

Special Education: Five tips for success

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To paraphrase T.S. Elliott, October is the cruelest month. If your child has struggled in past the second month of the new school year is the time when it usually becomes clear that he or she is going to have academic challenges. As the parent of a student who for several years experienced classroom failure because of an undiagnosed learning differences, I believe now is the time to act if you think your child needs special education services.

Federal law requires public schools to provide every student a "free and appropriate education, also know as FAPE. While FAPE is federally mandated, it is not always easy to ensure that your child receives services. This week Education Matters offer five things to for parents and guardians to consider while the school year is still new and full of possibility for success.

1) Request diagnostic testing. If your child is having difficulty completing home work and beginning to fall behind with class assignments, you may ask the school to administer academic testing. I suggest that you make your request in writing. Be certain to date your request and follow up with the school if you have not received a reply to your request after 10 school days. You also have the option of documenting your child's need for special education services through private testing. You will of course be responsible for the cost, but it may be indicated if you the school refuses to provide testing and you feel your child needs to be evaluated.

2) Discuss the test result with the school. Once testing has been completed the school should convene an evaluation team to determine if your child is eligible for special education services. This evaluation is called an Individual Education Plan (IEP) meeting. Generally, the team will consist of the parent(s), classroom teacher, special educator, and other service providers such as the speech and language pathologist, occupational therapist, social worker and school psychologist. Should the team decide your child do not need special education services, you have the option to appeal the decision in a due process hearing. Your appeal options are outlined in the Parental Safeguards manual that is given at each IEP meeting.

3) Determine which special education law apply. There are two federal laws that cover FAPE. They are the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act (IDEA) and Section 504 of the federal Rehabilitation Act. This is essential because you will need to know which level of service your child requires to meet his or her educational needs. IDEA cover specific conditions such as speech and language difficulties, hearing impairments, mental retardation and emotional disturbances. Section 504 is covers diagnosed conditions such as ADHD. It is for students who don't qualify for IDEA, but still need extra help and supports in the classroom.

4) Advocate for your child. Your most significant role in this process is being a strong advocate for your child. Your voice and determination guides the evaluation team. Your oversight holds the school accountable for developing and implementing an IEP that will meet your child's needs. Keep in mind an IEP is a contract between you and the school to ensure your son or daughter's academic success. You must make certain the IEP clearly states exactly how the school will meet specific educational goals.

5) Closely monitor implementation and progress. In order for the plan to have any chance of success, it must be implemented as agreed upon in the IEP. You have the right to ask for a team meeting whenever you feel it is necessary to evaluate your child's progress. You may request changes to the IEP if you feel adequate progress is not being made.

It is very important that you carefully read any meeting documentation and bring any discrepancies immediately to the attention of the IEP team. With meticulous attention to detail and persistence, you can ensure your child receives the services he or she needs to have success in the classroom.

Education Matters is dedicated to improving academic outcomes for Baltimore area students. The goal is make families aware of the need to be active participants in our children's education. Future columns will include advice on how to apply to a private school and where to seek help if your child is having academic difficulty. If we are to keep students off the track to academic failure and guide them to a course of success--- education matters.