How to advocate for your child

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PTA’s Mission Statement

The overall purpose of PTA is to make every child’s potential a reality by engaging and empowering families and communities to advocate for all children.
Levels of Parental Involvement

*Student achievement improves when parents are involved in their children’s education.*

**INVOLVED IN SCHOOL MANAGEMENT**
- *Suggest activities to broaden parental participation*
- *PTA*
- *participate in Board of Education meetings*

**INVOLVED IN DAILY AFFAIRS OF THE SCHOOL**
- *Volunteer in the classroom, school, library, …*
- *Room parent*
- *PTA*

**BROAD, GENERAL SUPPORT**
- *Support learning at home: read school newsletters and memos, make sure homework is completed, read to and with your child, show that school is important, discuss events at school, expose your child to a variety of experiences, such as museums, zoos, sports, concerts*
- *Ownership of the job of education*

**UNINVOLVED PARENT**

Modified from Fay Brown and Valerie Maholmes, *Education Update*, January 2004
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<th>Staying informed</th>
<th>Local action</th>
<th>State and National action</th>
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<tr>
<td>Read newspapers and magazines</td>
<td>Vote on school budgets, school boards, town representatives</td>
<td>At legislative events, speak up about your opinions</td>
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<td>Attend school board meetings, town, city, and county board meetings</td>
<td>Speak with teachers, principals, and superintendents about issues and concerns</td>
<td>Develop letter writing campaigns</td>
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<td>Read school, district and classroom newsletters</td>
<td>Write letters to the editor of local newspapers</td>
<td>Call or fax the office of local representatives</td>
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<td>Participate in webinars</td>
<td>Work on a PTA function that is designed to benefit children</td>
<td>Vote for state and national representatives</td>
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<td>Attend PTA meetings</td>
<td>Attend parent-teacher conferences and open houses</td>
<td>Become a PTA member</td>
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<td>Visit the state and national PTA website and read PTA newsletters</td>
<td>Develop relationships with local media to share information about issues related to children</td>
<td>Participate in government marches or legislative events</td>
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<tr>
<td>Attend legislative events such as town meetings and brunches to get to know your representatives</td>
<td>Work with local businesses and other organizations to create opportunities to benefit children</td>
<td>Sign petitions</td>
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Get Involved, Be Informed

• Know the facts of your child’s situation, including her strengths and weaknesses and the views of those who work first-hand with your child in school. If your child has a disability, know how it affects your child in school.

• Know your rights and legal procedures. Make sure that you have all the details. Know your school. Get to know teachers, therapists, and other personnel.

• Build positive relationships and contribute to the school environment. Know who the decision-makers are and what motivates them. Stay informed about what’s happening in your school and school district.
Keep Records

• Make your requests in writing, (they do not have to be typed), even if you have also spoken directly to school personnel. Keep copies of everything you get or send to the school. If possible, send important letters to the school “Return Receipt Requested.” If you hand-deliver materials, make note of the date and time, and the person who received it.

• Don’t rely on phone calls or casual conversations. Keep a record of the conversation: date, time, name and position of the school personnel and any decisions reached.

• Whenever possible, ask for written confirmation of what is promised to you.

• Organize your records. A notebook or binder is helpful.
Prepare

• Decide what you think the district could do to solve the problems you’ve identified; if you can figure out what should be done there’s a much better chance of a successful outcome.

• What kind of meeting is being scheduled? Is it an IEP meeting? A mediation session? If you’re not sure, call the district to find out. Ask what will be discussed. Identify any legal requirements that relate to the meeting, such as what kind of notice you must receive, what staff must participate, and any time deadlines that apply.

• Find out about the real story; do not rely on gossip or hearsay.
Prepare, cont.

• Decide what you want to accomplish. Prioritize. Be selective. It may help to bring a checklist and to agree with the district concerning the agenda or topics to be discussed before you go.

• Bring materials that will help you get your point across: evaluations, report cards, evidence of your child’s performance, records, copies of the law or guidebooks, private evaluations.

• Bring someone to help you at the meeting. If you can’t locate an advocate, bring a friend or neighbor or a member of your church or synagogue.
Prepare, cont.

• If necessary, bring others who have worked with your child who may help the school see the problem differently – a psychologist or therapist, or a community leader who works with your child.

• List questions that you want answered to keep your focus during the meeting.

• Make appointments for meetings, and call to confirm them the day before.
Use Meeting Time Wisely

• Be polite and courteous at all meetings. Be on time and respect reasonable time limits.
• Acknowledge when good things have happened and special efforts have been made.
• Sit across from decision-makers. Keep eye contact. Take notes, or have a friend take notes while you listen.
• Say what you want in your own words. Be clear, concise.
• Ask questions! And make sure you get answers.
Use meeting time wisely, cont.

• Take the time to make good decisions:
  – Repeat what they say to make sure you understand.
  – Don’t feel pressured to discuss something if the school did not prepare you, or to make a decision immediately if you need a day to think about it.
  – Take breaks when needed to cool off, consult, or cry.
Use meeting time wisely, cont.

• End meetings with a plan of action or “next steps.” Set deadlines.
• Get a summary of what was agreed to and who was present.
Use Resources Creatively

• Go up the “chain of command.” If you are unsuccessful in resolving matters with the principal, go to the superintendent’s office, your special education director, or other personnel at the district level. If that is unsuccessful, go to the school board.

• Find other parents with your concerns, and approach the problem as a group—use your PTA, support groups, or talk to other parents in your child’s class.

• Look for other programs or resources that may help: violence prevention programs, instructional support centers, mediation.

• Talk with other parents and advocates about what works and what does not work. Learn from each other’s experiences.
Follow Up

• Keep track of deadlines. Communicate with personnel.
• Report on progress as well as problems.
• Be firm about timelines, but patient enough for the school district to accomplish what it needs within those timelines.
Remember

• **YOU** are an expert on your child.
• Focus on the problem, not the people. Avoid getting sidetracked by personal conflicts. Bring the focus back to your child.
• Don’t get bogged down in “legalese.” You will be the most convincing in your own words. Make sure the school district staff speak clearly and don’t get bogged down in jargon you don’t understand – ask questions!
Remember

• Focus on the present and future, not the past. Work first on fixing the present problem; address remedies for the past second.

• **There may be more than one way to get what your child needs.** Work toward mutually agreeable solutions. Be flexible and creative. Problem solve! Problem solve! Problem solve!

• The “big picture” – remember what is truly important to you – and your child – and advocate for it!
Resources

• [www.nyspta.org](http://www.nyspta.org)

• Education law center
  [www.drnpa.org/File/publications/how-to-be-a-good-advocate-for-your-child---tips-for-parents.pdf](http://www.drnpa.org/File/publications/how-to-be-a-good-advocate-for-your-child---tips-for-parents.pdf)

• National alliance on mental illness:
  [www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/CAAC/How_To_Advocate_For_Your_Child.htm](http://www.nami.org/Content/ContentGroups/CAAC/How_To_Advocate_For_Your_Child.htm)
Resources, cont.


• Wrightslaw- http://www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/advocacy_intro.htm

• Davidson Institute for Talent Development http://www.davidsongifted.org/db/Articles_id_10263.aspx
Resources, cont.

• Every Person Influences Children
  http://www.epicforchildren.org

• The parent advocate
  http://www.theparentaladvocate.com

• Rochester Advocacy Center
  http://www.advocacycenter.com  585-546-1700