Being a persuasive advocate for students with disabilities

Advocacy in School · https://inclusionactionontario.ca/docs/being-a-persuasive-advocate/

Parents and guardians are their student's best and first advocates. Being a persuasive advocate is an art that takes some practice.

To successfully advocate, you need to be aware of the legal obligations of school boards. It also means understanding the abelist belief system most people continue to operate under, including most parents and guardians. Many, if not most, system administrators still believe segregated classrooms offer the best solution for students with disabilities. This is notwithstanding 50 years of research that demonstrates the opposite.

Nonetheless, advocates need to work productively with the school team. Most administrators and staff want to deliver solid education and support all their students, but are overworked and stressed. Help them help you get to inclusion.

Here are some tips on successful advocacy:

- **Organize your advocacy around the long-term vision for a good life.** Tools like "Charting the LifeCourse" can help you with this. Share that vision with the board. Is what the board is offering going to get your student where you want to go, or somewhere else? Does it solve a problem for today, while creating problems down the road? Can the board assure you that students in special education classrooms will be meaningfully engaged in work and the community after they finish at the school? Ask them how students without disabilities will develop any skills to work with students with disabilities if they are not in the same classroom for most or all of the day.
- **People you influence most are those that are happy around you and have gratitude for you, and you for them.** It is not always easy to be happy in these situations, but try to keep a positive attitude through your discussions with the school and staff. Forgive yourself if you aren't perfect. Forgive administrators and staff if they

aren't perfect.

- **Be a great listener.** Seventy percent of communication is listening.
- **Be credible.** Know the law. Know the research and facts. Don't exaggerate.
- **Be clear** in what you are asking and why.
- **Be prepared.** Understand your student, acknoweldge the challenges and work towards solutions.
- **Be scarce and subtle.** People place more value on things that are not always there.
- **Be a story teller.** People are able to relate to stories better than facts and numbers. How does segregated learning make students feel? As it turns out, not so great.
- **Include your student** or their peers and friends if at all possible.
- **Find ways to get the administration to question their board's system decisions.** When a board says that a segregated classroom will be better for your child, ask them if there is any data to back this up. The research says inclusive general education is the better option. If a board says your child does not need access to the general curriculum, but would be better served by an "alternative curriculum", ask them why. The literature suggests it's a barrier rather than a benefit, and recommends establishing the general education curriculum as the default curriculum for all students. If the principal in the neighbourhood school tells you the school is not physically accessible, suggest now is the time to make the neighbourhood school accessible to all students who live in the neighbourhood. Often, the answer to why segregated classrooms are supported will be because it is administratively easier to organize special education by group, even though special education is supposed to be individualized. It often is not even finanically expedient. If they tell you there is no money to support students in the regular classroom, ask them to explain why they fund segregated classrooms, which are more expensive. Point out that with multi-million and billion dollar budgets, it does not make sense to you that inclusion is too expensive. Are human rights and dignity too expensive? Remind them the whole

budget is to be considered when supporting children with disabilities, not just the "sweatered" special education budget. The Moore decision of the Supreme Court of Canada made that clear in 2012. Remind them that resourcing segregated classrooms over inclusive options is a choice.

Advocacy is an art as well as a skill. It requires practice and it requires a network of people to support you and your goals. Inclusion Action in Ontario is one such network. We're here to help. Join us.