

To Advocate or Not to Advocate? There is No Question:

WHY PARENTS MUST ADVOCATE FOR THEIR CHILD'S EDUCATIONAL NEEDS

By Christopher Hayes

If you buy a toaster that doesn't work as it's supposed to, you take action ... You don't wring your hands and wait for the company to find you. It's the same with IDEA [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, the law that protects the rights of deaf and hard of hearing children in the classroom] ... The full implementation depends on parents. ~ Cutler (1993)

According to the University of Notre Dame's online dictionary (n.d.), the word *advocacy* comes partly from the Latin word *advocare*, which means "to summon or call to one's aid." This definition provides an interesting look into what advocacy means when looking at the special needs of a child. Advocacy is a summoning of support, a call for resources to address the child's particular needs.

In rural schools, itinerant teachers deal in situations in which the number of deaf and hard of hearing students is high, and the number of trained teachers of deaf and hard of hearing students is low. For example, I am the only teacher for all 40 deaf and hard of hearing students in our county. I work in a mainstream environment with students whose hearing loss varies from mild to profound. For all these students, parents represent vital members of their educational teams. It is our responsibility to encourage and support these parents as advocates and to recognize parents as the critical element in their children's education. Knowledge of their child's disability or challenges does not automatically place a parent in an advocate's role. Sometimes educators assume that because parents are involved, the parents understand their rights and responsibilities surrounding the needs of their child. This may not be the case. Attendance at teacher conferences and school meetings does not constitute advocacy.

A parent's understanding that their child has an exceptionality does not mean that a

Photos courtesy of Christopher Hayes

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Left: Hayes meets with a parent to discuss resources available to deaf and hard of hearing children.

parent understands the educational impact of their child's exceptionality. In my experience, parents with whom I work—all of whom live in rural districts—are not exposed to the means or the resources to become advocates for their children. There are several reasons for this:

- **Parents too often believe that their opinion is not valued or that it does not matter.** According to a study by researcher David Engel from 1988-1990, “parents feel inadequate and unqualified in special education situations across socioeconomic and other demographic classes” (Phillips, 2007). This study demonstrates that it doesn't matter whether rich, poor, highly or minimally educated, parents report that they feel unqualified to direct the education of their children.
- **Parents believe that they don't know as much as the professionals do.** Although parents are the caregivers and have raised the child, there is a feeling that they have little to offer the educational process. Engel reported that “parents feel that their own observations or requests are given little weight and that decisions are based primarily on the recommendations of the professionals” (Phillips, 2007). Whether it is because of the professionals'

unfamiliar language or the extent of their education, parents seldom speak up at meetings and rarely question educators' decisions. This reaction may be even more pronounced in meetings that involve deaf or hard of hearing children because hearing loss is a low incidence event and the chances that parents would have a deep understanding of it or the educational alternatives it entails are slim.

- **Parents are unsure how to navigate the process of addressing concerns.** Parents are naturally concerned about their children's performance. They want to know how their children are doing; they want to know if it is advantageous to change their children's educational program. They also want to know how their children are doing in relation to hearing children and in relation to their deaf and hard of hearing peers. Therefore, we need to explore why parents are so often silent in our educational meetings. Perhaps they are given too much information; or what they are hearing is extremely difficult to internalize and process; or they feel a sense of self-doubt and fear that if they disagree with the experts, the experts will retaliate.



Left: Hayes works with a student on a literacy activity.

Below: Sharing information and resources with families involves and empowers them in their child's education.

- **Parents fear retaliation.** Parents report feeling that if they talk to teachers or staff about needed services or resources, their requests will frustrate or anger the professionals, who will thus take out these feelings on their children.

Reaching Out and Supporting Parents

With over 15 years of experience as an itinerant teacher, I have found it helpful to take deliberate steps to support and foster advocacy from parents. Others may find these steps useful as well. They include:

- **Maintain open lines of communication.** Maintaining an “open door” and allowing face-to-face communication as well as communication through phone and e-mail permit parents to reach out and test ideas, express concerns, talk about their children’s successes or needs, and seek help in finding resources. Setting limitations is necessary, of course, but teachers should try to be available and set aside time when parents can come in to discuss their children.
- **Value parents’ input.** Pay attention when parents talk; observe the ways they interact with and advocate for their children. Parental input is valuable, even when it is subjective. Challenges at home are not necessarily challenges at school and vice versa. This is important information and must be included as input within reports and Individualized Education Programs. Bottom line: Parents know their child, too, but in a different way.
- **Empower parents.** Knowledge is power. Share resources and information, and support parents in their own search for information and ways to advocate. The more you put them in charge, the more they will feel confident and

comfortable with advocacy. People love to know that they can make choices, too, and that they are doing the right thing.

- **Remain professional and unbiased.** We are in a field in which professionals disagree adamantly. In a mainstream itinerant setting, children come from different backgrounds, cultures, socioeconomic backgrounds, language exposures, and communication modalities. Our job is to be conversant with all sides of the issues, to focus on the best educational programming, and to remember that we do this for the child and not for ourselves. Also, teachers are professionals and our conduct reflects on our schools and districts, and especially on our field. Seek to understand, then to be understood.
- **Thank parents and praise them.** Parents are important members of every educational team. They often advocate for their children in ways that may seem small, but we need to notice this and praise their effort. Having a child with hearing loss is a multidimensional condition; parents have a lot to learn, and sometimes not a lot of time in which to make decisions. So, when they act on behalf of their child, it is important to recognize and support their actions.

This places a lot of the cheerleading and pep talking in the hands of the itinerant teacher. However, when I can do this, I see parents become more informed and more actively participate in the advocacy process.



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connotation sometimes changes—and the parents’ actions may be viewed by the school staff as adversarial. This can cause a breakdown in the process of advocacy for parents, and it may change the atmosphere of cooperation between parents and schools.

As educators, we must understand the role of parent advocacy and make recognition of its importance visible. If teachers, counselors, and support staff can help parents see

In My Experience

In my experience, advocacy—adding a voice to support children in their education—has a different connotation depending on who is doing it. We teach our students to advocate for themselves because skills in advocacy will help them throughout their lives. Educators and staff advocate for students, providing information and support. Both forms of advocacy tend to be viewed positively, but when a parent steps in to advocate for his or her child, the

their own importance, they may go a long way to fostering and encouraging parent advocacy. Parents need to be recognized for what they understand and what they do. The more they feel that they are doing the right thing for their child, and the more they see that their input is valued, the better they feel and the less likely they are to feel detached and divorced from the decision making that determines their child’s education. We need to actively encourage their involvement and advocacy.

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