even more surprised to realize that her son loved the class, too.

After she told me how much she and her son both learned, she became one of our biggest and best advocates in our efforts to provide sex education for individuals with developmental disabilities at Highland Friendship Club. She now says that



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sexuality awareness and education for individuals with developmental disabilities cannot be a “one and done” program—all people change over time, and this is why we need to continue keeping the dialogue open, ensuring that comprehensive sex education is an ongoing project.

Reluctant Parents

We all know smart, thoughtful, and open parents who express some of these same reservations about sex education. Some of us probably had those parents. Some of us may even suspect that we are those parents. These are parents who, like almost all parents, want the best for their children but who, when it comes to matters of sexual health and sex education, are embarrassed and unsure. Perhaps these parents are worried that a teacher will talk about issues that go against their family beliefs or traditions. Perhaps these parents are worried that a more advanced student will bring up a subject that the rest of the students aren't ready to hear or learn about. Perhaps they're worried that rather than another student, the teacher or educator will bring up an issue or a situation that they believe their own child has never thought or heard about before.

Their discomfort isn't much different from that faced by teachers and educators when they first learn to deliver topics in a comprehensive sex education curriculum to their students. The discomfort is widespread for reasons I've already discussed, and it's one of the reasons that, when I run a workshop or conference breakout session, I often ask teachers and educators to first discuss their own experiences learning sex education as a child or young adult. When I ask teachers and educators to reflect on their sex education, they often recall:

- Parents admonishing them: “Don't get pregnant or we'll kick you out of the house!” This sentiment is frequently shared by women. Most women remember that although their parents repeatedly warned them to under no circumstances get pregnant, their moms and dads never provided any information about how a woman gets (and can avoid getting) pregnant. The women I talk to at workshops often remember feeling a low-level but constant anxiety that they would somehow end up pregnant and pushed out of their parents' house.
- Punitive lessons from religious, often Catholic, schools. Many of the adults with whom I work have deep-seated discomfort with sex, and they often identify that discomfort with a Catholic upbringing that taught students that if they had sex before marriage they would go to hell.



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- Information inappropriately shared. In every workshop I run, one or more adults recalls an incident of uncomfortable oversharing, typically on the part of their teachers at the time. A standard example is one recently shared by a workshop participant who remembered a health teacher telling his class to avoid having sex or they'd end up with herpes like he did. This information, shared in this way, serves to scare students—but not necessarily from having sex. More likely it alienates students and scares them out of considering adults to be informed guides that they can consult in their own pursuit of knowledge.

Parents' reservations often come from a similar history. As with the teachers and educators I train, some parents remember confusing, punitive, uninformed, or just generally uncomfortable or inappropriate experiences around sex education. Frequently, they may recall that they did not receive any sort of sex education; in these cases, they may feel that although they weren't provided with formal lessons, they learned enough along the way and turned out just fine.

When I reflect back on my own experience, I see something similar but also a little different. Unlike many of my workshop attendees, I had pretty supportive parents: There were always books around, and I knew that any questions I had would be answered. But of course, I never had any questions. Middle schoolers rarely do—or, at least, they rarely have questions they want their parents to answer. Consequently, my parents and I rarely talked about sex or sexuality.

The twist in my story is that my dad was a middle school health teacher. Luckily (from my perspective at that age), I went to a different middle school, so I didn't have to sit in the classroom while my dad taught sex education to me and my peers. Of course, once I got to high school, a lot of my new friends had my dad for sex education, and they liked to bring this to my attention as often as possible. For a very quiet and shy ninth-grader, this was mortifying. What I learned from my experience is that young people, even when they know that their parents are a good source of information, may have trouble approaching them with their questions. Young people may feel shy or embarrassed, or they may be uncomfortable about their own questions and about what their parents might think if they ask them. I also learned that unless parents are proactive partners in providing their children with a sex education, most questions will go unasked and, usually, unanswered.

Unfortunately, even when parents are educated and informed and open to discussions about sex and sexuality, they are rarely proactive. In fact, few students



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actually receive lessons, even very casual ones, in comprehensive sex education from their parents (Ballan, 2001). While some parents purposefully avoid talking about sex with their children, many parents inadvertently sidestep the subject (Angera, Brookins-Fisher, & Inungu, 2008; Ashcraft & Murray, 2017). Most typically, older children and adolescents seldom seek out their parents to discuss questions and concerns, and their silence encourages parents to believe that their children are uninterested in or unaware of sexual issues; consequently, topics in sex end up undiscussed (Angera, Brookins-Fisher, & Inungu, 2008). The silence, which is problematic on its own, may also work to reinforce the oft-expressed belief among parents that sex education will “put ideas” into their children’s heads (Ashcraft & Murray, 2017).

Some readers may feel that this is a retrograde attitude, but I am here to attest to its continued relevance: A parent recently shared with me that she didn’t allow her son to be in a puberty/sex education class in fourth grade because she thought it was too early for him to learn this information. Rather than asking her son about specific questions or proactively providing him with what she judged to be age-appropriate information in her home, she unilaterally decided that fourth grade was too early for this information, and so she did not provide it. We can all understand and empathize with parents who feel this way. I am a parent, too, and I know that it’s hard to let your child grow up and begin to make their own choices and decisions. But as a teacher and educator, I can’t help but wonder about that fourth-grader. He was not allowed to participate in a class where he could have learned meaningful information about sex and sexuality, and he also did not receive information about sex and sexuality from his family at home. His mom may not recognize it, but by default she has made her child completely reliant on the ignored and hidden curricula (and on the media, too) to deliver this information: She has removed herself, even if inadvertently, from being considered by her son to be a trusted and knowledgeable source of information about sex and healthy sexuality.

Another parent I encountered over the past year has a 38-year-old daughter with Down syndrome. Her daughter lives in a group home in a small town and is very active in the community. I was invited to the group home to teach a class on healthy relationships and boundaries. Before the day of class arrived, the parent called me to discuss many concerns, especially her concern that I was going to teach her daughter how babies are made. I told her that although our program is called “Sexuality for All Abilities,” in this particular class, I would be focusing on



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healthy and unhealthy relationships as well as safe and unsafe boundaries. She shared that her daughter struggles with appropriate boundaries often and felt that this would be a good class for her. However, she also worried that her daughter would nonetheless learn how babies are made. She felt that because her daughter had never asked how babies were made—despite the fact that her brothers all had children—that it was inappropriate for me to teach her about it. Ultimately, she withheld her daughter from the class, and according to the group-home staff, the 38-year-old woman continues to struggle with boundaries.

Unsupportive Parents

In addition to well-meaning parents who nonetheless avoid or sidestep what they might consider difficult or uncomfortable conversations about sex and sexuality, teachers and educators also know that there are parents who are rigorously opposed to teaching topics in comprehensive sex education.

While these parents are often in the limelight, they are in fact part of a tiny minority. You don't just have to take my word for it. While some parents are opposed to the idea of sex education (an idea that is typically based on their idea of what sex education looks like rather than what it actually is), research shows that in actuality most parents overwhelmingly support sex education in middle and high schools, even if they do so only passively. According to some reports, this support is expressed by 93 percent of parents (Kantor & Levitz, 2017). The support is comprehensive and crosses cultural, religious, and political lines. Kantor and Levitz's research (2017), for example, explicitly accounted for the so-called political divide between Democrats and Republicans on matters of sex education. According to their work, a large majority of parents of all political stripes in all states want middle school and high school students to be taught topics in healthy relationships, birth control, STIs, and sexual orientation.

The widespread belief that providing sex education in the schools is a really controversial topic and that many parents are rigorously opposed to the curriculum is not true. In fact, it's just another myth. According to advocacy groups like Sexuality Information and Education Council of the United States (SIECUS), this myth is most often perpetuated by an infinitesimally small minority of abstinence-only-until-marriage proponents. Unfortunately, the myth—much like the myth of asexuality and its application to people with disabilities—is a powerful one. It animates the wide-spread belief that there are two equally weighted sides to the “debate” on whether or not to provide sex education in schools.



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In reality, there are not two equally weighted sides to this debate. There is, in fact, hardly a “debate” at all. Most parents—and, according to research, perhaps almost all—want their children to be taught sex education in middle and high school (Ito et al., 2006). Many parents would likely support their elementary school-aged children and perhaps even preschool-aged children learning lessons in healthy relationships, boundaries, and selected issues on consent. To help legitimate and broaden this view, teachers and educators who move forward on integrating a comprehensive sex education into their classrooms must work to communicate what a comprehensive sex education actually is. We must also communicate that a high-quality comprehensive sex education program seeks not only to educate students with facts but also to aid and empower students to continuously check in with their families, communities, and their own values regarding sexual health and sexuality.

Of course, because the extremely vocal but extremely small minority has dominated the conversation, teachers and educators sometimes feel that we can’t simply or candidly talk about topics in sex education in schools, that we can’t provide students with information about STIs or HIV, that we can’t explain methods of birth control or teach students how to use a condom, that we can’t really address complicated but ever more pertinent issues surrounding consent. We often feel we can’t do so much of the teaching that we might otherwise do out of respect for (or fear of) the other side’s beliefs.

While it’s important to respect differing opinions, I wrote this book in part to point out the fact that supporters of comprehensive sex education are part of a huge (if sometimes quiet and passive) majority. Even some of the most conservative-leaning states in the nation (including North and South Carolina, Texas, and Utah) overwhelmingly support teaching students about birth control, condoms, access to contraception, and other topics in a comprehensive sex education (Kantor & Levitz, 2017). As far back as 2004, an NPR/Kaiser Family/Kennedy School poll announced that “the debate over whether to have sex education in American schools is over” (Henry J. Kaiser Family Foundation, 2004). As recently as 2018, a study of likely voters found that 73 per- cent of respondents believed that the federal government should fund evidence-based programs that prevent teen pregnancy (Planned Parenthood, 2018).

* * *

There is no crowd of angry parents poised to beat down classroom doors at the



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thought of schools delivering topics in a comprehensive sex education curriculum. In all likelihood, the crowd consists of only one or two worried parents.

Therefore, we can discuss these topics without granting the tiny minority an outside influence in the discussion. In fact, we must exercise our power as teachers and educators to ensure that all conversations about teaching lessons in comprehensive sex education remain fact-based instead of ideological. If instead we cede control of the discussion to the minority, we cede control of the narrative, and we continue to contribute (if inadvertently) to the current culture of discomfort and its concomitant silence on matters of sex and sexual health.

Unfortunately, in 2018, the federal administration empowered this culture of discomfort by increasing funding for abstinence-based curricula. Given the evidence showing that abstinence-only education does nothing to stop unwanted pregnancies, or STIs and HIV and fails completely to give students guidance about consent or sexual assault, the federal government's decision reflects not evidence-based reality but the politicization of sex education (Stranger-Hall & Hall, 2011; Santelli et al., 2017). In this way, the culture of discomfort perpetuates our students' undereducation. According to SIECUS, relying on information from the CDC, "only 38% of all high schools and 14% of middle schools in the United States provide all 19 topics identified by the Centers for Disease Control and Prevention as critical sex education topics" (SIECUS, 2018). This, despite the reality that a majority of parents want their children to learn the pertinent information.

Currently, students do not receive enough information on topics of healthy sexuality. While the few parents I referenced earlier often repeat the argument that student should receive the sex education they require at home, research, as I've also pointed out, indicates that the information parents provide is not sufficient (Hall, Sales, Komro, & Santelli, 2016; Angera, Brookins-Fisher, & Inungu, 2008). In "The State of Sex Education in the United States," researchers wrote that one of the reasons for the "insufficient state of sex education" is that "parental-provided information" is not specific enough or comprehensive enough to compensate for the gaps that currently exist in most classroom-based sex education curricula (Hall, Sales, Komro, & Santelli, 2016). Parents clearly, if only implicitly, recognize this: It may be one reason that so many parents say they want federally funded evidence-based sex education.

Comprehensive Sex Education as Advocacy

Of course, teachers and educators of students with developmental and other



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disabilities know very well that what goes for the general classroom does not always go for the special education classroom. That's why, when it comes to teaching topics in comprehensive sex education to the special education classroom, the stakes for overcoming community-based obstacles (such as a culture of discomfort) can feel a lot higher. Sometimes it seems that in the special education classroom, the myth of asexuality and the myth of a major sex education controversy combine to create a super-myth prohibiting teachers and educators from providing their students with information they know students need. Its pervasive power makes real discussions about sex education—much less any implementation of comprehensive sex education—feel almost impossible.

However, I've said this before and I'll say it again: Just because something feels impossible doesn't mean it actually is impossible. In Chapter 1, I referenced another minority group—an increasingly vocal minority of parents, teachers, and advocates who recognize their children's right to sexual expression. This group recognizes that an important part of teachers' and educators' work consists of dispelling the myth of asexuality and speaking truth to the power of controversy. We know that equipping students in the special education classroom with information, particularly with information they need but often cannot access anywhere else, will help them be less vulnerable to sexual exploitation and to assault.

Further, we believe that it should not be controversial to state that all students need to be educated and able to practice participating in healthy relationships, recognizing safe and appropriate boundaries, advocating for their personal safety, engaging in appropriate private and public behaviors and recognizing private and public places, dealing with the interpersonal dynamics of dating, grasping the workings of puberty and human reproduction, understanding how to prevent pregnancy (and how to mitigate the risks associated with sexual activity), and understanding gender and sexual orientation. It should not be controversial to state that all students make better choices when they are educated. Given the relative clarity of these statements, teachers and educators can make a strong case that delivering lessons on topics in comprehensive sex education advocates for our students in the special education classroom and helps our students advocate for themselves.

* * *

I immediately recognized the power of this kind of advocacy when I taught my first



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class on sex education to adults with developmental disabilities through Highland Friendship Club. I knew that many of these adults had completely missed out on any kind of sex education, either because they were never given the opportunity to participate in classes on sex education or because they didn't have the opportunity to learn the basics of sex education somewhere else along the way. I therefore worked with a local community organization that supported adults with and without disabilities. With the help of a local consultant who had taught sex education to individuals with disabilities, we created the class for special education teachers, parents, group-home staff, other caregivers, and self-advocates. The class was titled SAFE: Sexuality Around Families/Environments. We focused on boundaries and healthy relationships and then eventually moved on to changes in the body, human reproduction, and dating. These classes had a ways to go to be comprehensive, but our hope was that SAFE would act as not only a supplement to what was being taught in the schools but would also be a starting point for further, more comprehensive discussion.

Many of our participants provided positive feedback, but one adult stands out. She was very quiet in class and seemed only somewhat engaged with the material. However, after the class, her mother emailed to say that every week on the ride home from class, her daughter told her all about the class and how the different elements of the lesson applied to her own life. She ended her email by noting that she felt her daughter learned so much from this course and increased her self-advocacy skills, too.

A Team-Based Approach

I received so much positive feedback from my students in the SAFE class that several years after I began teaching it, I decided to bring it into the middle school where I taught at the time. Because our school had never offered a class like this to special education students, the administrators and parents were hesitant. To make my case about the relevance of the course's lessons to the lives of our students, I assembled a team of teachers, educators, and support staff who believed that our students needed and would benefit from receiving lessons in comprehensive sex education. We needed permission from the administration to offer our class, but this was easy to secure after we provided research that showed that the rate of sexual assault was alarmingly high for people with disabilities. We also needed the support of parents, so we created a thorough opt-in letter that we sent home to parents, asking them for permission for their child to participate in



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the class.

Some parents had questions. For example, parents asked, “How do you know that my child will understand this information?”; “Are you sure my child needs to learn this information?”; “How am I supposed to support my child with this information after the class is finished?” However, we quickly realized that these parents were simply anxious about what they perceived as a new door opening in the lives of their children. Most were in fact overwhelmingly thrilled that their child was going to be able to participate in a class that featured the SAFE curriculum. To communicate the broad range of material and to show students and parents how many people could offer support in the topics under discussion, the school social worker, school nurse, and other teachers participated in delivering the course, making guest appearances on select days. The widespread participation showed students just how big their support circle was.

We knew how important parent participation would be to providing students with a sound foundation in sex education, so we worked hard to promote their participation. We frequently sent home letters to parents with student homework. The letters and homework often included discussion questions and activities that parents could do with their children or that they could use as a springboard to further, less formal discussion. The homework typically included a section about the topic for the next class session, followed by a space for parents or students to write down their questions. Our questions covered a range of by-now familiar issues, such as, “Is it okay to masturbate in the living room?”; “Do I have to give people hugs even if I don’t want to?”; or “How do I know if it’s a healthy friendship?” This was a productive activity for parents and students because it allowed concerns at home to be discussed in a school setting, where students (and parents) could benefit from the different authority granted to teachers and educators by their students. While SAFE taught the students valuable information, it taught the group of educators of which I was a part valuable information, too. It taught us that wide support of a new program is crucial to its success. It taught us that approaching a new program with the help of a team can both signal and solicit support. It taught us that although our school had never before offered this kind of course, our community wanted and benefited from it.

* * *

This kind of team-based approach to teaching, in which the team absolutely includes parents, will be very familiar to teachers and educators in the special



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education classroom or teachers and educators of students with developmental disabilities. In fact, even teachers and educators who are new to teaching students with developmental disabilities know that special education teachers typically deal with a far different level of parental involvement than do teachers in general classrooms. The parents of students with developmental disabilities are often extraordinarily involved in the education of students. This involvement is welcome and necessary because it helps to ensure that each student in the special education classroom receives the accommodation and the education they require (and that federal law mandates they receive), and because it helps to ensure that elements of their education are implemented and reinforced at home.

As teachers and educators begin to brainstorm approaches to integrating topics in comprehensive sex education into the special education classroom, they should consider this broadly team-based approach to be a major asset. The approach helps foster a close relationship between teachers and parents by involving teachers in issues operating in the back-ground at home and by ensuring parental involvement in pedagogy and curriculum. This is an incredibly helpful reinforcement tool, especially when it comes to topics in sex education, which often exist in a gray area that can be challenging for some students (with or without developmental disabilities) to navigate. Of course, the close relationship between teachers and parents can also present an obstacle, particularly when a teacher or teaching team must operate within the context of the super-myth of asexuality and the so-called controversy surrounding sex education. In this more antagonistic environment, teachers may face a much higher proportion of skeptical parents or of parents who are resistant or even opposed to the idea of a comprehensive sex education curriculum. Teachers and educators will also certainly face the reality that families have different backgrounds, beliefs, and values and that those inform many choices about education that families make.

Clear Communication Is Crucial

In my experience, opposition to providing lessons in a comprehensive sex education is often due, at its root, to a lack of clear communication. Just like teachers, parents and families have many and sometimes competing draws on their time. Teachers and educators can do their best to provide parents with timely and clear information, but that doesn't always mean that the information is received. Further, Maura Brink, a principal of a St. Paul, Minnesota elementary school, says that even when there is clear communication, it can sometimes be confounded by



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differing expectations. When it comes to the topic of sex education, a few parents want zero discussion of the topic at the elementary level, and others would prefer that the school take the lead on all topics related to sex education. Maura says that schools can often overcome this challenge by finding a balance between the differing sets of expectations and by clearly explaining, to all team members and especially to parents, what it means to teach topics in comprehensive sex education at each level. You will be unsurprised at this point to hear that some parents may hear “sex education” and “elementary school” and form an opinion without realizing that at this level, topics in comprehensive sex education typically focus on healthy relationships and boundaries.

Clear communication starts, as it did in the example of the SAFE program offered earlier, with the introduction of a comprehensive sex education curriculum to the school administration. This type of curriculum is not in place at most schools and is not in place in most special education classrooms. It can therefore be introduced to a school and to the special education classroom in a variety of ways. Sometimes, an administrator hears about the curriculum at a workshop and brings it to the school. Sometimes, a parent pushes for the curriculum after hearing about it elsewhere. But often, the curriculum is introduced to a school by a teacher or educator like you.

Teachers and educators can approach introducing a comprehensive sex education in several ways. First, because of the importance of their school-based team, most teachers will want to check in with their team members to talk about integrating elements of a comprehensive sex education curriculum into their lesson plans. Initial conversations may be difficult, partly because of the cultural currents informing the idea that students in the special education classroom do not have needs related to sexual health and partly because while you have read this book and are therefore prepared to have difficult conversations about sometimes taboo subjects, your team members have not. They may not feel the same way about the importance of delivering lessons in comprehensive sex education, regardless of their classroom experience. It can be a difficult balance between advocating for students' rights to comprehensive sex education and meeting your coworkers where they are with their own understanding of and feelings about sexual health. But this is an important conversation to have. It's often the first step in acknowledging that students in the special education classroom are in fact sexual beings and do in fact require an education commensurate with that reality. Further, when team members collectively recognize the value of a comprehensive sex



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education for the students on their case load, it enables team members to support, reinforce, and build on each other's work. When, for example, a student displays inappropriate classroom behavior, such as touching themselves or hugging others without their consent, any team member can use nonshaming language to reiterate why that is not appropriate classroom behavior. They can also use the same language to remind the student about the differences between private and public behaviors and places.

To first bring up this topic to your team, consider adding it to an agenda at a meeting. Create a few talking points; for example, it's always helpful to start by sharing the unacceptably high rate of sexual assault for people with disabilities. It's also helpful to point out how difficult it can be for some students to understand appropriate boundaries and healthy relationships. Most likely other members of your team have noticed similar issues or have similar feelings and will want to talk through what it could look like to address some of these issues in the school setting.

Building Administrative Support

With a critical mass of the teaching team on board, teachers can begin to build administrative buy-in. This may start with the school principal or perhaps the special education director or coordinator. Teachers can approach their administrator with an argument about the importance of integrating elements of a comprehensive sex education into the special education classroom when that argument is grounded in evidence. When I worked as a health teacher for the special education classroom and when I consult with districts today, I often share a letter from the Minnesota Health Commissioner, Jan K. Malcolm (see the following figure). The letter describes the benefits of providing a comprehensive sex education curriculum early and reinforcing it throughout middle and high school. It also describes best practices for teaching a comprehensive sex education, including centering the curriculum on a "positive, healthy definition of sexual health" and ensuring its delivery "by trained staff who are comfortable with the subject matter and supportive of the program" (Malcolm, 2017).



MANAGING PARENT ATTITUDES

Excerpted from *Sexuality for All Abilities*



Protecting, Maintaining and Improving the Health of All Minnesotans

October 2019

Dear Colleague:

The Minnesota Department of Health works to protect, maintain and improve the health of all Minnesotans and sexual health is an important aspect of overall health. MDH advances sexual health in the state through several approaches, one of which is comprehensive sexuality education. I am writing to express my support for comprehensive sexuality education as a key component of sexual health promotion. Sexuality education is part of a public health approach that is evidence-informed and multi-faceted with a focus on prevention and health equity.

Human sexuality is lifelong and consists of more than just the absence of disease and unintended pregnancy. It is a normal part of development and a lifelong process. Developmentally appropriate comprehensive sexuality education provided by parents, schools, pediatricians, and other professionals helps adolescents as well as adults develop a healthy sexuality and make positive, informed, and safe choices about healthy relationships, responsible sexual activity, and reproductive health throughout the lifespan.¹

Comprehensive sexuality education includes anatomy and physiology, puberty and adolescent development, identity, pregnancy and reproduction, contraception, disease prevention, healthy relationships, and personal safety and protection.² Comprehensive sexuality education not only increases knowledge, it also teaches important skills.

Teens who learn “how to say no to sex” in a formal setting are significantly less likely to experience teen pregnancy than teens with no formal sex education and 50 percent less likely to experience pregnancy than teens who participated in abstinence-only programs.³ The most effective comprehensive sexuality education programs effectively include messages about abstinence. Programs that include information on both abstinence and contraception and condoms result in an average of 35 percent reduction in STD incidence.⁴

Two-thirds of comprehensive sexuality education programs have positive behavioral effects, with an average of 12 percent reduction in sexual activity, a 25 percent reduction of unprotected sexual activity, 31 percent reduction in prevalence of STDs, a 13 percent increase in the use of protection, as well as an 11 percent reduction in pregnancies.⁵

Best practice evidence suggests that an effective sexuality education program is:

- Medically accurate and bias free
- Conducted within the context of a broader Coordinated School Health Program
- Initiated early, before students reach the age when they may adopt risky behaviors, and reinforced throughout middle and high school
- Focused on the risk behaviors that are most likely to result in HIV infection, other sexually transmitted infections, and unintended pregnancy
- Centered on a positive, healthy definition of sexual health rather than one that focuses only on avoiding negative outcomes
- Based on proven theories of behavior change, with an emphasis on instructional methods that foster functional knowledge and develop prevention skills within environments that reinforce the knowledge and skills taught

An equal opportunity employer.



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- Of sufficient duration for students to acquire the knowledge and skills needed to adopt healthy behaviors
- Implemented with consistency as approved
- Delivered by trained staff who are comfortable with the subject matter and supportive of the program^{6,7}

Minnesota parents also support comprehensive sexuality education, 89 percent think that sexuality education should include information about abstinence and prevention of pregnancy and sexually transmitted diseases.⁸ Over 60 percent of teachers in Minnesota believe sexuality education is one of the most important topics they teach.⁹

Beyond preventing STDs and unintended pregnancies, sexuality education can help improve academic success; prevent sexual abuse, dating violence, and bullying; help youth develop healthier relationships; delay sexual initiation; advance gender equity; and reduce sexual health disparities among lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, and queer (LGBTQ) youth.^{10,11}

Finally, comprehensive sexuality education can decrease costs to taxpayers. It is estimated that teen childbearing in the U.S. costs taxpayers (federal, state, and local) at least \$9.4 billion annually. In 2010, public spending for unintended pregnancies in Minnesota totaled an estimated \$333 million, and teen childbearing cost \$146 million.¹² Investing in education and access to reproductive health care are more efficient uses of these funds.

The enclosed document provides more detail with references supporting the need for comprehensive sexuality education and overall sexual health promotion.

Sexual health is complex and closely connected to many other aspects of health, not just during reproductive years, but throughout the lifespan. Comprehensive sexuality education promotes sexual health during and beyond adolescence and is an investment in the overall health of all Minnesotans.

Sincerely,

Jan K. Malcolm

Commissioner

Minnesota Department of Health

PO Box 64975

St. Paul, MN 55164-0975

www.health.state.mn.us

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When the administration is persuaded by the argument, they can contribute to a letter for parents. This letter, which will name the administrative point person in addition to other contacts (for example, it can include names and contact information for the director of special education and a district social worker), explains to parents the upcoming curriculum and the reasons for adopting it. It also typically includes the administrative point person's contact information for further discussion or the direction to email with any questions.

For some teachers and educators, particularly those who are experienced in navigating district bureaucracy, a step-by-step approach may feel unnecessary. However, by proceeding intentionally, teachers and educators build a strong foundation for clearly and expressly communicating the district's recognition of the importance of teaching and fostering sexual health among all students. Additionally, a letter that shares the new curriculum and the reasoning supporting it helps to communicate to parents that a comprehensive sex education is proactive, thoughtful, and above all, a district-supported endeavor. This reinforces the continuity of education for all students, and it can help encourage parents to reinforce a similar spirit of education at home.

This intentional approach also extends to following up on the district's show of support by providing parents with further information. How teachers and educators approach parents will depend on several factors. One of the most important factors is a teacher's caseload. While some teachers have the same eight to 12 students on their caseload for several years (making it much more likely to get to know individual parents better), other teachers might have upwards of 50 students on their caseload. Teachers with smaller caseloads will be able to touch base with parents over the phone—often at the beginning of the school year—and can introduce the focus on comprehensive sex education during that time. Teachers with bigger caseloads will not always be able to touch base with every parent. However, every teacher should strive, as we do in every other aspect of educating students in the special education classroom, to communicate proactively.

Building Parental Support

Regardless of the number of students on a caseload, before beginning to teach topics in comprehensive sex education in the special education classroom, teachers should email or send a letter home introducing the topic. This letter is from the teacher or educator and offers a reminder of the administrator's commendation, provides a preview of the materials, and includes a message to



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Excerpted from *Sexuality for All Abilities*

ensure that parents know whom to contact with replies.

Sample Letter

Dear Parents and Caregivers,

Sexuality education is a lifelong process of acquiring information, developing healthy relationships, forming attitudes and values about self, relationships, and intimacy. For students with disabilities, sexuality education may be of particular importance. The rate of sexual assault for those with disabilities is much higher than for those without. We know that one key to preventing sexual assault and developing healthy relationships is through sexual education. Unfortunately, many students with disabilities have not received sexual education and have not learned a lot of this information.

We will soon begin our sexual health course and will be using materials from Mad Hatter Wellness, *Sexuality for All Abilities*. Topics covered in our lessons include:

- Healthy Relationships
- Safe and Appropriate Touch
- Personal Safety
- Private and Public Behaviors and Places
- Dating
- Puberty
- Human Reproduction
- Pregnancy Prevention
- Risks Associated with Sexual Activity
- Gender and Sexual Orientation

Sexual health is complex and closely connected to many other aspects of health throughout life. Comprehensive sexuality education programs have positive behavioral effects including a reduction in sexual assault. If you want more information about this curriculum, please visit www.sexualityforallabilities.com or contact us with any questions/ concerns you may have.

Sincerely, Katie Thune

While even in the special education classroom, worried parents are in the minority,



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Excerpted from *Sexuality for All Abilities*

it is important to document the communications that have occurred, whether phone calls or letters, whether from the administrator or from you, the teacher or educator. I remember an incident that occurred when I began teaching lessons on puberty in the special education classroom. One parent was particularly upset that her daughter was learning about puberty in my class rather than at home. This parent vented her irritation and frustration on Facebook. Another parent who knew both me and the unhappy parent saw the post. She told me that comments ranged from support for early lessons on puberty and the importance of schools providing these lessons, to comments expressing anger about schools delivering lessons on puberty. The students in this class were in fourth through eighth grades—most of them had already begun going through puberty and all of them (including her daughter) had lots to share during class about their experiences, as well as appropriate questions.

Because I kept a record of the letter I had sent home in the weeks prior that alerted parents to the upcoming puberty unit and suggesting that they call me with concerns, I was able to share my concerns with the principal and point to a record of prior communications. Together, with the help of the unhappy parent, we were able to confirm that the letter had been sent home; it simply had not left the student's backpack. Although this is an example of one of many ways that the best of intentions regarding clear communication can go awry, it's also an example that there are often unexpected opportunities to reestablish a neutral exchange of information. And in fact, this experience stayed in firmly neutral territory. The parent did not want her child to participate in the sex education class, but she ultimately allowed it, without airing her concerns further on social media. As with all communication about sex education classes, it is extremely important to maintain careful recordkeeping. This is often a daunting task, but, as the preceding example illustrates, because I recorded all my communications with all of my students, I was able to tell the principal exactly what my correspondence included.

As in so many other aspects of teaching, despite any teacher or educator's efforts, there will be similar issues. It will be from a minority of parents, but it will still be uncomfortable. It helps and is important for teachers to recognize that much of this pushback is due to general discomfort around issues of sexuality and sexual health for students in the special education classroom (yet again, the myth of asexuality announces its presence), and to a lack of clear communication (even when that lack of communication isn't really anyone's fault). Of course, as discussed earlier, general pushback is not only due to this general discomfort, but it is also



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Excerpted from *Sexuality for All Abilities*

often due to parents' own prior lack of access to quality comprehensive sex education or is the result of their cultural or family backgrounds. Teachers and educators must respect this discomfort. But they can also do a lot to alleviate it. In so many of my experiences, concerned parents almost always benefit from receiving more information about what a "comprehensive sex education" actually means, including information about the topics it covers and the lessons it includes. They also benefit from just being able to express their worries or to process their own (possibly new) feelings about viewing their child as a sexual being.

I remember a parent who balked upon learning that our class was entering a new unit in human reproduction. When the parent called, I explained that while human reproduction included the biology of reproduction, it also included lessons about relationship building and boundaries, such as knowing whom to hug and when they could be hugged. As the parent and I talked, it became clear that he had not considered these subjects to fall under the umbrella of a comprehensive sex education. It also became clear that he was beginning to realize, on our phone call, just how helpful these lessons could be for his son. We talked through comprehensive sex education and how it's much more than the biology of sex; it's about relationships, and thus, it's about life. A comprehensive sex education aims to guide students through the knowledge and skills they need, to help them understand their own attitudes and values, and to teach them how to make appropriate, healthy, and safe choices. Learning about reproduction in this new unit was just a small part of the bigger picture. After our conversation, this parent was absolutely on board.

Teachers and educators can also offer another, larger event to introduce their students' parents to a newly adopted curriculum in comprehensive sex education. I have frequently helped schools and districts encourage parental support for teaching topics in comprehensive sex education in the special education classroom through a family event or workshop. In facilitating these kinds of events, I've seen firsthand the power in allowing parents to express their concerns, learn a little bit about the curriculum and the plan, and spend time together with other parents who are going through the same thing. Parents are usually relieved and, frankly, some- times thrilled, for the opportunity to talk with other parents with whom they have so much in common. The overall goal of these events is to help parents become a little more comfortable about a comprehensive sex education and its place in their children's lives, but these events can often do so much more to build a broader foundation for students and families.



MANAGING PARENT ATTITUDES

Excerpted from *Sexuality for All Abilities*

* * *

Ultimately, whether their influence is a help or a hindrance, parents and parental involvement is a necessary part of introducing (and navigating) elements of a comprehensive sex education in the special education classroom. It's not only necessary because parental support can help further the education of all children, it's important because a comprehensive sex education never really begins or ends in the classroom. It reaches into every facet of most every human being's life.

Because this is the case, I want to urge all readers to try to proactively involve parents at many different points as they teach topics in comprehensive sex education. I do this in several ways. First, as I did in the SAFE curriculum, I often create lessons and curricula that include worksheets and activities for students and parents to do together. A worksheet might foster repetition of a lesson's key messages. Or, a worksheet might consist of a Q&A and ask students to write down a question for the question box (or ask a parent to help them write down a question for the question box). Or, a worksheet might ask the child and the parent to each write down a question for the question box.

Oftentimes, homework is not a realistic option. In this case, teachers can send parents notes about the topics discussed in class and include several resources to support parents in their conversations with their child at home. Second, as mentioned earlier, I periodically arrange for a family event or a workshop and occasionally bring in a guest speaker or a panel to speak to parents. This can help broaden the concept of a comprehensive sex education and can offer parents a sometimes more neutral way to access the themes in a comprehensive sex education curriculum. Third, I sometimes invite parents or caregivers into the class and teach a lesson to everyone. While this may feel intimidating, it models not just the lessons but the language used to discuss topics in a comprehensive sex education. Consequently, it helps parents experience the objective and candid delivery that can make lessons in a comprehensive sex education feel straightforward and forthright. An added bonus is that students—perhaps surprisingly—often find it pretty fun to learn alongside their parent or caregiver.

The point is, sexual health and a comprehensive sex education will be a lifelong journey for our students. And whether parents are ready to recognize it or not, they are and will always be their own child's best sex educator. As the parent who was initially reluctant to have her child join in one of my early classes on sex education for adults with disabilities recently said to me, I believe we need to continue to



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teach, teach, teach, listen, listen, listen, help, help, help those with developmental disabilities develop into healthy beings—again, because we are unique, it must be on a continual basis till death, mostly due to changing bodies, minds, and needs. [My son] is not the same man he was when he was 21, and I suspect he won't be the same man when he's 41—so all the more reason the topic must be perpetual.

There are many ways to overcome community-based obstacles to teaching topics in comprehensive sex education in the special education classroom. Introducing the curriculum with the help of a team of teachers and administrators, opening the lines of communication as wide as possible, and encouraging parents to get and stay involved in this part of their children's education is some of the most important work we can do to help our students become healthy, self-advocating young adults.

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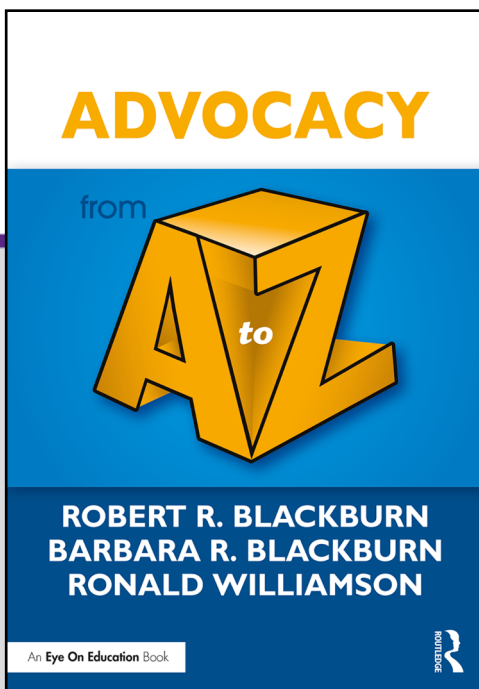
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CHAPTER

3

GAINING SUPPORT WITH LIMITED RESOURCES



This chapter is excerpted from

Advocacy from A to Z by Robert Blackburn, Barbara R. Blackburn, and Ronald Williamson

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GAINING SUPPORT WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Excerpted from *Advocacy from A to Z*

In a time of tight budgets, difficult choices have to be made. We must make sure our very limited resources are spent on priorities. I believe we should have no higher priority than investing in our children's classrooms and in their future.

—Bob Riley

Virtually every school or district, as well as many nonprofits, struggle with finding the resources for advocacy. In some states, schools are explicitly prohibited from using public funds to try to shape or influence public opinion. Limited resources can be a real problem when advocating for a change in your school's program.

As schools have wrestled with the issue of limited funding, certain strategies have been identified for dealing with this dilemma. Each of the strategies requires a commitment to a more collaborative and inclusive environment, one where different opinions and points of view are welcome.

The strategies fall into three broad categories: (1) business and community partnerships, (2) grants and entrepreneurial activity, and (3) use of traditional and social media.

Business and Community Partnerships

Business Partnerships

Business partnerships are most often established between a school or district and a local business partner or national partner with a local presence. The Council for Corporate and School Partnerships, founded by Coca-Cola, defines partnerships as “a mutually supportive relationship between a business and a school . . . in which the partners commit themselves to specific goals and activities intended to benefit the students and the school.” Business partners often recognize that they can benefit from being seen as a supporter of schools in their community.

In DuPage, Illinois, the high school's Business-Education Partnership Council is organized and staffed by the district's information and public affairs office. Members of the council meet monthly to explore how members of the local business community can support the school, advocate for resources, and work with its members to support the school's focus on student achievement and increased community outreach and involvement.



GAINING SUPPORT WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Excerpted from *Advocacy from A to Z*

Similarly, in Cecil County, Maryland, the Business and Education Partnership Advisory Council, a group organized by local businesses, seeks to find ways that local businesses can support the schools and advocate for students to meet job market needs and to have satisfying careers that will make them good citizens in their community. Not only do members of the council provide resources for the schools, they also serve as advocates to the larger community about specific school needs or programs.

Community Partnerships

Community partnerships bring together the resources of local businesses, service clubs, nonprofit agencies, volunteers, churches, colleges and universities—almost anyone with an interest in children and young people. They are a powerful social resource that schools can tap into to support their educational programs.

In many communities, local fraternal organizations are looking for ways to support local programs. Often they want speakers for their meetings and luncheons. It's an easy way to build relationships with a vital community group and at the same time advocate for your school, its programs, and initiatives.

Strategies for Success with Partnerships

When you work with business or community partners, follow this advice:

- Provide high-quality information—Help people understand the issues, as well as the school's programs and areas of need. If advocating for a new program, provide factual information with ample data about the impact on students and the way local businesses can be supportive.
- Have a consistent message—People rely on those they trust (including social media friends) for information. Those they trust may not necessarily be school leaders. So invest in “internal public relations” to make sure everyone in the school, as well as those working with partners, provides the same message about programs, their impact, and their value.
- Maintain confidentiality—Be careful what you say and to whom you say it. When working with partners, always clarify what can be shared and with whom.
- Address key issues directly—Deal with real concerns as soon as possible. Gather additional information that might be requested. Don't dodge issues and concerns. Make sure messages are accurate and lessen rumors.



GAINING SUPPORT WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Excerpted from *Advocacy from A to Z*

- Don't make promises—Statements made early can feel like a commitment, and trust will be damaged if your “promise” can't be kept.
- Value dissent—Recognize that different points of view are always uncomfortable but important. They often reveal problems that weren't thought about, and they can give you clues about resistance you may encounter.

Grants and Entrepreneurial Activity

You can become much more aggressive in seeking grants and engaging in entrepreneurial activity to support your advocacy efforts. When faced with a lack of district resources to expand their curriculum, a consortium of five small Oregon districts sought a state grant to pay for adding interactive television so that they could share teachers of Spanish, accelerated math, and chemistry. Teachers rotated among the five high schools but were able to interact with students on all campuses. This same consortium shared the costs of a grant writer and, by the end of the first year, found that the new grants justified the grant writing expense.

Some schools also use entrepreneurial activity to raise funds to support program enhancements. In some cases, they create products for sale outside of school, but most of the time they involve retail operations housed within a school, often food and beverage sales.

Some high schools we've worked with have school stores that sell supplies and spirit wear. Others have a coffee shop open before and after school. Still others have a smoothie shop. In several cases, local foundations provided the seed money, including equipment and initial inventory to start the business, and local citizens contributed their services to help with financial management. In each case, students learned about managing a business and raising revenue, and the school was able to build valuable partnerships with business and community groups, a form of advocacy.

Traditional and Social Media

Both "Chapter E: Engaging Through Technology" and "Chapter K: Keys to Social Media" of *Advocacy from A to Z* discuss the use of various forms of media as advocacy tools. We won't repeat that information here, but it is important to recognize the powerful way that both traditional media like websites and email, as well as social media like Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram, can be used to share information about your school and your programs and initiatives.



GAINING SUPPORT WITH LIMITED RESOURCES

Excerpted from *Advocacy from A to Z*

It's critical to balance the two approaches. Often traditional media like email or the school's website is viewed as providing a limited, somewhat biased view of the school. In other words, it's seen as an administrative tool. Social media, on the other hand, is often viewed more positively and is seen as more responsive, more up-to-date, and more engaging.

Similarly, social media is more likely accessed by younger families and newer members of your school community. Your school's website and email may not be the first source of information for many families. Regardless, each of these forms of media, once in place, is a low-cost way to share information about your school, its students, and their successes.

Final Thoughts

Advocating for your school and its programs doesn't require a lot of resources. When resources are limited, there are several low-cost ways to share the news about your school and your efforts to improve student learning.

As discussed in other chapters, building relationships with key stakeholders and sharing your message broadly are keys to successful advocacy.

Final Reflection Questions

What challenge do you face in this particular area of advocacy?

What was the most important thing you learned in this chapter? How can you apply that lesson in your own situation?

In six months, if you look back on this learning, what would you like to have accomplished?

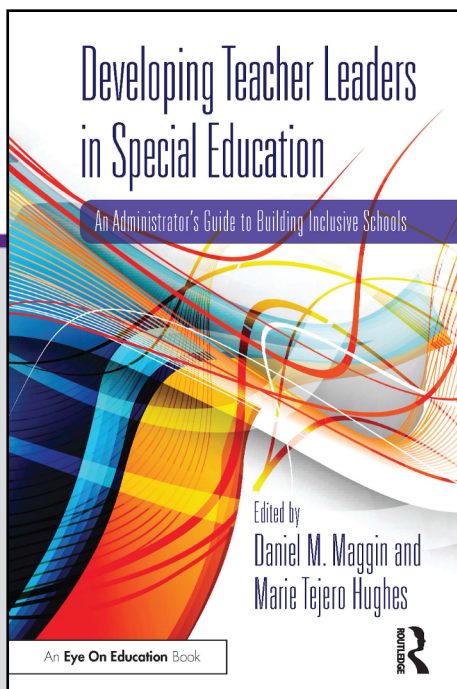


CHAPTER

4

ADVOCACY

BY CATRINA DORSEY AND KARY ZARATE



This chapter is excerpted from

Developing Teacher Leaders in Special Education
edited by Daniel M. Maggin, Marie Tejero Hughes

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ADVOCACY

BY CATRINA DORSEY AND KARY ZARATE

Excerpted from *Developing Teacher Leaders in Special Education*

Grace is a new special education resource teacher and works with many families who are eager to learn more about how to support their children. While Grace loves working with the families one on one, she wonders if her efforts might be more fruitful if the principal would allow her to sponsor a parent advocacy group to facilitate parent connection, family empowerment, and community collaboration.

Administrator's Perspective	Special Educator's Perspective
<p>Is sponsoring a parent group the best use of our limited time and resources? Aren't there other things our teachers should be doing that can directly impact student learning and raise test scores? Besides, aren't there outside organizations that help families learn how to advocate for their own children?</p>	<p>Supporting families who wish to learn more about helping their children is one of the best ways to increase our impact! By connecting our families with needed resources and supporting their efforts to advocate for their children, we are increasing their capacity to support our learners and enhancing our effectiveness as educators.</p>

Key Points:

- Review the history and legacy of advocacy in the field of special education.
- Identify the six major principles of special education law.
- Distinguish different types of advocacy.
- List shared competencies of effective advocates.
- Distinguish the administrator, the general educator, and the special educator's roles in advocacy.

Why Advocacy?

Advocacy is an integral function of the role of a special educator, and it is important that school leaders are aware of the associated ethical, professional, and legal mandates. Just as special educators have a responsibility to support families and students, administrators play an important role in creating a collaborative climate in which special educators are professionally supported in advocacy efforts. Research is clear on the need for school advocacy and its numerous benefits. In many cases, families of children with disabilities enter the school setting hoping to work with school staff as partners in a shared commitment



ADVOCACY

BY CATRINA DORSEY AND KARY ZARATE

Excerpted from *Developing Teacher Leaders in Special Education*

(Zaretsky, 2004). Soon, many of these families encounter multiple systemic barriers. Lack of knowledge (Turnbull & Turnbull, 2003), feelings of intimidation (Fish, 2008), and difficulty interpreting jargon (Park & Turnbull, 2001) have been commonly reported. Some families may find special education regulations perplexing, others have reported feeling unwelcome and having their parental role minimized through attitudinal barriers such as the power differential between schools and families (Leiter & Krauss, 2004). School leaders and educators who position advocacy as a shared community value are likely to eliminate many of these concerns and others. Families and professionals have reported that advocacy can yield positive outcomes for children with disabilities as it may result in teachers being more accountable and children receiving more services (Burke et al., 2019). Families perceive that strong family-school partnerships correlated to a diminished need for outside parent advocacy (Burke et al., 2016), and a reduced need for the most legalistic form of advocacy – due process hearings. Due process is generally fled by families due to disputes regarding educational strategies or supports (Cohen, 2009) and can be laborious and resource intensive for both families and schools. It is of critical importance that families who find themselves at odds with the school about their child’s programming have access to resources which can help direct their decision making. One such resource that administrators might provide to families who have questions regarding their legal rights is the Parent Advocacy Center for Educational Rights (PACER).

Expectations related to the special educator’s role as an advocate are continuously evolving. Evidence of this can be found in the United States legislation of IDEA (2004) as well as in recent revisions to the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015, which changed the language of ‘parent involvement’ to ‘parent and family engagement.’ This slight but significant change in verbiage signals a shift in focus from the individual parent to community partnership as a whole (Fenton et al., 2017), and places the onus on educators to rethink family involvement and transform the ways in which they invite families to the table for meaningful, productive collaboration.

STOP AND REFLECT

1. Are there any staff members presently in your building who have strong advocacy skills and are positioned to share those with others?
2. If not, what simple steps can you take to help build capacity for advocacy in your building?



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BY CATRINA DORSEY AND KARY ZARATE

Excerpted from *Developing Teacher Leaders in Special Education*

Understanding advocacy is important for school leaders because leaders are ultimately charged with supervising the critically complicated and important work of special education teams. When teams do not operate in a manner so that families feel that their children's needs are being met, families with resources may choose to engage the services of advocates outside of the school system. A 2004 study by Zaretsky revealed that though these family advocates and school leaders are often on opposing sides, they both generally agree that schools do not necessarily serve all children equally well. Making advocacy an integral part of the work that schools do on behalf of children and families can greatly enhance the ability of schools to focus on collective change, which can benefit all children (Lalvani & Sauer, 2015).

Legacy of Advocacy in Special Education

While there are several different contextual definitions, in special education an advocate may be defined as one who supports families in understanding their rights while providing support and guidance through the Individual Education Plan (IEP) process (Goldman et al., 2017). Throughout the history of the United States, advocates have played an enormous role in acquiring and protecting the rights of individuals with disabilities, including helping children in need of special education programming and related services. In the 19th and 20th centuries, many who were concerned about the plight of children with disabilities devoted time and energy to increasing community awareness and working to secure services and protections for these vulnerable citizens. Eventually, these advocates refocused their efforts into issuing formal demands for public institutions to provide educational access, legal protections, and specialized services for children with special needs. It is important to note that prior to this time, public schools in the US had absolutely no legal obligation to meet the special needs of children with disabilities. Some services may have been offered by benevolent groups or charitable individuals responding to an inner moral or ethical imperative, but there was little accountability or oversight, and few assurances that services offered were educational, appropriate, or even meaningful. Few children with serious disabilities had any real chance at being prepared for meaningful participation in society. In the US during the 1960s and 1970s however, advocates for children with disabilities became more vocal in expressing their discontent. Responding, at least in part, to radical social and political shifts ushered in by the American Civil Rights Movement, informal groups of advocates assembled themselves and galvanized into political action, formally petitioning the courts for public access to educational



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goods and services on behalf of children with disabilities. Once legal protections were secured through the US court system, children's access to a free and appropriate education was legally mandated, and change was imminent. One of the most impactful legislative achievements was the US Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), as it was rebranded in the 1990. Key points of this landmark legislation included six major principles that provided children with disabilities the right to (a) a free and appropriate education, (b) an appropriate evaluation, (c) an Individualized Education Plan, (d) receive an education in the least restrictive environment, (e) parental participation in the process, and (f) procedural safeguards. Since the legislation's passage, many of the finer points have been further shaped by reauthorizations, US Supreme Court rulings, and Presidential Acts including the 2001 No Child Left Behind (NCLB) and the 2015 ESSA. However, despite decades of challenges, funding issues, and continuing legal clarifications, advocacy is partially responsible for the fact that the IDEA's six major provisions remain largely intact (see Table 2).

Table 2: Six Major Legal Principles of IDEA

FAPE – Under the law, all students are entitled to receive a Free and Appropriate Public Education which meets their individual needs and prepares them for further education, employment, and individual living.
Appropriate Evaluation – It is required that evaluations must be conducted by a team of trained evaluators, administered in a nondiscriminatory manner using proper methods and materials, and offered in the child's primary language or mode of communication.
Individualized Education Plan – Within an established timeline, an IEP must be developed by an IEP team and must incorporate specific information including a student's present levels, goals, and progress.
Least Restrictive Environment – To the greatest extent possible, a student should be provided with the opportunity to participate in a learning environment with peers in the general education environment.
Parental Participation – Parents have the right to participate as members of the IEP team. They have rights regarding notification, meetings, evaluation, and the IEP process.
Procedural Safeguards – Parents' rights in the IEP process include notification timelines for meetings and procedures, review of educational records, and timely notification of their right to request mediation or due process.



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If IDEA is to continue to address the increasingly complex needs of children with disabilities in the United States, sustained advocacy must continue to occur at the federal, state, and local levels. In the wake of NCLB and ESSA's calls for greater accountability, many school districts find themselves in the difficult position of being asked to utilize ever dwindling resources to meet ever-increasing demands. In such a climate, educational administrators would be wise to recognize that they have both an opportunity and a responsibility to embrace the role of professional advocacy. Not only should school leaders consider assigning advocacy a prominent position on their own professional agenda, they would do well to also invite special educators to assume key leadership roles in the effort. From the earliest days of the advocacy era, compassionate professionals have partnered with families of children with disabilities. By sharing their valuable professional expertise with families as well as with those who create policy and legislation, special educators have the opportunity to hone and develop their leadership skills while positively impacting the lives of the children they are committed to serve.

Special Education Advocacy on Different Levels

In 2000, Dr. Mark Ezell, a professor of social work, proposed a typology to illustrate the different types of advocacy that many nonprofit organizations engage in. In this typology, he distinguished 13 different categories of advocacy, five of which are critically important for special educators: community, internal, legislative, policy, and political (see Table 3). Community advocacy can be as simple as hosting programs to educate and inform the school community about the needs of those with disabilities and taking other simple steps to establish advocacy as a shared value. Special educators and administrators can advocate internally by being reflective about their own professional practices and making sure that applicable laws and policies are upheld. Legislative advocacy can be facilitated by simply joining and participating in an existing professional organization. Policy advocacy is made simpler if relationships are established with those who influence laws, and it should be noted that all forms of advocacy might be considered 'political' to some extent since advocacy generally involves working with groups of people who may or may not have shared objectives. Navigating opposing ideas and sorting through complex interpersonal dynamics is crucial for anyone needing to identify shared goals and accomplish meaningful tasks. An administrator who understands the varied nuances of dealing with the complexities of school politics is far more likely to effectively lead a team of special educator advocates than one who does not.



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Forms of advocacy	Basic description	How administrators and special educators can participate
Community advocacy	Can include educating and organizing the community as well as challenging assumptions about vulnerable populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Raise sensitivity and awareness in the school community • Promote an inclusive and responsive environment
Internal advocacy	Working from within an organization to change existing policy, procedure, and practice	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Know requirements of IDEA • Regularly evaluate policies and procedures; identify and remove any barriers
Legislative advocacy	Promoting and influencing legislation that will benefit specific populations	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Join and get involved in professional and national organizations that lobby at state and federal levels
Policy advocacy	Engaging and influencing those who work to pass legislation, craft public policy, or make court decisions	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Build relationships with local policy makers • Inform and mobilize the community about grassroots efforts
Political advocacy	Intervening to influence government policies and practices at the state, local, or federal levels	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Work closely with local officials • Testify at public hearings • Participate in demonstrations, marches, or lobbying

Shared Competencies of Effective Advocate Leaders

Although good educators may naturally possess many of the skills and competencies needed to advocate, some have expressed conflicted feelings about picking up the advocacy mantle. Special educators, administrators, and service providers must respond to both the needs of the organization they represent as well as the individual needs of the children they serve, and occasionally, conflicts of interest may arise (Trainor, 2010). Willingness to advocate may also be linked to



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the professional preferences of the individual. Some special educators and administrators readily embrace advocacy and consider it a natural extension of their job description, while others may not necessarily feel the same. Reluctance to advocate may also be related to confusion attributable to generalized use of the term. In the field of special education, the noun advocate is often used to refer to a third-party professional working on behalf of families. These advocates are often viewed as a threat to IEP teams' decisions and might receive a guarded reception from other members of the special education team. In these instances, the advocate is perceived as an adversary. This is unfortunate, because every member of a child's IEP team has both an ethical and a legal imperative to advocate on behalf of the child, including the school leader. Advocacy on behalf of children and families with special needs can be a practical way for administrators to take their place within the larger professional community and demonstrate their willingness to work with others seeking to accomplish the same goal: Providing access, opportunities, and services for children with special needs, and sharing resources with the families who love and support them.

STOP AND REFLECT

All students can benefit from a culture of shared advocacy – not just those who qualify for services under IDEA. School leaders can encourage special educators in leadership positions to use their unique perspectives, skills, and specialized training to improve access for students throughout the entire school community.

How can you empower your special educators to share more of their skills with the entire school population?

Although the functional roles of school administrators and professional special education advocates might be regarded quite differently, the two roles actually share a common set of professional skills and competencies. For example, both must be skilled in data analysis and need to have more than a basic understanding of current and emerging trends in research and policy. Both must be resourceful, need a foundational understanding of relevant laws and procedures, and must be able to exercise sound communication skills in the dispatch of their professional duties. Shields (1987) identified foundational knowledge, competencies, and dispositions that all effective advocates need. However, it might be argued that school administrators and special educators need to possess additional advocacy dispositions, knowledge, and skills. Special education leaders must know how to work effectively with others in pursuit of shared goals and mutually agreeable

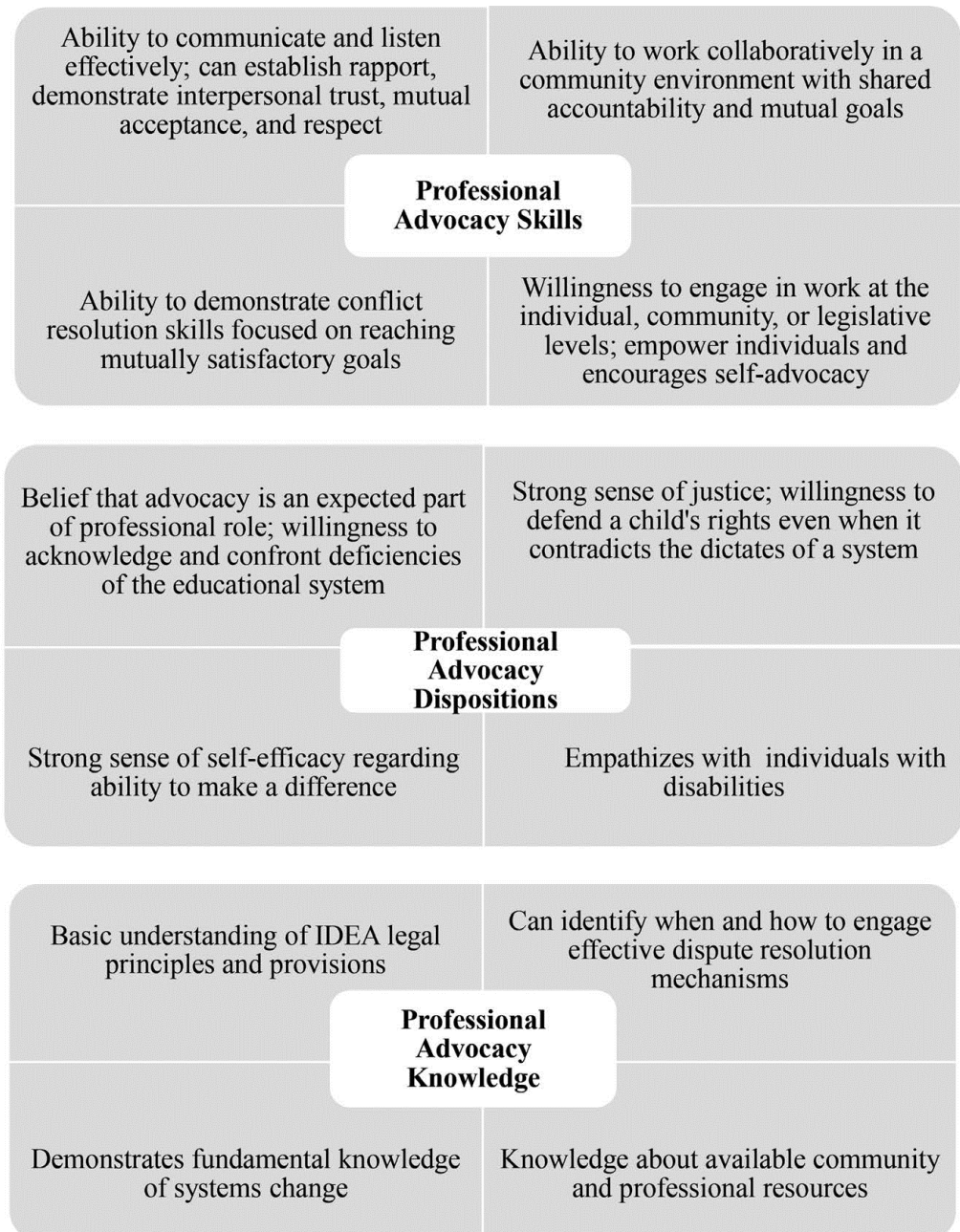


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outcomes that benefit vulnerable children and their families. They also need to be reflective and understand that responsible advocacy demands reflection and accountability, not just calls for change. Finally, educational leaders who advocate



Adapted from Fiedler & Clark, 2009, p. 21-23; Shields, 1987



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have to acknowledge that advocacy requires follow-through when new ideas are implemented and must demonstrate a willingness to be flexible when appropriate adjustments need to be made. Good advocates on any level also must be careful to guard their credibility. They understand that they will not be taken seriously if their advocacy efforts are not perceived as ethical and well-informed.

Another way that special educators and administrators differ from other professional advocates is that they focus most of their efforts within the school setting implementing emerging trends, while other types of advocates may focus most of their efforts outside of the school setting influencing such trends. This distinction is key. Prudent educational administrators understand that the internal policies they supervise and evaluate are largely influenced by forces beyond the school walls. Thus, engaging in professional advocacy on behalf of students in external settings not only benefits students and families, it also serves to ensure that administrators themselves are positioned to provide informed input on the policies that will shape and influence the future of the field of special education.

School Leaders Supporting a Climate and Culture of Advocacy

As educators and school leaders advocate for students, they share a common responsibility to help provide students with disabilities the services and experiences they are entitled to in accordance with the stated aims and mission of laws and policies already in place. Though some school administrators may be understandably reluctant to invest the time and energy necessary to engage at higher levels of advocacy, it should be noted that opportunities abound to engage in meaningful advocacy at the local, organizational, and community levels. In schools, administrators can easily promote sensitivity and awareness by implementing informative school programming that empowers impacted families with needed tools and resources, while raising awareness within the larger school community. Advocating administrators who wish to get involved at the legislative, policy, and political levels on broader issues such as equalized funding or school budgets can easily do so by joining forces with outside organizations already working on those topics. The point is that effective administrative advocacy need not be complicated, overwhelming, or time consuming! When advocacy is positioned as a shared responsibility and embedded within organizational climate and culture, administrators can easily share the workload with knowledgeable special educators, general educators, and families. Administrators can facilitate advocacy in the entire school community by:



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- Establishing a rotation for attending and participating in local school board meetings.
- Signing the school up for email alerts from external advocacy agencies.
- Meeting regularly with a multidisciplinary team to review, identify, and monitor school policies which may unduly impact children with special needs.
- Publicizing important issues in the form of announcements, website links, or press releases to the larger school community.

Administrators can also support special educators and staff in their individual and collective efforts to professionally advocate for themselves and for their students. Administrators should recognize the importance of establishing a safe environment in which all teachers are respected as skilled professionals, are free to ask appropriate questions, and can respectfully challenge existing policies and practices without fear of professional reprisal. General educators, who may or may not have much foundational knowledge about special education, are on the front line working with the majority of the student body and are often among the first to notice that a child might need to be considered for specialized services. Administrators have a responsibility to establish and maintain appropriate screening and identification systems that will enable general educators to make sound and knowledgeable recommendations.

School administrators can also encourage general educators to participate in advocacy efforts by bringing in relevant professional development that the entire school community can participate in and benefit from. Efforts toward establishing more inclusive learning environments will be far more effective when general educators are provided with training that inculcates the desired dispositions necessary to maintaining a climate of advocacy. When administrators take the opportunity to invite general educators to the table, it helps to ensure that the entire school community has a shared vision that everyone can work toward and meaningfully contribute to. Both the Arc and Learning Disabilities Association of America are resources provided in Appendix B of *Developing Teacher Leaders in Special Education* where administrators can look for relevant resources to assist in this important effort.

Special educators have specific ways in which they typically advocate for their students. It may be useful for administrators to consider that when working on behalf of their students, a special educator's advocacy efforts may generally fall



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into one or more of the following three basic categories:

- **Obtaining** resources for students that might not be provided otherwise. Such resources might come from either inside or outside the school setting and may include either goods or services. Administrators can support these advocacy efforts by helping to ensure that needed resources are available to the teachers, or by supporting teachers' efforts to secure needed materials from other sources.
- **Modifying** assignments, practices, procedures, or policies as appropriate given the parameters of the child's IEP. Administrators can support these advocacy efforts by establishing the expectation that general educators will support special educators' attempts to minimize and reduce barriers to equal access.
- **Promoting** new policies or legislation that may increase access to services or resources for needy student populations. Administrators can support advocacy efforts of this type by staying abreast of evolving legislation, and by getting involved in community organizations that are already active in policy work.

STOP AND REFLECT

Engaged families are among the most valuable resources in a school community.

1. How does your school actively support family advocacy?
2. What steps can you take to either establish a new family advocate group in your school or to improve the family advocacy group that you already have?

Like administrators, special educators should also be encouraged to consider the wisdom of advocating at different levels both within and beyond school settings. In schools, special educators best represent the needs of their students by empowering families, promoting inclusive environments, ensuring that IEPs are being followed, and advocating knowledgeably in IEP meetings. To inform and support their in-school efforts, teacher advocates will need to look outside of the school setting for guidance and resources. Reading professional journals and following relevant news stories at the federal, state, and local levels are important ways of keeping up with current and emerging trends. Joining local and national professional organizations is an effective way to make professional contacts and to gain access to information and useful resources. While much can be learned from simply reviewing publications, involvement at the committee level of local, state, and national organizations can also offer expanded professional networking



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opportunities that build awareness, increase professional knowledge, and provide enhanced access to digital resources such as newsletters, webcasts, or podcasts.

Supporting Family Advocates

In addition to the teaching staff, administrators can also help support family advocacy efforts in practical ways. For families, educational advocacy is perhaps the most important way they can be educated about and empowered to secure necessary goods and services for their child with a disability. Special education can be a maze for families due to the myriad emotions that come along with raising a child with disabilities, the bewildering legalities of special education law, and the dizzying array of acronyms routinely tossed around IEP tables. The innate complexity and constantly evolving nature of the field of special education makes it vital that families have meaningful opportunities to plug into groups and make connections with others who are knowledgeable about and know how to find necessary resources.

Advocacy can be difficult for any family of a child with a disability, it can be particularly difficult for those who have neither the knowledge nor the means to access help-for-hire. Families often turn to out-side advocates when they have concerns about the school meeting their child's needs, but when schools elect to actively support advocacy, home/ school bonds can be strengthened.

Compassionate and knowledgeable school professionals are a logical and convenient source of information for families when questions about services or programming arise. When school professionals provide space and support for families to advocate, it can help level the playing field for under-resourced families by offering them tools, access, knowledge, or services they might not otherwise have been privy to.

Establishing a school supported family group is one way that administrators and special educators can meaningfully support all families' efforts to empower themselves while simultaneously demonstrating a willingness to work together in the context of a mutually respectful learning space. By inviting families into a collaborative workspace for the benefit of students, administrators can openly and authentically demonstrate their professional advocacy dispositions, skills, and knowledge while also providing families with a forum to voice their questions and concerns. With very little effort, even school leaders who are unwilling to fully commit to advocacy may support parental advocacy. Special educators on staff can be commissioned to pick up the leadership mantle by:



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- Hosting guest speakers who can present on relevant topics – Engaging the services of professionals who work outside of the district can help both families and the district stay current with special education issues and concerns. Some of these professionals may even be willing to donate their time and services. The entire school community can benefit from the knowledge that is shared.
- Creating spaces and events which encourage families to support and share knowledge with one another – Providing families with opportunities to learn from one another is a powerful way to promote self-advocacy, establish a collaborative environment, and help families form and nurture supportive partnerships among themselves.
- Allowing district personnel to make professional presentations – Giving educators and related service providers time and opportunities to share their professional expertise can increase families' understanding of how these various professionals serve their children and can allow families to benefit from their highly specialized knowledge. Allowing staff to make these presentations at regularly scheduled school events such as open houses and curriculum nights would prevent staff from having to work extra hours.
- Connecting families with community resources – There are many local, state, and national groups who make it their full-time mission to help individuals with disabilities. Schools can establish partnerships with these groups and build bridges between those organizations and families, which can greatly benefit the entire school community. Each state in the US has a parent training and information program (PTI) which is federally funded and set up to support families in their advocacy efforts. Schools may consider reaching out to these PTIs and finding out ways to bring featured resources directly into the school for families who may not have direct access to the PTI. Interested families can use the resources at the PTI to learn about available resources, programs, and services and to find tips on effective communication and participation in the educational planning process.
- Hosting family/professional book clubs – one of the easiest ways to get families involved is to select an appropriate book, start a book club, and invite families to join in. Snacks and childcare can be provided, and the book selections can follow families expressed topics of interest.

Administrators might find that supporting and encouraging teachers and families



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to assume a mantle of advocacy may actually prove to be a protective factor for a school or district. When teachers and families are engaged in a mutually respectful and collaborative setting, they are more likely to share issues or concerns that school leaders need to be made aware of. When general educators are invited to participate in advocacy activities, their over-all knowledge of special education laws and policies is likely to significantly increase, lessening the likelihood that they will engage in actions that may violate certain principles. When special educators are encouraged to share their specialized skills and knowledge with the larger school community in support of advocacy efforts, all children get to benefit from their wealth of wisdom and training. As the culture and climate of the school changes, reduced teacher turnover and increased organizational efficiency are likely to be observed. School leaders may have an opportunity to proactively address any potential issues or concerns that do arise with minimal conflict or escalation. For administrators who remain nervous about committing scarce time and energy resources to advocacy, it should be noted that administrative support for general and special educator advocacy may be either tacit or explicit in nature. Opportunities may be as simple as asking teachers to:

- Participate in building- and district-level committees.
- Collaborate on projects and initiatives that promote tolerance and inclusivity.
- Attend, participate in, and possibly even present at district functions such as parent-teacher conferences, school board meetings, and committee meetings to represent their interests and make their voices heard.

Supporting Student Advocates

No discussion of special education advocacy would be complete without acknowledging the need for teaching age appropriate self-advocacy skills to students with disabilities. The development of self-advocacy is critical for those who live with disabilities, and school is the ideal setting in which to introduce and nurture this necessary life skill. It is important that students with disabilities learn their rights and are taught effective ways to assert themselves appropriately across social settings. Special educators can be commissioned to work with building-level team members to support student advocates by encouraging age-appropriate participation in decision making and IEP development. Special educators can also take the lead on working with building-level team members to establish age-appropriate policies and procedures that prioritize equipping student learners with the tools they will need to advocate for themselves throughout their



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lives and across social settings.

Summary

We recognize that educational leaders are uniquely positioned to coordinate and facilitate advocacy efforts for their organizational stakeholders. By positioning advocacy as a shared value and a shared responsibility, advocate administrators can indicate their willingness to work to uphold the rights of students with disabilities in a sustainable way. When school administrators offer special educators the opportunity to share their knowledge and utilize their training beyond the classroom setting, it can benefit all students, not only those who are protected by specific laws and policies. All teachers have the capacity to lead, and when administrators make it a point to strategically engage teachers to the fullness of their professional potential, everyone in the school community can reap the rewards.

There is no question that advocacy takes dedication, time, and effort. The critical importance of the mission dictates no less, but the burdens of the workload can easily be shared. Advocacy, situated as an integral component of organizational climate and culture, builds on the rich historical tradition of special education advocacy and must be practiced with due deliberation and skill. Children with disabilities are among the least powerful and most vulnerable in our society and all educators have an ethical and professional obligation to invest time and energy elevating their cause. In this manner, our work continues toward the aim and mission of IDEA being fully realized in the lives of the students and families it was designed to protect. The services and benefits currently available under IDEA were once just the collective vision of a dedicated army of advocates who tirelessly fought for them to become reality. Individuals with differences and disabilities have access to the many services they utilize today due to the power of advocacy.

School leaders have the responsibility to establish advocacy as both a shared value and a shared responsibility, but they need not do so alone! There are many resources in the community—individuals and entities alike— who work on behalf of individuals with disabilities and who can offer the benefit of their expertise to school leaders who wish to support their stakeholders in this all-important task. Simply stated, advocacy is important work because advocates change things. Advocates work to change hearts and minds and in doing so they change practices and laws. Advocates work to change culture and climate, and in doing so, they increase tolerance and respect.



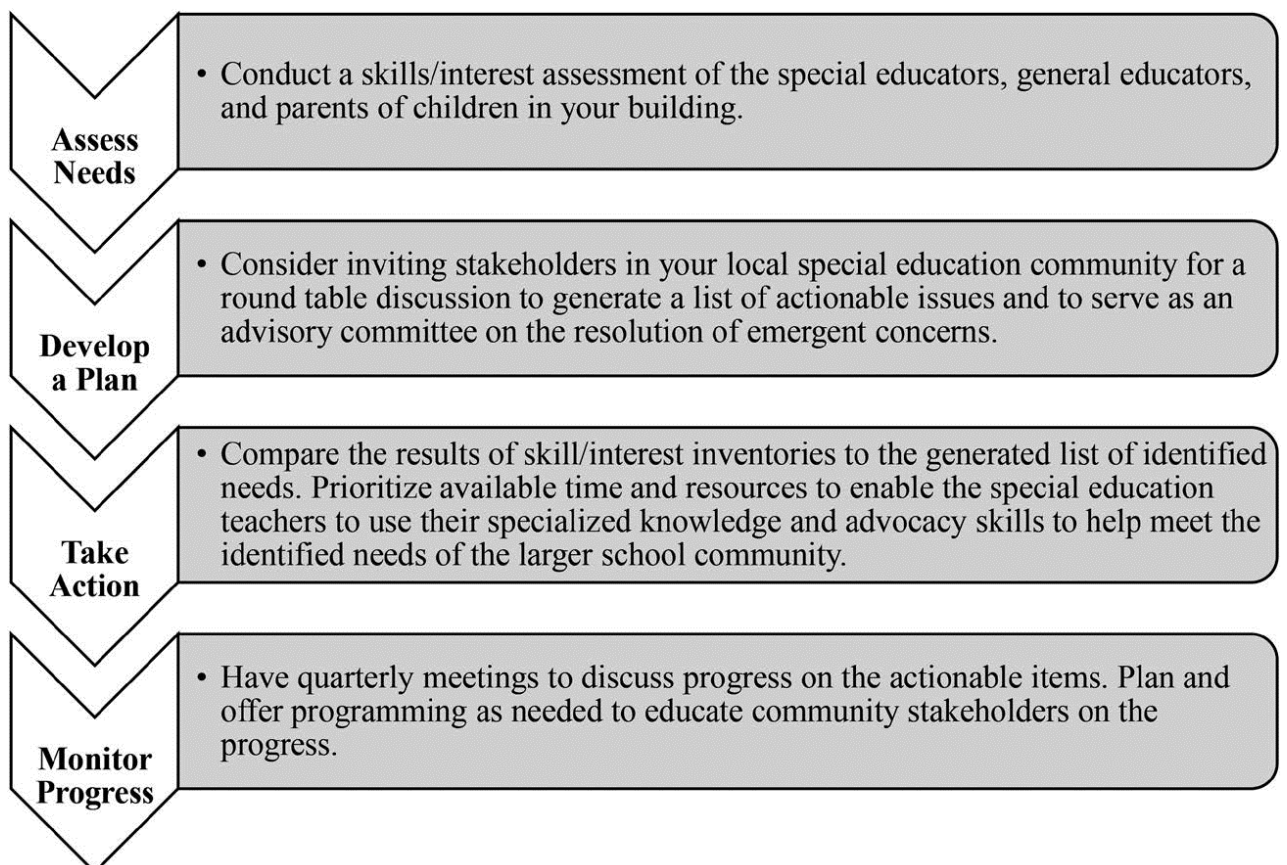
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Advocacy is not just a hobby or a professional pastime. For educators, advocacy is a shared professional responsibility. School administrators should welcome opportunities to speak truth to those with power to craft the policies, procedures, and practices that school staff are asked to implement. Special educators, by virtue of their personal calling and their professional training, are uniquely qualified to step into prepared spaces and share specialized knowledge with the entire school community. General educators also have an important role to play and should be offered professional development to assist in making instructional and disciplinary decisions that promote educational equity and cultural responsiveness. When school administrators, special educators, and general educators each understand and embrace their unique roles as advocates, the entire school community can reap the benefits of having advocacy positioned as an integral component of the organizational culture and climate.

Next Steps





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ADVOCACY

BY CATRINA DORSEY AND KARY ZARATE

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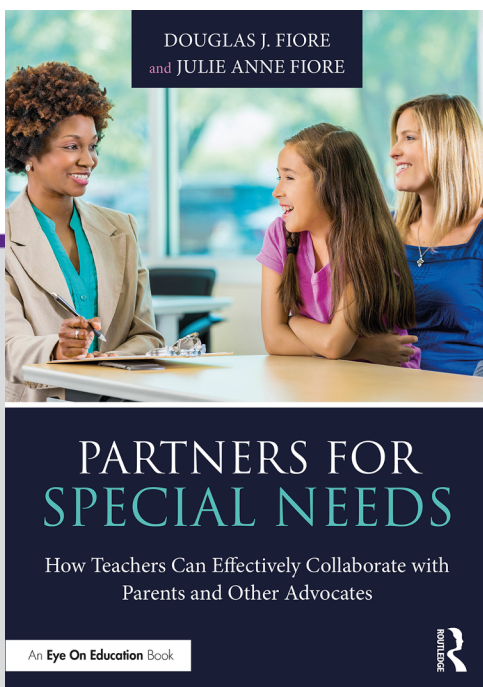


CHAPTER

5

“RULE OF THREE”

WORKING WITH PROFESSIONAL ADVOCATES



This chapter is excerpted from

Partners for Special Needs by Douglas J. Fiore, Julie Anne Fiore

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"RULE OF THREE"

WORKING WITH PROFESSIONAL ADVOCATES

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In this chapter, we explain the “Rule of Three” and ensure that an appreciation can be gained of the valuable roles of the teacher, the parent, and the advocate. When we think of all three as a team and eliminate thinking of conflict, it becomes easier to recognize that the role of an advocate is not to take sides. An advocate is there to help ensure that the child’s educational needs are met. Advocates are completely on our side if we all are on the side of the child. The many examples in this chapter should spark some thinking and draw some parallels to situations that you know very well.

Today, in the 21st-century classroom, students are learning in new and exciting ways, and teachers are using data, measured accurately and often, to drive instruction. The focus has shifted from group learning to individualized and small group instruction using multi-faceted pedagogical methods, environments, and delivery models. With the advent of the co-teaching model, it is not uncommon to have two or three teachers in a classroom simultaneously instructing heterogeneous groups of learners on one lesson. A heterogeneous group is a group comprised of students who may differ slightly in their ability levels, but still share at least one thing in common, such as their learning style, which can be auditory (listening), visual (viewing), or kinesthetic (moving). Each group may be learning the same content, with the same Common Core Standard (the national standards for English language arts, literacy, and math, broken down into small, measurable objectives), but the material used to teach and understand the content may differ according to the needs of the learners.

Now, as you think about your early elementary education days, take a moment and imagine your classroom. Was it designed to enable you to learn the way you learn best, or was it set up for the convenience of the teacher? Picture your desk. We are sure it was neatly situated in a row, which started from the front of the room going in a straight line to the back of the room. Why do you think it was designed that way? Was it for you? Or was it so the teacher could easily maneuver between the rows to monitor student learning after instruction had been delivered. Now, imagine a new way of learning. If you peek inside a 21st-century third grade classroom, it looks very different than what you experienced. The chalkboard is no longer in the front of the room. There is often more than one adult in the room, and the students are divided into groups. Below, we will give you a vivid



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description of a typical lesson in today's classroom and how it might look to an observer. Pay special attention to the learning environment and how it differs from what you experienced. Then think about how this type of classroom setup impacts the way students interact with teachers today. Reflect on the concept of Universal Design for Learning. Is the modern classroom you are about to picture universally designed for all learners?

Envisioning the 21st-Century Classroom

Imagine a small group of third graders today, working at a kidney-shaped table with the teacher in the center. Behind the teacher is a movable whiteboard, where the teacher and/or the students can draw or write as they are progressing through the lesson. The students are all typical for their age and development, but they all are all visual learners, so their favorite thing to do is draw. These students enjoy talking and interacting with their peers, but when they get in a large group, they sometimes lose focus, so the small group keeps them engaged and excited to participate. Now, as the students interact with the teacher, the teacher personalizes the learning for each student, giving positive, specific feedback like, "I love the way you explained the meaning of the word 'summit' to the group. Can you draw a picture of a 'summit' on the whiteboard to show what the meaning of the word is, too?" In order to evaluate students as they are learning, the teacher then uses a checklist to measure whether or not the student can understand and explain the concept. The students cannot see what the teacher is writing, but the teacher is gathering formative data on what he/ she sees the students may or may not understand about the new vocabulary word. The students are all on task, and they are learning in a way that suits their specific needs. This is relevant learning, because the students can participate; therefore, it is in these students' Zone of Proximal Development. How did you feel when you read this lesson? Did you, as a student learn this way? Did the teacher's personal, small-group approach make you want to join in?

Now, imagine in the same room James and Mike, two rambunctious, creative, and gifted third graders. They hate working in groups because they feel like other students bother them or interrupt their thinking too much. Their vocabulary knowledge is well beyond that of a typical third grader, and their ability to read and interpret text is at a fifth grade level. James and Mike would be bored working in a group on a simple vocabulary lesson, so they are working on an independent learning contract. James and Mike each sit at a desk on opposite sides of the room



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in a study carrel with a laptop. They look up their vocabulary words using an online dictionary, log in to a writing application on their laptops, and begin to write an informative essay. James loves snakes, so his story must utilize all seven of his vocabulary words. It must have a great topic sentence, six descriptive sentences which relate to his topic sentence, and a solid conclusion which restates in a different way what the topic sentence discussed. Mike enjoys motorcycles. Instead of doing a writing assignment like James, though, he is given a learning contract where he is completing an informational blog for other students to read. His assignment has the same learning criterion that James has, but his writing assignment is slightly differentiated to accommodate his interests and needs. This motivates him intrinsically, which means he feels the desire to complete the assignment without any outside reward. He just enjoys doing it because it is fun for him. These are just two short examples of what 21st-century learning looks like.

If you entered any elementary school today in any part of the United States, public or private, it would look similar to what we just described above. The only thing that would be different is the number of students, the number of teachers, the type of content, and the type of groupings. Otherwise, teaching has become very individualized, which has allowed students to work more independently and more creatively, and to develop greater technology skills. This will serve students well into the next twenty years or so as they work to reach their potential by giving them the type of instruction they really need to be active participants in their learning, and to provide them an opportunity to really get to know their teachers, their peers, and, more importantly, themselves.

Instructional Implications

As you can see, teaching really has evolved from being an art to being both an art and a science. Teachers are expected to understand more and more about the brain, how it works, and the many biological and environmental factors affecting learning. The implication for this type of change in instruction means that having only one teacher plan to deliver and assess the lesson for all learners is not conducive to highly differentiated and universal teaching. Teaching collaboratively today involves using a whole group of experts – regular education teachers, special education teachers, psychologists, reading specialists, speech therapists, guidance counselors, technology teachers, and other professionals. Planning, executing, and examining the outcome of each lesson and the implication for each



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learner is now facilitated both throughout and beyond the school day. Teams can be comprised of a variety of different experts. Vertical teams (such as third through sixth grade science teachers) or horizontal teams (all third grade team members in a district) can plan together on a weekly, monthly, or quarterly basis. These horizontal and vertical teams can also partner with special education teams and other service providers to accommodate specific learning needs of the exceptional learners. More time is spent co-planning, co-teaching, and evaluating a lesson than ever before. Data from both formal (completed in a written format, such as a test, a written assignment, or a group project) and informal (simple anecdotal observation of a student's participation in class lessons, discussions, or assessments) sources is analyzed by the team, and then future instruction is provided according to the results of the data. As the team uses data to drive instruction, input must be gleaned from parent(s) and any other outside sources as well. Teaching is no longer a lonely profession, but rather a profession of tremendous interdependence. Today's teacher must rely upon, analyze, and use the data collected from all those who influence how the child learns, behaves, and interacts with others on a daily basis.

Considerations to Ponder

When we started our teaching careers, vertical teams and horizontal teams actually represented new concepts. The evolution of instructional planning and the collaborations between and among teachers are relatively new in our schools. However, for many readers, not planning and collaborating with other teachers, whether at your own grade level or not, is a normal and essential part of your work.

Working collaboratively with parents and advocates, sadly, is similar to vertical and horizontal teams. That is, successfully collaborating with adults who are not teachers is relatively new in our schools. At least, doing it well is new. You have the skills to improve the lives of your students with special needs, and you have the knowledge and disposition to involve parents and advocates successfully in the process.

"Rule of Three"

As you study how the context for learning has evolved from when you attended elementary and middle school, you will also develop a greater understanding of how 21st-century learning demands from those who support students in the classroom are changing. Educators and parents can and should utilize advocates to



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help bridge the gap between home and school. This is called the “Rule of Three”. The “Rule of Three” consists of the parent(s), the teacher, and the advocate working together to develop an ongoing, trust-based, data-driven relationship that builds success for the student. Research shows that teachers and parents work more effectively together if an objective third party (advocate) is present and available to “mediate” meetings, represent parent concerns and perspectives, and clarify instructional implications for the student to the parent as the school year progresses. Partnering in a team of three allows objective data to drive decision-making while still creating a forum for opinion-sharing and empathetic understanding for the student and his/her family. As you continue to read this chapter, you will not only learn the role of each member of this three-person team, but you will also learn strategies on how to make the team successful. The first member of the team we will consider is the parent. Parents are an integral part of student success when it comes to language acquisition, communication, and data sharing, as the next section of this chapter will explain.

Parents: Partners in Language, Communication, and Data Collection

Parents are an integral part of student success across the curriculum. However, the most important part of how parents influence learning is language acquisition. Much of what students acquire occurs in and around the home during the first few years of life. Research shows that preschool children are biologically inclined to acquire language through experiences of sight and sound. If a child is raised in a home where the use of language (from any culture) is limited, the child will have limited language development. This creates a context of deficiency in language acquisition. Developing a child’s language ability requires tremendous partnership between the home and the school, and must be created in such a way that the instruction is both relevant and deliberate for the child. Lev Vygotsky (1962, p. 108) suggests that the communication connections do not have to take place immediately, but that “in the course of further schoolwork and reading”, learners can make the association between concepts and experience. Vygotsky describes the teacher’s role as assisting students in the recognition of decontextualized, systematic concepts. Symbolism, through the use of images (stop signs) and sounds connected with traffic, media, and other public displays, enhances a child’s ability to make associations, build sound/symbol relationships, and form language rules. In time, the way the child observes and acquires language becomes the foundation for the way the child perceives the world.



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Take a moment and picture yourself as a child at home with your parent(s). Think about what kind of language was spoken. Did your parents speak to you in full sentences, with proper grammar, or did they speak to you in sentences full of slang? Did you learn to speak one language, or multiple languages? How much did you travel, and how many books did your parents read to you as a child? All of these things affect the way you learned language. As you think about your language exposure and the way your parents encouraged your language development as a child, think of the students with whom you may work and the implications for instruction based on their different backgrounds and language needs. Below you will see two examples of two different students who need special education services. As you read their stories, imagine how important parental involvement may be in their acquisition of language. Think about what questions you may have for each parent as you read. How would you build a rapport with each family and develop a plan to help the student be successful based on many different factors: culture, language, socio-economic status, and so on?

First, we would like to tell you about "Juan". Juan is a sweet, gentle young man from a Hispanic family. His family moved to Hays, Kansas from Puerto Rico about one year ago. Juan is entering first grade. Juan's father is a laborer, and he spends his days on farms, harvesting wheat. Juan's father quit school in fifth grade to help support his family back in Puerto Rico. His native language is Spanish, and he speaks it fluently, but he writes very poorly. Juan's father also does not speak English, nor write it. He is beginning to recognize symbols and words around him, but when he speaks to Juan, he only speaks to him in Spanish. Juan has had no exposure to the English language other than what he has seen in brief television shows or on signs. He is starting first grade with a severe English language deficit in both reading and writing. Although he is not cognitively delayed based on testing done by the school psychologist, he will need complete language immersion in the classroom in addition to an English as a Second Language (ESL) teacher in order for him to learn and develop appropriate language skills on a par with his typically developing American peers. Juan's parents will need tremendous support as Juan receives his education. Not only will there be significant differences in how he will acclimate to the American way of life culturally, but there will be huge barriers to his social relationships and his academic growth, since he has little or no experience of conversing with American children his age. What are the implications for Juan's education? Who will help you build a rapport



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with his family when they only speak Spanish? What if his parents have a negative perspective of education and do not want to help Juan learn? How will you help them understand your goals and ideas to enable Juan to learn and grow in your class?

Now, let's think about a completely different type of student who is an exceptional learner. Meet "James". James is a black youth who hails from the north side of Chicago. James is the son of a pediatrician in West Town. Both of his parents are educated and well-traveled. James attended a private Catholic school during his elementary education and will now be attending public middle school as he enters the sixth grade. He is a bright, but highly distracted, youth who ended up in the principal's office too often. His parents grew tired of his attention issues, but also knew he was bored and needed a change. James reads and writes at an eighth grade level and has been recommended for the gifted program by his previous teachers. James's parents have asked what type of educational and reading programs are available from the public school he will attend to support his learning. They are tired of the strict religious, authoritarian style of teaching many Catholic schools provide, and they want him to be able to learn with students from diverse backgrounds, but they are going to monitor his education closely to make sure the law is followed. They both want to make sure that James is challenged, since he tends to get distracted if he gets bored. Since James's dad is a pediatrician and his mother is the owner of a small business, they are both incredibly busy. The Intervention Specialist where James will go to school happens to be licensed to work with gifted students in addition to students with special needs, which will serve James well. James's parents really want to understand how best they can work with the school to ensure he will be successful as he transitions from private school to public school. They have no idea how to ask for what James needs, but they are very sure that they will hold the school accountable for meeting James's academic, social, and emotional needs during the school day.

What are the educational implications for an exceptional learner like James in reading and writing? How will you challenge him? How will you work with his parents knowing that they are already feeling angry and frustrated with his previous educational experience? How can you ensure that everything you are doing as an educator complies with the law, but gives James everything he needs to reach his academic, social, and emotional potential in this new, particularly difficult, environment?



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Learning about your students' families, their cultures, and their language development is just a small part of navigating through the teaching maze. It doesn't matter whether you are a regular education teacher or a special education teacher. The first critical role of the teacher is to build a trust rapport with the parent. This is the most valuable part as you work to implement the "Rule of Three". Developing a trust rapport will build a sense of community, open lines of communication, and help to bridge the gap between what is being implemented at school and what is being taught at home. As stated in the previous chapter, teaching is no longer a lonely profession; it is a profession of collaborators, working together for the needs of each child.

In order to begin an open line of communication, the teacher needs to create a safe, positive environment for the parent(s) to share ideas and input on the student's education. This starts before the school year even begins. Parents really want to know that the teacher cares. After all, parents are entrusting teachers with their most precious treasure, their child. As we think back to one important example from our early parenting years, we remember the year our youngest son entered first grade. This was a pivotal year, because it set the tone for communication between home and school for years to come in our family. The trust rapport that was built between the teacher and both of us that year taught us that it was equally important for us to be involved in the educational activities of our child as it was for the teacher. The teacher needed us, and we needed the teacher.

Before school started, during orientation, the teacher gave each parent a little notebook with a pen attached. We won't sugar-coat things by saying Nicholas was a bright little angelic young man who never disobeyed us. In fact, he was bright little man, but he was also difficult at times. As the year progressed, the notebook the teacher gave us provided insight into an important problem that surfaced every day. Through the daily communication in his notebook, we would learn that Nicholas spent most recesses "on the wall", which meant standing, facing a wall, without permission to interact with his peers, for various little offenses he had committed during the day. During parent-teacher conferences, the physical education teacher commented that he thought Nicholas would spend his life "on the wall". We chuckled, but we were worried, surprised, and certainly disappointed at that comment. We both wondered how taking away the recess of a very active, curious, and precocious child could benefit his academic and social needs. It was because of that daily notebook that we were prompted to ask for clarification



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regarding the “on the wall” situation with Nick. We both reached out to the teacher by writing in the notebook, and the teacher called us in to meet with her. Together, we discussed Nick’s daily offenses, his behaviors at home, how we would partner to hold Nick accountable, and how we could both prevent Nick from fulfilling the physical education teacher’s prophecy of spending his life “on the wall” with no chance for parole. It was in that daily communication that we both felt “safe” to share our feelings, our concerns, and develop our combined plan of action. It was personal, meaningful, and purposeful. It also provided a continuum of service from home to school. Nicholas was being cared for the way a community should care for a child; with love, consistent expectations, and shared responsibility. The evidence of his behavior changes as the year progressed showed that good communication builds trust – and the opportunity to solve problems. Nicholas spent far fewer recesses “on the wall” after that meeting, the meeting that began because of a notebook. It was simple, but it was powerful.

After a teacher develops a keen awareness of his/her students’ language abilities, creates and implements a forum for communication, and establishes a trust rapport with the family, the next job is for the teacher to begin to learn to partner with the parent to collect the data necessary to drive instruction. This is the tricky part, because the data can be observed and collected in different ways, yielding inconsistent results. While a good trust rapport and an open line of communication are both critical in creating a personalized relationship between the family and the school, the difficult part is when that trust rapport is challenged by the inability of the parent/teacher partnership to view data objectively.

Advocate: Mediator, Negotiator, and Objective Third Party

This is where the importance of the Special Education Advocate comes into play. (For simplicity, the Special Education Advocate will be referred to as just the “advocate” hereafter.) The advocate is crucial to the success of the parent/ teacher team in that he/she serves as the mediator between the two parties when an objective decision cannot be made. After all, both parties are heavily invested in the success of the student. We both believe that neither the parent nor the teacher intend to be subjective when collecting, analyzing, and reporting data, but it does happen. When one spends hours per day providing personalized care, it is hard not to develop a subjective viewpoint.

The narrative we have written below exemplifies why the role of the advocate was developed, how it helps both the parent and the teacher, and how the real purpose



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of the advocate is not to take a “side”, but to speak for the child, who may be too young or incapable of having a voice. You will see in this example that the advocate is, at times, the voice for the parent, the voice for the teacher, and most importantly, the voice for the child. There is an old adage, “There are two sides to every story.” We believe there are actually three: the teacher, the parent, and the child. The advocate speaks for the child while helping to enforce the law, so that busy teachers and administrators can ensure they are doing everything possible to implement the best education. When districts are overwhelmed with students who have special needs, the role of the advocate can be so valuable, as it assists in analyzing the data, reporting the data, and following up on communication between the parent and the school. The advocate is also a legal adviser, holding both the school and the family accountable. This is why we believe in firmly applying the “Rule of Three” in many special education cases. Someone must represent the needs of the child as often as possible. The advocate, when trained properly, is the person to do so. This is protective for both the school and the family. It also ensures the neutrality that is so vital for what can be intense conversations involving emotions of all parties present.

The example we are about to give is provided for both parents and teachers. This is not an example of “persuasiveness”, but of “perspective”. As both educators and parents, our most important role is to develop “perspective” and create empathy for one another. It is not to be convinced of one another’s viewpoint, but to simply acknowledge one another’s viewpoint, to respect it, and to work with it, so that something purposeful and powerful might occur: collaboration. We’ve all been in positions when it was difficult, if not impossible, to see an opposing viewpoint. After all, the reason we feel so passionate about what we do, as a parent or as an educator, is because we care. If we didn’t care, there would be no reason to argue. We would simply give in, agree, and move on. Thankfully, on both sides of this story, you’ll find that the teacher and the parent both truly care. As you read, be sure to keep that in mind. It will help you when you want to step in and take a side. Whether you are a parent or a teacher, you will begin to gain new insight as to why advocacy is so critical, and why the “Rule of Three” is truly essential in 21st-century learning. Public education is changing, at both state and federal levels. We believe, more than ever before, that we need advocates.

Let us introduce “Rebecca”. Rebecca is an eighth grade student who has been identified as having a severe learning disability in reading. Rebecca is social and athletic. She enjoys participating in a variety of peer-related groups, which include



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church, horse-back riding, and swimming. She is talkative and friendly when she is around her same-age peers in social settings where she feels confident in her abilities. However, in school, you will often find Rebecca withdrawing from interactions with her peers in academic-related activities. She tries very hard to exclude herself, because she feels certain that everyone around her can sense that she is struggling to read. She is embarrassed, sullen, and rarely completes assignments on time.

Rebecca goes home each day and tells her parents how frustrated she is with her teachers. She says they try to draw attention to her in class by offering to help her. She wishes they would just “leave her alone”. She likes to work with one or two classmates with whom she feels safe. When her teachers try to pair her up with other classmates who may have similar interests, but different abilities, Rebecca refuses and claims that her teachers really don’t know what she needs. If they knew what was best for her, they would let her work with the same students every day. She is tired of being embarrassed by her teachers. Rebecca’s parents spend a lot of time contacting the school principal on behalf of Rebecca. Both parents work full-time jobs, so they feel that the responsibility for Rebecca’s education falls primarily with the school. They cannot tell what is wrong with Rebecca’s learning, but they know she is several levels behind her typical peers in reading. The school principal is quick to defend the teachers, knowing that the classrooms are full of students who have a wide variety of learning styles and needs. The principal feels that Rebecca, being about to enter high school, needs to take more responsibility for her own learning. However, the principal has to hear both sides of the story, so has meetings whenever Rebecca’s parents request them in order to make them happy. Rebecca’s parents are tired of being in meetings where promises are made to help Rebecca, but no plans are actually developed with follow-through. Rebecca’s parents feel that the team of teachers and administrators simply hand out a bunch of papers with some numbers on it and talk in a language they do not understand. They are always nice and polite to the family, but then nothing changes.

When you read this story, were you able to see the parent perspective? Did you understand how frustrating it was for the parents to hear their child’s needs weren’t being met at school? Did you feel empathy for the fact that the language used by the team of teachers and administrators was too difficult to understand and that no plans were made with follow-through to help Rebecca? Did it make you angry? What would you do if you were Rebecca’s parents?



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As you were gaining perspective on the parent role in the “Rule of Three” in Rebecca’s story, you may have noticed that you began to “side” with the family. After all, the parents do have a valid point that Rebecca’s needs are not being met by the school team. There is little objective and/or anecdotal evidence to prove that the meetings which are taking place ensure Rebecca’s voice is heard and the parents’ concerns are addressed. While this may seem true in Rebecca’s circumstances, it isn’t true in all situations regarding special education in public schools. Many public schools are very diligent about providing frequent evidence and action plans relevant to student needs. However, for those districts where time, resources, and problem-solving are difficult to manage in the ever-changing educational climate, advocacy can be the answer to both the parent perspective and the school perspective, because it serves to connect both parties by providing a non-judgmental, objective viewpoint, which assists in communicating, in a fair and equitable manner, both parent and school needs.

In the next section, you will see how utilizing an advocate can help take the pressure off parents while ensuring the school team is following the law and consistently communicating the procedures and safeguards in place to assist the student in the educational process. You will discover how the 21st-century educational team is truly an interactive and collaborative force. You will also learn how no teacher, no matter how skilled, educated, or experienced, should be left to fend on his/her own in important legal matters. Teachers are working harder than ever to take care of the needs of a wide variety of students in the most demanding educational climate in the history of education. Parents need teachers, and teachers need parents. They both need support.

“Rule of Three”: Teacher, Parent, and Advocate

Today, teachers are constantly gathering input from a variety of professional colleagues to gauge their students’ progress on a daily basis. If you are a teacher, you may be able to identify easily with the following scenario in a public school setting today.

You’ve read about the parent’s perspective, but for now, let’s analyze things from a teacher’s perspective, so that you can visualize how interdependent teaching has become. It’s Tuesday at 10 a.m. at “Pioneer Middle School”. Even though the school day doesn’t officially begin until 7:45 a.m., the teacher, Ms. Martin, has been at work since 6:30 a.m., preparing for an IEP meeting, co-planning with her sixth grade team, and finishing her lessons for the day. She is currently in a classroom of



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twenty-five sixth graders, teaching a small group of students with different abilities a lesson in fractions. The sixth grade math teacher is sitting on the opposite side of the room with a larger group, instructing the same lesson, using slightly different materials and moving at a faster pace. Ms. Martin has an electronic tablet in her lap as she sits on the floor, handing each student fraction cards to sort equivalent fractions. As she interacts with each student, she records, through the use of a checklist, the student's knowledge of the content she teaches. In the middle of the lesson, one of the students in Ms. Martin's group becomes agitated. He refuses to work, gets up, and leaves the room, and the entire class becomes distracted. Ms. Martin has several decisions to make. She must ensure that the students she is teaching continue their lesson. She must also ensure the student who left the room will not harm himself or others. In addition to this, Ms. Martin is no longer able to collect data on the remaining students in the group.

As this scenario developed, keep in mind that in less than two minutes Ms. Martin made a decision based on one student's behavior which cascaded into involving the cooperation and coordination of services from various professional colleagues in the school. She communicated via walkie-talkie with the secretary in the office that the student was agitated, had left the classroom, and was now roaming the halls. The secretary followed up on that communication in the office by notifying the Dean of Students that an agitated student had left the classroom. The Dean of Students then reached out to the school psychologist to meet with Ms. Martin as soon as the student was found in the hallway. Ms. Martin knew she must then also communicate the follow-up information on this student to the entire sixth grade team of teachers in order to facilitate a plan of action to prevent future emotional outbursts from the student. Ms. Martin is feeling overwhelmed. She knows that this student is in crisis. She also knows the protocols and procedures that must take place in order to assist the student; however, she cannot do it alone. Even as this scenario unfolds, Ms. Martin must first work with the school psychologist to determine the cause of the behavioral outburst, then develop a plan to prevent it from happening for the remainder of the school day. Ms. Martin must ensure she is following the law, as well, by providing this student with as much access as possible to learning with his typically developing peers. In addition to meeting this one student's needs, Ms. Martin still remains responsible for the rest of the students she teaches, whose learning was disrupted because of one student. This creates terrible stress for Ms. Martin, as she feels she is trying to be the "problem-solver" to one student who is clearly in crisis while she is simultaneously



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“letting down” the other students in the group, who were engaged and learning before the incident occurred.

As difficult as it may seem, this incident is a very typical example of what special education teaching is like in public schools today. While the scene unfolded, were you able to identify with this example? How is it similar or different than what you experience? How might you approach the situation differently? Did you have empathy for the teacher who struggled to meet the needs of all the learners?

When a student is in crisis, the school team responds, as best as it can, in an effort to problem-solve. As you can see in the above scenario, the educational team utilized an elaborate protocol, communicating with and engaging various professionals to meet the needs of one student. This happens multiple times on a daily basis in public schools nationwide. While the educational team works to gather data and determine possible future steps within the school setting, the parent is then contacted to relay important information to the school. After all, there may have been an incident before school that affected the student’s behavior. The educational team cannot and should not be the sole decision-maker in student issues. It is therefore necessary for the school and the parent to build a continuum of data that connects home life and school life.

As the parent is contacted, the educational team begins to collaborate and develop a case for the student behavior in question. The parent will then be consulted by the team and any additional evidence will be added to the case. As evidence is collected and analyzed, the team is responsible for communicating the educational implications of the resulting data from the student and the team to the parent. The problem is that the parent may not always understand the implications of the resulting data, because the language is written in a way that the parent is not able to decode or understand due to various cultural or cognitive differences. The parent may also not know what questions to ask the team regarding the legal rights of the child.

The question you should then ask yourself as a teacher is: “If parents are not aware of or able to understand all of the educational and legal implications of the team decision-making regarding their child, are they truly being given an equal opportunity to share in that decision-making regarding those educational and legal implications?” This is an incredibly important question, because great school districts can and do provide the necessary legal materials and information to parents and students, but there is a gap between what the parents hear or perceive



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Excerpted from *Partners for Special Needs*

and what they truly understand about the legal obligations of public schools regarding their child and how they affect the implications for educational instruction. This is not the fault of the public school system, and it is not the fault of the parent. It is simply the consequence of a variety of circumstances, which have resulted in a lack of clear, understandable, and equitable communications developed between the home and the school. Positive communication is truly vital in these circumstances. The complexity of the law and the tremendous diversity of parent knowledge have created a need for advocacy in special education, especially when heated and emotional discussions take place regarding educational decision-making.

We are sure you agree that both teachers and parents want to be respected for their knowledge and opinions. If you review the examples of all the students discussed in this chapter, you will notice that there were valid concerns from both teachers and parents who worked to create a positive, engaging educational climate at home and at school. There is no “right” answer that defends one side; however, there is one “right”, and it belongs to the child. Every child in this nation has a right to a free appropriate public education (FAPE). FAPE is guaranteed by the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act of 2004. For more information on the historical legal landmarks involving education, please visit Chapter 1 of *Partners for Special Needs*.

Special Education Advocates work to be stewards of the law. It is the advocate’s job to act as a liaison between the parent and the school on all legal matters regarding public education. Advocates are the important third party in the special education process, because they help the parent(s) learn, understand, and communicate their child’s rights and needs under the requirements of special education law to the public schools. Thus, advocates act as mediators between the teacher and the parent(s) to complete the final partnership in the “Rule of Three”.

As you can imagine, advocates are not necessarily fighting “against” the school district, but are simply clarifying in various formal and informal settings the state and legal obligations of our public education system to the family. After all, the educator and the school are expected to know and comply with state and federal guidelines. The advocate simply provides a framework for the team to do so in such a way that the process is truly equitable and fair not only to the district, but to the parent and, more importantly, to the child. The beauty of advocacy is that it relieves the pressure of a two-sided situation. It provides clarity. Good teachers



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know that in a 21st-century learning environment, collaborative teaching, using objective data to drive instruction, is not an individual task, but the task of a team. A team of “experts” is responsible for analyzing, planning, and implementing a child’s educational plan. One of the experts in the team of three is the parent. That expertise comes from knowing the child more than any other expert can or ever will.

Shouldn’t parents have the right to understand the implications of their contribution to the decision-making team? Shouldn’t parents understand all of the educational services their child is entitled to by law – not because the parent isn’t an expert on his/her child, but because the parent has the right to participate, according to the law, in how to make the best decision possible? The advocate helps protect the child by empowering the parent with the necessary tools to have an educated and legal voice in the process. After all, if you believe the team is working for the good of the child, then every expert in the team should have all the tools necessary to make the right decision. That is advocacy. That is why the “Rule of Three” works. It serves to empower the entire team to make the best decision possible for the child.

Conclusion

Knowing that a parent has hired an advocate to assist in ensuring that his/her child’s needs are being met used to be scary for some teachers. In fairness, in some schools, it still is. It shouldn’t be, though. As stated at the beginning of this chapter, advocates are on our side as long as we are on the side of the child with special needs. If we aren’t on the child’s side, then we may need to revisit our processes. Advocates are paid to be somewhat one-sided. Work with them, not against them.

The same can be said of parents. Whether or not the parent hires an advocate, that parent wants what is best for his/her child. Schools do, too. There is no reason for us to be on opposite sides, since we have the same end goals. Now, some parents are challenging to work with, for a variety of reasons. In Chapter 7 we provide some resources to assist you in cases where parents are difficult.

The “Rule of Three” illustrates the extreme benefits of working together for the benefit of students. Working together may involve conflicts or “bumps in the road”. However, it is worth it in the end, when all students with special needs can and do receive the free appropriate public education they deserve.