

BASIC ADVOCACY SKILLS

The purpose of this section of the web site is to describe some of the basic skills and knowledge that you will need to be able to advocate effectively on behalf of your child.

Learning to communicate effectively with teachers and other school personnel is one of the best ways to ensure that your child's school is creating a good learning environment for your child, and to ensure that your child's school is providing your child with the services or programs that he or she needs to succeed in school.

Not everyone starts out by being a good advocate. Many parents and guardians have faced challenges in getting their child's health and education needs met. These parents must learn the skills they need to become good advocates for their children. If they do not learn these skills, their children may fail to get the help they need to achieve their dreams, and lead fulfilling lives.

Having your heart in the right place is very important, but only the beginning.

Developing your advocacy skills is the next step to becoming a more effective advocate.

This web site will . . .

- Give you information, strategies and advice about how to become a better advocate for your child.
- Help you develop your basic advocacy skills, so you can communicate more effectively with teachers, principals and the school board.
- Provide information and connect you to resources on special education, suspensions & expulsions, and other topics related to your child's education.

What are the Skills and Qualities of a Good Advocate?

A good parent-advocate . . .

- Finds friends and people in the community who will help
- Knows his or her rights, and the rights of his or her child
- Knows how the system works
- Asks a lot of questions

- Actively listens to what others have to say
- Is prepared and organized
- Thinks about what they want, and what they want to say
- Takes action, one step at a time, to make sure they get what is best for their child
- Communicates clearly and with confidence
- Is assertive, but respectful and polite

In the following sections of this web site, we provide you with the basic information you will need to begin to develop each of these skills and qualities.

What is Advocacy?

“Advocacy” refers to the efforts of an individual or group to effectively communicate, convey, negotiate or assert the interests, desires, needs and rights of yourself or another person.

An **advocate** is . . .

a person who speaks up for, and defends the rights of him or herself, or of another person.

A **self-advocate** is . . .

a person who speaks up for him or herself, and defends his or her own rights.

A **parent-advocate** is . . .

a person who speaks up for, and defends the rights of his or her child, and is willing to work with a school or other service provider to make sure that their children get the services they need and deserve.

A person does not have to be a lawyer to defend his or her own rights, or the rights of people that they care about. An “**advocate**” is any person who speaks up for his or her own rights or for the rights of others.

To be an advocate, you do not need a perfect understanding of the law. Many people who work for organizations in communities across the province are not lawyers, but have a basic understanding of the law as it applies to your situation. These people can help you to understand your options, and help you to decide if you need to call a lawyer.

When you are working to defend the rights of your child to ensure that he or she is being treated fairly, and getting the education services he or she needs, you are a **parent-advocate**.

Law Reform

The purpose of another kind of advocacy work is to change laws, policies or practices. Some lawyers, community workers, unions and lobby groups advocate with the government or local school boards on behalf of their clients or members, or on behalf of a disadvantaged group in society. This is called “**law reform**”.

Anyone can get involved in law reform. If you would like to get involved in making changes to the education system, there are national, provincial, and local advocacy groups that you can join.

In the **Education & Advocacy Links** section of this web site, we provide a list of some of the parent associations, and other organizations, working to change the education system in Ontario.

Why Should I Learn How to be a Better Parent-Advocate?

Most often, there is no person better to advocate on behalf of children than their parents or guardians.

You are the best person to advocate for your child because . . .

- You know your child better than anyone else
- Not many people care as much as you do about your child
- You are responsible for your child

If you don't speak up for your child, who else will?

Thinking of Yourself as your Child's Best Advocate

The following story was borrowed from the Advocacy section of the Ontario Association of Children's Rehabilitation Services web site:

I remember being at a parent support meeting where we were introducing ourselves and hearing for the first time (when asked what she "did") a mother saying that she was her daughter's advocate. I was very impressed and thought "Ya- that's what you call what I seem to be spending much of my time on lately".

I think at that moment I stopped thinking of myself as "just the mother" or "Mum" (as some professionals insisted on calling me—even though I was not their mother) and began to think of myself as "the advocate".

It gave me a certain feeling of dignity and helped put me on more of an equal footing with those professionals that I encountered. Even if that feeling of equality was only in my own mind, it was very powerful.

Thinking of yourself as your child's advocate is the beginning of the process of becoming a good advocate.

You are Not Alone!

The first and most important thing you should know about advocating on behalf of yourself, or your child, is that you are not alone. Your friends, partners, other family members, and people who work with community organizations can help you.

The links on this web site are a point of contact between your family and agencies in the community that exist to help you.

Don't be Discouraged

Defending your rights and the rights of your child can be an uphill battle. The public education system, like other public institutions (the health system or the justice system, for example), is a big bureaucracy with a lot of rules and a lot of power and resources.

Remember that many students and parents have faced the challenges that you are facing now, and have learned how to advocate for themselves and their children.

You do not need to learn all of the strategies and tools that we introduce to you on this web site all at once.

Many of the basic advocacy skills discussed on this web site are life skills that you can take with you when dealing with public institutions like the education system, the health system, and the justice system.

Even the best parent-advocates and self-advocates do not always find justice or the perfect solution. A good parent-advocate, however, always has the satisfaction that they did the best for their children that the system would allow.

Do I Need a Lawyer?

There are times when getting help from a lawyer is appropriate. On this web site, we will provide you with information about the situations in which you might need a lawyer . . .

for advice;

to argue on your behalf in a Tribunal or Court setting; or

to assist in preparing a human right's complaint.

As mentioned, other people in the community can help you to understand your rights and the rights of your child.

If you think you need to talk a lawyer right now, and you cannot afford a lawyer, the following is a list of legal organizations that may be able to provide assistance. Clicking on the name of the organization will take you to their web site where you can find their contact information.

[Legal Aid Ontario](#)

Legal Aid Ontario (LAO) helps to provide legal services to low-income individuals and families. LAO runs a certificate program that provides legal vouchers to low-income people for a range of legal services in such areas as criminal law, family law, and immigration law.

If your child has been expelled from school, or you are a student that has been expelled you may be eligible for a LAO certificate. You can take this certificate to a lawyer to pay for legal services.

[Hamilton's Community Legal Clinics](#)

Hamilton's community legal clinics are funded by Legal Aid Ontario to provide legal services for low-income individuals and families. The lawyers and legal workers at these clinics do not get directly involved in education law issues. The clinics can, however, help you to find support and advice by directing you to other community agencies that provide assistance and information to parents. They may also be able to assist you in filing a human right's complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

[Justice for Children and Youth](#)

Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY) is a specialty legal clinic located in Toronto that deals with legal issues of children and youth.

[The Child Advocacy Project](#)

The Child Advocacy Project (CAP) is a registered project of Pro Bono Law Ontario. The purpose of CAP is to defend the education rights of children and youth across Ontario. The volunteer lawyers who take CAP cases are experienced and trained in Education Law.

CAP lawyers provide free legal services to:

- Students who are involved in the Special Education process
- Children and youth who are at risk of being suspended or expelled
- Children and youth who are being denied the right to enroll in school

[The Office of the Children's Lawyer](#)

The Office of the Children's Lawyer is a law office in the Ministry of the Attorney General that delivers programs on behalf of children under the age of 18 with respect to their personal and property rights. Lawyers with the office will assist in the representation children in various areas of law including education law.

Finding Support

The most important step you can take to becoming an effective advocate for your child is to find people in the community who will provide you with information and support.

Often parents can feel intimidated or uninformed when dealing with their child's education team. This may be the result of the attitudes and actions of school or school board personnel or of the feelings and attitudes of parents. In either case, it can lead to very ineffective and unproductive relationships.

Finding a support person, and asking them to attend meetings with you, is one of the best ways to even up this power imbalance.

If you have someone with you when you attend meetings with a teacher or principal, school personnel will be more careful about what they say and how they treat you.

How can a Support Person Help Me?

A support person can . . .

- Listen to your problems and help you to find solutions
- Give you moral support
- Attend meetings with you
- Be a witness at meetings to protect you from mistreatment
- Help you gather information that you will need
- Help you to write a letter, or write a letter on your behalf
- Help you to understand how the system works
- Help you understand your rights

Where Can I find a Support Person?

There are many people and organizations in the community that can help you advocate for your child.

Some of these people will be professionals who have the power to influence decisions made about your child. A family doctor or social worker, for example, can write a letter to the school that gives the school information about the special physical, emotional, or educational needs of your child.

A support person can be a friend, family member, or a person who works for a community agency.

How Do I Find People in the Community to Support Me?

Step #1:

Contact a friend or family member who you can talk to, and who will come to meetings with you.

Step #2:

Make some phone calls to community agencies and services in the community. People who work for community agencies often are aware of other services available in the community. Ask them what services they can provide. Ask them if they know of anyone else who may be able to help.

Step #3:

Network with other parents and parent groups for mutual support. Talk to people and organizations in the community that share your concerns.

When trying to find a support person from a community agency, you may not call the most helpful person on the first try. Keep trying until you find someone that can help you.

Know Your Rights

In Ontario, the *Education Act*, along with other regulations and policies, define the education rights of children and youth as well as parents or guardians.

These rights include:

- The right to a public education
- The right to participate in decisions made about your, or your child's education
- The right to have decisions made and to be informed of decisions within legislated timelines
- The right to request a review of decisions made about your child's education
- The right to appeal decisions made about your child's education

On this website, we provide specific information on your rights and the rights of your child in two areas:

Special Education; and

Suspensions & Expulsions.

In this section, we also provide information about other rights of children and youth in Ontario, including rights defined in the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and Ontario's *Human Rights Code*.

Why do I Need to Know my Rights?

To make sure your child gets what he or she has a right to, teachers, principals, and other decision-makers need to know that you understand your rights, and that you have the resources and support you need to defend your rights and the rights of your child.

Defending one's rights, or the rights of someone who cannot speak up for themselves, is not always easy. Though you or your child may be guaranteed certain rights by law, defending your rights can sometimes be a long, difficult, and expensive process.

One of the aims of this web site is to help you to avoid getting into a long, difficult, and expensive legal battle by giving you some of the tools you will need to advocate successfully for your child.

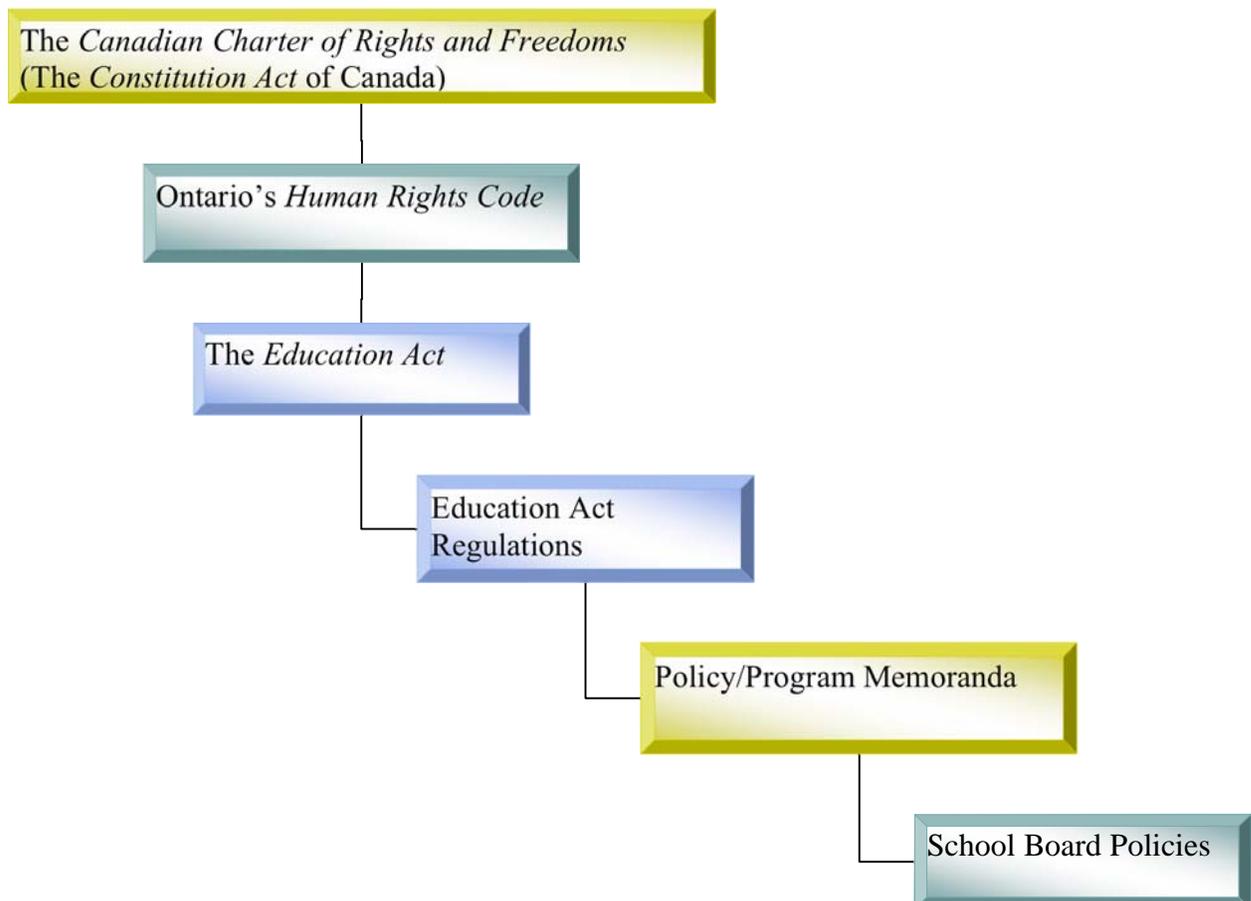
Education Law and Policy

The *Constitution Act* of Canada gives the Ontario government, and other Provinces, the power to decide how public schools in Ontario will be run and funded.

In this section, we provide an overview of the law governing the public education system in Ontario. In the sections of this web site on **Special Education** and **Suspensions & Expulsions**, we provide further detail about the law, and your rights in these specific areas.

The Legal Hierarchy

The following diagram shows the many levels of law and policy that govern the public education system in Ontario.



The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* is part of the Constitution of Canada and, as such, is part of the highest law in the country. The Constitution is referred to as “supreme” law, because it “has supremacy” or “takes precedence” over all other laws and policies made in the Canada. This means that the decisions and practices of the Ministry of Education, schools, and School Boards must be consistent with the rights enshrined in higher-ranking laws, including Ontario’s *Human Rights Code* and the *Charter*.

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* and Ontario’s *Human Rights Code* are discussed later in this section.

The *Education Act*

The *Education Act* is the main piece of legislation, or “statute”, governing public education in Ontario. This legislation provides authority for the creation of all of the main features of the education system. The *Education Act* sets in law the powers and responsibilities of the Minister of Education and School Boards, the authority of principals and teachers, and the rights and responsibilities of parents and students.

In the sections of this web site on **Special Education** and **Suspensions & Expulsions**, we include information on the specific rights related to these areas as set out in the *Education Act* and regulations.

You can read Ontario’s *Education Act* at the following link.

[The *Education Act*](#)

Regulations

Regulations can be understood as supplements to legislation which provide additional detail in a specific area.

Important aspects of the education system in Ontario are governed by Regulations. So, it is important for parents not only to know what is in the *Education Act*, but it’s Regulations as well.

For example, *Regulation 181/98* under the *Education Act* sets out the process for deciding if a child is going to be identified as exceptional by a School Board. It also establishes the roles and rules for Identification, Placement and Review Committees (IPRCs), and the appeal process of IPRC decisions.

The following are links to some of the Regulations under the *Education Act* that may be of interest to parents and guardians. (“O. Reg.” stands for “Ontario Regulation”).

[Identification and Placement of Exceptional Pupils – O. Reg. 181/98](#)

[Special Education Advisory Committees – O. Reg. 464/97](#)

[Special Education Programs and Services – R.R.O. 1990, Reg. 306](#)

[Suspension of a Pupil – O. Reg. 106/01](#)

[Expulsion of a Pupil – O. Reg. 37/01](#)

[Access to School Premises – O. Reg. 474/00](#)

[School Councils – O. Reg. 612/00](#)

Ministry Policy

The Ministry of Education and local School Boards also make policy. Policies provide direction about how things should happen. Policy may take the form of policy statements, directives, guidelines, or memos that define the procedures and practices of schools and School Boards.

The Ministry of Education issues “Policy/Program Memoranda” (plural for memorandum, abbreviated “memo”) which set guidelines for School Boards, and outline procedures and practices. Policies do not have the legal force of Statutes and Regulations, but they are legally binding.

The following are links to some Ontario Ministry of Education Policies/Program Memoranda that may be of interest to parents and guardians. A more complete list is available on the Ministry of Education web site. (“PPM” stands for “Policy/Program Memorandum”).

[Learning Disabilities – PPM 8](#)

[Early Identification of Children’s Learning Needs – PPM 11](#)

[Psychological Testing and Assessment of Pupils – PPM 59](#)

[Educational Programs for Pupils in Government Approved Care and/or Treatment Facilities – PPM 85](#)

[Residential Demonstration Schools for Students with Learning Disabilities – PPM 89](#)

[Development and Implementation of School Board Policies on Antiracism and Ethnocultural Equity – PPM 119](#)

[School Board Policies on Violence Prevention in Schools – PPM 120](#)

[School Board Codes of Conduct – PPM 128](#)

[School Board Programs for Students Who Have Received a Full Exclusion – PPM 130](#)

[Homeschooling – PPM 131](#)

School Board Policy

School Boards also make policies on various matters as directed by the Ministry of Education. The School Board policies of the Hamilton-Wentworth District School Board and the Hamilton-Wentworth Catholic District School Board will be discussed in the sections of this web site on **Special Education** and **Suspensions & Expulsions**.

Government Priorities

Within each Ministry, governments have specific priorities. Governments can act on their priorities by providing funding. These priorities will have an impact on what the Government actually accomplishes for students in Ontario.

For example, the Government or Ministry may decide that it is a priority to reduce the drop-out rate. If the government acts on this priority, a strategy will be developed, and funding provided to implement the strategy.

It is possible to influence government priorities by working with groups that support your goals.

The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms

The *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms* sets in law a range of rights, including the right to life, liberty, and security of the person (Section 7), and the right to equal protection and benefit before and under the law without discrimination (Section 15).

What is a Charter Challenge?

Some parents seeking justice for their children have had to face the Supreme Court of Canada in challenging lower-ranking laws, regulations, policies, or practices by arguing that the regulation, policy or practice is inconsistent with the *Charter*, or inconsistent with earlier decisions made based on the *Charter*.

The Eaton Case

In 1995, the Court of Appeal for Ontario released a landmark decision on the education rights of children with disabilities.

The decision ended a three-year legal battle by Emily Eaton and her parents against the Brant County Board of Education to have Emily integrated into the regular class at her neighbourhood school.

In its decision, the Ontario Court of Appeal recognized that under the *Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms*, segregating children with disabilities in special classes against their parents or guardians' wishes violates their equality rights under section 15(1) of the *Charter*.

This decision, however, was later overturned on appeal to the Supreme Court of Canada.

The following are links to articles describing the Eaton case and the court decisions.

[Eaton Case-Court of Appeal for Ontario \(1995\)](#)

[Eaton Case-Supreme Court of Canada \(1997\)](#)

The Ontario *Human Rights Code*

The Ontario *Human Rights Code* is a provincial law that guarantees everybody in Ontario equal rights and opportunities without discrimination in areas such as employment, housing and services.

The Code's goal is to prevent discrimination and harassment on the grounds of race, colour, sex, disability and age. In total, there are sixteen grounds mentioned in the Code.

Section 1 of Ontario's *Human Rights Code* guarantees the right to equal treatment for all people living in Ontario. This includes the right to the equal treatment of new immigrants to Canada and children with special education needs.

According to Section 1 of Ontario's *Human Rights Code*:

Every person has a right to equal treatment with respect to services, goods and facilities, without discrimination because of race, ancestry, place of origin, colour, ethnic origin, citizenship, creed, sex, sexual orientation, age, marital status, family status or disability.

The following is a link to the Ontario Human Rights Commission web site. This web site includes a plain language guide to Ontario's *Human Rights Code*.

[Ontario Human Rights Code-Plain Language Guide](#)

What is a Human Rights Complaint?

Some parents and guardians who believe that their child has not received appropriate services because of their race, sex, colour, disability, etc. have filed Human Rights Complaints with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

If you believe your rights or the rights of your child under the *Human Rights Code* have been violated, you may want to file a complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission. The following link outlines the process for filing a human rights complaint with the Ontario Human Rights Commission.

[Filing a Human Rights Complaint-OHRC](#)

The Right to Exercise Your Rights without Reprisal

Section 8 of Ontario's *Human Rights Code* guarantees the right of people in Ontario to claim their rights under the *Code* without reprisal, such as harassment or threats. This means that if you file a complaint about your child's school or the School Board with Ontario's Human Rights Commission, that any mistreatment of you or your child is a violation of your rights under the *Code*.

According to the *Human Rights Code*:

Every person has a right to claim and enforce his or her rights under this Act, to institute and participate in proceedings under this Act and to refuse to infringe a right of another person under this Act, without reprisal or threat of reprisal for so doing.

Human Rights Settlement-Toronto District School Board

Another function of the Ontario Human Rights Commission is to investigate problems of discrimination in a community, and to encourage and coordinate plans, programs and activities to reduce or prevent the problem.

In July 2005, the Ontario Human Rights Commission initiated a complaint against the Toronto District School Board (TDSB). The complaint alleges that the TDSB had failed to meet its duty to accommodate racial minority students and students with disabilities in the application of discipline, including providing adequate

alternative education services for racial minority students and students with disabilities who are suspended or expelled. The complaint also alleged that these failures to accommodate racialized students and students with disabilities violated Section 1 of the Ontario *Human Rights Code*, and that the TDSB was, therefore, not meeting its obligation under the *Code* to provide equal access to education services for these groups of students.

The complaint was not referred to the Human Rights Tribunal of Ontario. Instead, a settlement was reached about what the TDSB was prepared to do to avoid discrimination against racial minority students and special needs students in the application of school discipline.

This settlement has implications for other School Boards in Ontario, and should provide a guideline for other schools about what needs to be done to avoid discrimination against racial minority students and special needs students in the application of school discipline.

The TDSB agreed to the following terms of settlement.

[Toronto District School Board-Terms of Settlement](#)

Child and Youth Rights in Ontario

Children and youth have enough to deal with at school without worrying about disagreements between their parents and teachers, or whether they are going to receive the appropriate services at school.

However, children and youth need to know about decisions that have been made about their education, and should be given the opportunity to participate and provide input into these decisions whenever possible.

Justice for Children and Youth (JFCY) is a specialty legal clinic in Toronto that advocates for the rights of children and youth in Ontario. The following link to the JFCY web site provides information on the legal rights of children and youth of different ages. These include the right of students to see their school records, and the responsibility of students between 6 and 16 years of age to attend school.

[Age-based Rights and Responsibilities of Children and Youth in Ontario](#)

Justice for Children and Youth also encourages parents and educators to ensure that children and youth, whether or not they have disabilities, have a voice in decisions made about their education and other aspects of their lives.

Know How the System Works

To advocate effectively for your child, you need to educate yourself about school policy and procedures.

The Chain of Command

Nobody begins fighting for his or her rights by going to the Supreme Court of Canada. There is a chain of command in the school, at the School Board, in the government, and in the courts. Parents and students should understand this chain of command.

Most of the time, it is a bad idea to write or call a superior official (a Superintendent of Education, or the Ministry of Education, for example) before you have done everything you can to work with the person directly responsible for your child's education (the classroom teacher or the Principal of your child's school, for example).

If you have done everything you can to work with the people most directly responsible for your child's education, and your child's needs are still not being met, it is a good time to go up the ladder, and to write or call, the next highest responsible person.

If you have tried to work with school personnel and are still dissatisfied, record in writing any problems that could not be resolved by working with the school personnel, and the efforts that you have taken to resolve the problem. This information may be sent in a letter to the Superintendent of Education responsible for the schools in your area, or to the Superintendent responsible for special education or school discipline issues. If the School Board cannot resolve the problem, you can contact the Ministry of Education.

It may be a good idea to talk to someone that works for an organization in your community, or your support person, before contacting the School Board or the Ministry of Education. They can help you to figure out what you need to say, help you to write a letter, or help to you to develop another strategy.

Your Child's Education Team

Advocating for your child means being part of a team. The members of your child's education team will include you, your child's classroom teacher, and other school personnel.

The school personnel on your child's education team will change, but you will always be a member of your child's education team. This is why your role is so

important and why it is your responsibility to become an effective advocate for your child.

You should also think seriously about finding a support person who is willing to attend school meetings with you.

You and the other members of your child's education team need each other; neither can do the job alone. Learning how to work as an equal team member will help to ensure the best services for your child.

Roles and Responsibilities

Part of knowing how the system works is to understand the roles and responsibilities of each person on your child's education team, as well as the responsibilities of your child, your child's school, the School Board, and the Ministry of Education.

Understanding these roles and responsibilities will ensure that the person you are with whom you are communicating has the authority to make decisions regarding a problem or concern you may have. Understanding these roles and responsibilities will also help you in holding the members of your child's education team accountable.

Understanding your own role and responsibilities as a parent or guardian is also important, and will help to put you in a good position when advocating on behalf of your child. If you or your child are not living up to your responsibilities, it is difficult to claim that the school or school board is not living up to its responsibilities, if you or your child is not living up to your own responsibilities.

In the sections on **Special Education** and **Suspensions & Expulsions** we will provide further details about the responsibilities of the members of your child's education team, school boards, and the Ministry of Education in these areas.

The Ministry of Education

The Minister of Education represents the interests of the Ministry of Education at cabinet and oversees the development of education legislation, regulations, and policies.

The Ministry's roles and responsibilities fall within four main areas:

- legislation, regulation, and policy development
- funding and fiscal management
- setting policies and guidelines for school system management, including school trustees, Directors of Education, Principals, and other School Board officials
- developing programs and curriculum and setting requirements for student diplomas and certificates, and approving textbooks and other learning materials

School Boards

Ontario's School Boards operate Ontario's publicly funded schools. Local School Boards are responsible for the delivery of services according to the *Education Act* and its regulations and policies.

School boards are responsible for:

- determining the number, size, and location of schools
- building, equipping, and furnishing schools
- providing education programs that meet the needs of the school community, including needs for special education
- preparing an annual budget
- supervising the operation of schools and their teaching programs
- developing policy for safe arrival programs for elementary schools
- establishing a school council at each school
- hiring teachers and other staff
- helping teachers improve their teaching practices
- enforcing student attendance in accordance with the *Education Act*

School Principals

It is in the schools and classrooms that programs and services are delivered. The school personnel are responsible for direct delivery of services and decisions made about your child's education.

Principals are responsible for the organization and management of individual schools, including any budget assigned to the school by the school board. They are also responsible for the quality of instruction at their school and for student discipline. One or more vice-principals may also be assigned to the school to help the principal with his or her work.

Principals are responsible for:

- admitting and placing students

- administering the school's budget
- maintaining student records
- ensuring report cards are sent to parents
- developing a school safe arrival program with the help of the school council, parents, and the community in elementary schools
- ensuring student supervision and school discipline
- determining the organization of the school and ensuring ongoing maintenance of the school buildings
- assigning teachers to classes, and assisting and supervising them
- making recommendations to the school board on the appointment, promotion, demotion, and dismissal of teachers

Teachers

Teachers are responsible for:

- preparing lesson plans and teaching classes
- encouraging students in their studies and evaluating their work and progress
- supervising student behaviour and maintaining classroom discipline
- demonstrating good citizenship and respect for all groups of people
- acting as teacher-advisors for students in Grades 7 to 11 (for example, helping students complete their annual education plans, and monitoring their school performance and progress towards career goals).

Parents and Guardians

Parents and guardians also have rights, roles, and responsibilities.

Parents and guardians are responsible for . . .

- ensuring that their children attend school regularly and on time
- promptly reporting to the school their child's absence or late arrival

- helping their child be neat, appropriately dressed and prepared for school
- showing an active interest in their child's school work and progress
- becoming familiar with and informed about board policies and procedures in areas that affect their children
- becoming familiar with the Code of Conduct and school rules
- communicating regularly with the school
- participating in meetings with teachers and other members of your child's education team
- encouraging and assist their child in following the rules of behaviour
- assisting school staff in dealing with disciplinary issues.

Students

Students in Ontario's public education system are entitled to being treated with dignity and respect. In return, students have the following responsibilities.

Students are responsible for . . .

- arriving at school prepared, on time and ready to learn
- showing respect for themselves, for others and for those in authority
- refraining from bringing anything to school that may compromise the safety of others
- following the established rules and taking responsibility for his or her own action

The following link to the Ministry of Education web site provides an overview of the roles and responsibilities of the Minister of Education, School Boards, Principals, Teachers, Students and Parents.

[Roles and Responsibilities – Ministry of Education, Ontario](#)

Staying Organized

Putting together a file or record of your child's education needs, letters from the school relating specifically to your child's education, and other information, is necessary if you want to advocate effectively on behalf of your child.

A three-ring binder is a good way to keep your child's file organized. You can add, copy and transfer information easily, and use dividers to separate information into different categories.

Most importantly, keeping your records up-to-date and organized will help you to find information easily if there is a problem.

Keep this file at home, and take it with you to meetings at your child's school.

What do I include in my Home File?

Gather all materials that relate to your child's education and education needs, such as health records, school reports, and work samples (if appropriate). Ask for copies of all reports from doctors, and other professionals that have worked with your child.

Keep a record of your child's milestones, of his or her accomplishments, or changes in your child's emotional, intellectual and physical needs.

Keep a record of your own milestones as an advocate, of your successes and challenges. When you call or visit the school you can evaluate your success as an advocate by asking yourself questions. Did everything go smoothly? What could I do better next time?

Write down all telephone calls that you make to get information or services. Include the name and title of person you spoke with, the purpose of your call and its results, as well as the date and when to call back. Get a commitment for a follow-up phone call.

Write down the date, purpose, and outcome of all visits, appointments, meetings, and conferences.

Observe your child for brief periods and record in your notebook what you see and hear. Include the date and location of your observation.

Write down difficult or special words that relate to your child's education needs. Get explanations and examples from professionals.

Keep a dated copy of all letters you receive regarding your child's education and health.

Make copies of information provided to you by resource people in the community that you found useful.

Keep a record of the names of school personnel, school board members, school psychologists, and people you have talked to in the community. Obtain names, addresses and telephone numbers so that you can contact them for help and information.

How do I use my Home File?

- Maintain your Home File and take it to meetings.
- Review records before meetings.
- Have your Home File in front of you when you are talking with people face-to-face or on the phone. Take notes, and add them to your Home File.

Preparation and Planning

Identify Problems Clearly

Before communicating with school staff, it is important to think about your concerns, or problems, to be clear about your options, and to think about how the problem might be resolved.

Set Priorities

Setting priorities will help you to figure out what is really important and what is not.

Exercise:

Write all of your problems or concerns on a piece of paper.

Rank your problems.

“1” for the most important or urgent.

“2” for the second most important.

“3” for the third most important, etc.

Deal with one problem at a time. This will help you and your child’s education team to focus, and to solve each problem one at a time.

Choose your battles carefully—you may not have enough time and energy to fight them all.

Set Positive Goals

For each priority problem or concern you must decide what you want to happen.

If you are not sure what you think should happen, you probably need more information, or you need to talk to a support person.

Sometimes you only know what you don’t want to happen. You might be thinking,

“I don’t want my child to be suspended.”

This can be stated as a positive goal. Your positive goal is to do what you can to prevent your child from being suspended.

Figure Out Your Options

Before you decide what you want to happen, find out what your options are.

Once you have examined all of the options, then you will be ready to make an informed decision about what you want to happen.

This will be your position when you meet with other members of your child's education team like the classroom teacher or principal.

Before meeting with members of your child's education team, write down how you would answer the following questions. Don't worry if you don't have the answers to these questions right now.

What do I want to happen?

When do I want it to happen?

Who needs to take what action to make it happen?

Who is going to monitor whether these actions are taken?

These are questions you should be able to answer either before a meeting with members of your child's education team, or which you will be able to answer after you have had the meeting.

Make sure that what you want to happen is realistic. This does not mean giving up, or letting other people tell you that something is not possible.

Communicating Effectively

Keep the Lines of Communication Open

Probably, the most important thing you can do to be an effective advocate is to keep the lines of communication open, and to form good working relationships, with your child's classroom teacher/s, the principal, and other member's of your child's education team.

The Classroom Teacher

The classroom teacher is the single most important person affecting your child's education. The teacher has tremendous influence on your child's happiness at school and is the person that spends one-on-one time with your child on a daily basis.

One of your most important roles as your child's advocate is to communicate your child's needs to teachers and other people who work at the school. Most teachers will welcome parents and want to hear your ideas.

Communication with the classroom teacher needs to happen on a regular basis, not just once or twice a year. You can keep the lines of communication open by .

..

- writing notes to the teacher (your child's agenda book can be a useful communication tool for this)
- following up on notes from the teacher with a telephone call
- making classroom visits
- attending teacher-parent meetings

All too often parents and teachers disagree. However, you and the other members of your child's education team do not have to start out as adversaries or antagonists. If parents and teachers work together as partners, problems can be addressed quickly, and the needs and concerns of parents, school staff and your child can be addressed quickly in decisions taken about your child's education.

Children are always winners when teachers and parents work together effectively.

You can build good relationships with the classroom teacher and other school personnel that work directly with your child.

The following is a short list of ways that you can build and maintain good relationships with school personnel.

- Maintain contact with the teacher
- Share information and suggestions
- Be supportive
- Participate in meetings with the teacher and other school personnel

When your child's education team is meeting to solve a problem or make a plan, no one member should be trying to force a solution or plan on the other members of the team. Every member should have ideas about possible solutions and be ready to share them. Each member needs the chance to share in the process of planning and deciding.

Keeping the Focus on your Child

Keeping the team's focus on what is best for your child is your first priority.

When your team meets, you all have valuable information to share with one another.

One of your responsibilities is to provide information to your child's education team about your child's strengths and needs, and about your family and your home life. This information is as important as the observations or evaluations of the professionals on the team. If you don't speak for your child, the team will make decisions anyway, but with insufficient information. They need your input.

Positive and specific messages that focus on your child's needs, will make the teacher feel that you see him or her as a partner on your child's education team, who can work with you to find positive solutions to meet your child's needs.

Example:

"My son/daughter has been struggling in your math class; She says it is because she cannot concentrate because the other children are too noisy. Do you think there is anything we can do to make it easier for my son/daughter to concentrate during class?"

When you do have a problem, do not say to the teacher,

"You are the worst teacher my child has ever had. This is going to be the worst year ever."

Re-focus on your child's needs, and work with your child's education team to identify the problem clearly and look for positive solutions.

Sometimes the teacher or other school staff will not see the problem in the same way that you do. Listen, and try to understand the problem from the teacher's point of view. Now you can work together with the teacher to find a positive solution to the problem, that addresses both your concern and the teacher's concern.

You might say, for example,

"my son/daughter has not been happy in school lately, and says that you pick on him/her. Are you aware of any problem?" "Is there something we could do to make my son/daughter feel better about going to school?"

Offer your assistance in the classroom. Decide with the teacher what level of involvement is appropriate.

Offer your time and talents. Volunteer to be a grade mother or father, help with a field trip, record a textbook chapter for a student with learning disabilities, etc.

Be Respectful

Even if you do not like someone who works for the school, it is still important to respect their professional roles as a teacher or principal, for example.

Showing respect to other people does not mean agreeing with everything another person says.

You show your respect for other people when . . .

- You ask questions
- You listening carefully to what others have to say
- You work with others, rather than always disagreeing or being confrontational
- You are polite, and watch your tone of voice and body language

How you say something can be just as important as what you say. It is usually not a good idea to raise your voice unless you have planned on what you want to say, and you have planned on making this point clearly and forcefully.

You can show openness to the ideas of the other members of your child's education team by phrasing your demands as suggestions or preferences. You can use phrases like . . .

"I was thinking that it would be a good idea if . . ."

"I would prefer . . ."

"What do you think of the idea?"

Ask a Lot of Questions

Asking questions is another way of showing respect for the ideas and suggestions of others, and your openness to working as a team.

If you do not understand something, ask questions until you do understand.

Active Listening

Sometimes people in a conversation do not always hear what the other person is saying because they are arguing with the other person in their head.

When you are upset or thinking about something else (like what you want to say next), you may not really be listening.

Active listening means staying calm and quiet, and focusing on what the other person is saying.

Repeat the main points back to the other person, so that they know that you have been listening and understand what they are saying.

A good active listener will also take notes while they are listening to other people at a meeting or during a telephone call.

Always have a pen and paper when you are speaking with school or School Board personnel. Write down any important information, and include the name/s of the people at a meeting, or the person you are speaking with on the phone. Also include the date and time of the conversation. Write down any actions that you have agreed to take, as well as any actions that the other people have agreed to take.

Dealing with Emotions

It is important to notice if your own feelings are getting in the way of expressing yourself clearly and in an appropriate way. It is hard to be respectful, when you are full of emotion.

If you are feeling confused or angry . . .

- ask questions until you understand
- take a break
- reschedule the meeting or telephone conversation

Just as you may become anxious, angry or defensive when trying to get services for our children, school personnel may also react emotionally to attitudes and accusations made by parents. They may become defensive when attacked or presented with requests or demands they feel are inappropriate. The members of your child's education team can avoid this situation by taking some time apart to calm down and gather their thoughts.

Stay Focused of Your Purpose

Know the purpose of your call or meeting and stay on that purpose until it has been achieved.

Make sure you speak up if plans and decisions that have been agreed to by your child's education team are not followed.

Positive Advocacy

You have the right and responsibility to be involved, but you must be careful to exercise this right in a positive way.

Strive for a dialogue where you are working with the members of your child's education team to develop ideas and solutions, rather than arguing every point.

If you show that you care about your child's education, most classroom teachers will also want to show you that they care too.

Before you meet with your child's classroom teacher, write out a list of what you want to discuss. Start this list with the good things your child's teacher is doing.

Think of the good things that the classroom teacher is doing for your child, and praise them if you think it is appropriate. This will show your respect for the work that the teacher is doing, and will help to build trust and mutual goodwill.

You might say, for example,

“Ms./Mr. [teacher’s name], I wanted to thank you for working so hard to help my son/daughter make progress in math.”

Or,

“Ms./Mr. [teacher’s name], you have been very helpful in making my son/daughter feel safe and welcome at school.”

Even if you do not like the teacher, always respect the teacher’s position.

Even when there is a serious problem at school, it is important not to take your anger out on the teacher or other school staff.

Approach the teacher to discuss your concerns in a positive, non-threatening way.

Criticizing the teacher directly will not help you get what you want for your child. Negative messages that focus on concerns you have about the teacher or the school may put the other person on the defensive, and make it more difficult to work with them to find a solution.

Acknowledge the efforts of those people who have helped you to resolve a problem.

Being Assertive

Effective advocates are assertive advocates. Assertiveness can be defined as the direct, honest, comfortable and appropriate expression of feelings, opinions and beliefs through which one stands up for his/her own rights - without violating the rights of others

--Alberti & Emmons, 1970

Assertiveness is . . .

- Expressing your needs clearly and directly
- Expressing your ideas without feeling guilty or intimidated
- Sticking up for what you believe in
- Knowing what your rights are and how to get them
- Treating professionals as partners
- Exhibiting self-confidence when communicating
- Self-reliance and independence
- Persisting until you get what you need and deserve

Assertiveness is Not . . .

- Relinquishing your right and responsibility to advocate
- Beating around the bush before stating your needs
- Feeling too guilty or afraid to express your needs
- Agreeing with others when you would rather not
- Leaving decisions to others because "they know best"
- Reliance and dependence on others, giving into defeat
- Giving up when you run into "red tape"
- Making assumptions and decisions before you obtain all the facts

Communication Styles

There are three ways that we can communicate with other people; we can be assertive, aggressive or passive.

Assertive

Assertive behavior involves standing up for our personal rights and expressing our thoughts, feelings and beliefs in direct, honest, and appropriate ways that do not hurt others or violate their rights.

Assertiveness involves respect--respect for ourselves by expressing clearly our needs and defending our rights, and respect for the other person's needs and rights.

We can be assertive and polite at the same time.

The goal of assertive behaviour is to defend our rights and to have our needs met, while showing respect for other people.

Aggressive

When people are aggressive, they stand up for their rights and express their thoughts and feelings in ways that are inappropriate, and show disrespect for the other person or violates their rights.

The goal of aggressive behavior is to dominate or humiliate other people.

Passive

Passive behavior fails to express feelings and beliefs honestly, and permits others to "walk all over" them. It can also include expressing themselves in an apologetic and self-degrading manner.

The goal of passive behaviour is to please others and to avoid conflict.

Guidelines For Assertive Advocacy

- Be specific when introducing a complaint.
- Focus on one issue at a time.
- Don't just complain. Overloading another person with grievances can make her/him feel hopeless, and suggests that either you have been hoarding complaints, or you have not thought carefully about what really troubles you.

- Do not focus on past grievances. Focusing on problems that happened in the past can interfere with what you are trying to accomplish right now. Complaints, or grievances should be brought up at the earliest possible time, or the other person has the right to suspect that they have been carefully saved as weapons.
- Take time to think before you speak. Do not feel that you must rush to say something or to sign something.
- Do not consider counter-demands until your original demands are clearly understood, and there has been a clear response to them.
- Consider compromise. Look for solutions that meet the concerns of all members of your child's education team.
- Don't assume that you know what another person is thinking until you have heard what that person has to say.
- Do not assume that you know how another person will react, or what they will accept or reject.
- Avoid correcting another person's statement about his/her own feelings, or telling another person how s/he should feel.
- Repeat major points of a discussion to make sure that there is agreement, and to reassure the other person that you understand what has been discussed.
- Avoid sarcasm.
- Avoid labels and name-calling. Do not be intolerant. Be open to the feelings of other people. Try not to say things that you will regret later, and never make racist or sexist remarks that will offend others and violate their rights.

Good Meeting Practices

Meetings with teachers, principals and school board officials are the most important opportunities you will have to gather information about your child's education, establish relationships with your child's education team, and to provide input into how your child's education needs should be met.

In this section, we provide information about the skills you will need to effectively advocate for your child at meetings with your child's education team.

What Do I Need To Do Before the Meeting?

If you are nervous about the meeting and want to be an effective advocate for your child, spend some time before the meeting to prepare.

Think about the purpose of the meeting. Think about what you would like to be the outcome of the meeting.

If at all possible, do not go to a meeting alone. Take someone who knows your child, or a support person from a local community organization.

Find out the names and job titles of the key players at the meeting.

Bring your child's Home File.

It is a fact that your appearance, and what you are wearing, may affect how others perceive you, so dress appropriately.

Arrive at the meeting on time.

What Should I Do at the Meeting?

Your choice of seating can make a difference. To project an image of confidence, you may want to sit at the head of the table or next to the most senior official at the meeting.

If you bring a support person to the meeting, avoid contradicting each other.

Focus on your child's interests. Repeat, as often as necessary, your desire and commitment to working with your child's education team to developing an appropriate program for your child.

Present your solutions as one possible solution. Present your reasons before proposing a solution.

Ask the members of your child's education team how similar challenges or difficulties have been solved for other children. Be open to creative solutions from other members of your child's education team.

If you feel that you are being intimidated or not being shown respect, ask to re-schedule the meeting, and find a support person to attend future meetings.

Do not threaten any action you are not prepared to carry out. Let them know you are aware of your rights without threats.

Make a record of your meeting by taking notes or bring a tape recorder. Don't hesitate to ask someone to repeat something if you need more time to write it down.

Write down the date, time, and place of the next meeting.

Signing Documents

If you are asked to sign a document, make sure you clearly understand what you are signing. If you have any doubts, tell the people at the meeting that . . .

- a) you would like some time to think about what you are signing;
- b) you would like to have another meeting to discuss issues further;
- c) you cannot sign because you do not agree with what is written in the document--give the reasons why you disagree; or that
- d) you will sign, but only if certain changes are made to the document.

Following-up on the Meeting

It may be a good idea to follow-up meetings with a letter or note, thanking the person for his or her time, and confirming what you understand to be the commitments made and necessary next steps.

For longer meetings you may want to follow-up with a letter to the chairperson, or highest-ranking person at the meeting.

Do not be discouraged if you walk out of a meeting and then realize that you should have said or done something differently. This is part of the evaluation process and will help you in communicating more effectively next time.

If you do think of something important after the meeting, write a note or letter, or call the school. If there was a conflict or you are sorry about something you said

at the meeting, act quickly to resolve the conflict or repair any misunderstandings.

What Basic Information Do I Need?

To be an effective-parent advocate at meetings, there is basic information that you need about the key players attending the meeting, what roles they play on your child's education team, and about basic meeting procedures.

The following is a list of 12 questions that you should be able to answer, either because you already know the answer, or because you have collected the information during the meeting (by asking these questions at the meeting if necessary).

Beginning of the Meeting

1. What is the name and job title of the chairperson of the meeting?
2. Who will be taking notes at the meeting?
3. Has everyone at the meeting been introduced?
4. Do I know everyone at the table and why they are there?
5. Has the purpose of the meeting been clearly stated?
6. Is there a written agenda for the meeting?
7. Have I been asked what I would like to discuss during the meeting?

Conclusion of the Meeting

8. Have the main points of agreement or disagreement been summarized by the chairperson?
9. What actions have members of the meeting agreed to?
10. Will I receive a written statement of the actions that have been agreed to at the meeting? Ask the chairperson what documentation you will receive following the meeting.
11. What is the date, time, and location of the next meeting?
12. If a meeting is not scheduled, is it necessary to hold another meeting to discuss unresolved issues?

Meeting with the Classroom Teacher

Meeting with your child's classroom teacher at the beginning of the school year is a good first step to ensuring your child's success at school.

The first meeting between you and your child's classroom teacher is a good time, to talk about your expectations for the school year.

Teachers should provide parents with an overview of instructional content areas, his or her teaching style and philosophy, and the classroom routine. If this information is not provided by the teacher, ask.

Teachers can help parents to become active partners in their child's education by sharing information about class routines, grading criteria, homework, test-schedules, projects and class trips. Having this information will make it easier for parents or guardians to ensure that assignments are handed in on time, that their child has the necessary permission to attend a class trip, or are prepared for a project.

Parent-teacher interviews are confidential. So, if you choose, you may share information about your family, or other personal information that might be affecting your child's progress or behaviour at school. For example, information about changes in your family due to a family illness or a period of unemployment.

Parents can also talk to the teacher about what works at home in motivating your child or improving performance.

When teachers and parents share this information both will be in a better position to ensure that your child is successful and happy at school.

Regular Parent-Teacher Contact

An important goal of the first parent-teacher meeting is to discuss a plan for regular and ongoing contact that will ensure that concerns are addressed before they turn into problems. By agreeing upon a system for regular and ongoing communication, parents and teachers can monitor progress, and address unexpected needs quickly. You can ask:

"How often should we meet to discuss my child's progress?"

"What is the best time to meet?"

Parent-Teacher Interviews

Parent teacher-interviews are held two or three times a year at the end of each term when report cards are sent home. They are very short—usually 10 or 15 minutes—so it is important to prepare before the interview to make the best use

of that short time. If you need more time, you can schedule another appointment to meet with the teacher.

Before the Meeting

Read your child's report card, and make notes about any questions or concerns you may have. Talk to your child about the report. Write down any questions that you would like to ask the teacher.

Bring your list of questions to the meeting. Arrive a few minutes early.

Here is a list of the kinds of questions that you might want to ask the teacher:

- What does my child do well?
- What skills does she or he still need to develop?
- Is my child getting extra help?; in what subjects?
- What is your homework policy?
- How much time should my child be spending on homework?
- How does my child get along with the other students?
- How can I help my child at home?
- What is the best way to contact you if I have more questions?

During the Meeting

The teacher will review your child's report card or show you samples of his or her work.

Ask your questions.

Tell the teacher what your child likes and dislikes about school.

Let the teacher know if you think there is too much or too little homework.

Take notes so that you can share the teacher's comments with your child.

Follow-Up

Talk to your child. Stress the positive things the teacher said.

Talk about how you and the teacher are going to help with the things that need to be improved. Listen to your child's comments.

Are you happy that your child understands how things are going to improve, and his or her responsibilities?

Is your child ready and motivated to help make the improvements happen?

Does everybody understand the goals and what actions need to be taken to accomplish these goals?

When and how will you know when the goals have been accomplished?

Monitor improvement with the teacher and your child.

Good Telephone Practices

Preparation--Write down your questions before hand. Focus on one issue.

Make sure that you are calling the person who is directly responsible for dealing with your problem.

Identify yourself by name. Speak clearly. Identify your child, and your relationship to the child. Explain why you are calling.

Do not argue; just express your views.

Ask questions. Listen. Keep notes.

Briefly review any areas of agreement and any actions that you or the person to whom you are speaking have agreed to act on. These are commitments to action that the school, yourself, or your child has made.

If you believe it is appropriate to have a written record of the conversation (besides your written notes), follow-up with a letter, or request a written response. Restate your name and provide your mailing address.

If you cannot reach the person, leave a message with your name, number and reason for calling. If you do not receive a response within a few days, call until you receive a response, or call that person's supervisor.

Write down the date, subject or topic, and name of the person to whom you spoke, and the outcomes of your conversation.

Follow-up your telephone calls with a note or letter to confirm what you understand to be the actions that were agreed to on the phone.

Tips for Writing Letters

Many times a telephone call will not be effective or may not produce results. Writing a letter is a good way to record a problem and your efforts to have the problem addressed.

Writing letters to decision-makers can be a very effective way of making a complaint, solving problems in having your child's education needs met, or to advocate for changes to the public education system. Letters create pressure, build accountability, and encourage others to become more productive and responsible.

Writing letters can also be a good way of sorting out your ideas, and figuring out what you want. Letters also record complaints or problems. If no one responds to your problem, you cannot be accused later of not telling anybody about your problem. How would they know about the problem, if they were never informed?

In your letter:

- Focus on one issue.
- Keep your letter short and simple--no more than 2 pages.
- Write to the person who is most directly responsible. If you are not sure who is most directly responsible, call the school board or someone who works for one of the local, community organizations listed in the **Education & Advocacy Links** section this web site.
- Write your letter on a computer or typewriter if possible. If your letter is hand-written, make sure that your writing is legible.
- State clearly why you are writing.
- If you are advocating on behalf of yourself or a family member, make your letter personal. Talk about your own situation. Explain the problem and how the problem is affecting your family.
- State what you want to be done, what action you want to be taken. Be as specific as possible about what you want. Be realistic in your requests. Give reasons for your opinion.
- If you provide evidence in your letter, include these documents separately. Do not include confidential documents.
- Read your letter to someone else. Ask them what they think. Proofread your letter, and make changes where necessary.

- Show that you are expecting more than a standard form response. Use phrases like "I look forward to your comments" or "I look forward to your response".
- Suggest a deadline for a response to your letter.
- You may want to send copies of letters to the supervisor of the person to whom you are writing the letter. At the bottom of your letter, identify or "cc:" any other copies you send, so that the person to whom you are writing is aware that his or her supervisor knows about your letter.
- Include your complete return address.

Always keep a copy of all letters you send and receive in your Home File.

Conflict Resolution

Your Right to Participate

As a parent or legal guardian, you are guaranteed the right to participate in decisions concerning your child's education. To exercise this right, you have the responsibility to actively participate in the decisions made by the school about your child's education.

School personnel also have the right to disagree with you, and to put forward solutions. However, they do not have the right to eliminate you from the process of making decisions about your child's education. School personnel in this partnership are responsible for recognizing the value of your opinions, and for facilitating or making parent participation easy.

The right to participate in decisions concerning your child's education can be taken away if you do not act in a respectful and non-threatening way.

See Section on **Access to School Premises**

Your Right to Disagree

As your child's best advocate, you have the right to disagree with teachers or other service providers about your child's education needs, and whether the school is meeting those needs.

Parents and school staff do not have to like each other personally to be able to work together effectively (though it helps). It is important, however, for both parents and school staff to respect each other's roles and positions.

Look for Common Ground

Sometimes parents and school staff will not see a situation or incident the same way. When working with your child's education team you may thus experience differences of opinion or conflict. Remember that the members of your child's education team are individuals with different experiences, outlooks, and values. This means that they will begin meetings with different ideas about what the problem areas are and what the possible solutions might be.

When there is a disagreement between you and other members of your child's education team, the disagreement should be resolved as soon as possible.

When you are speaking with school staff, listen to their ideas, and make suggestions.

If you do not agree with, or understand, decisions made in a meeting with school staff, ask to schedule another meeting for the following week, to clarify decisions, or think about other possible solutions to a problem or concern.

As a first step to solving problems, look for common ground. Try to see things from the other person's perspective.

Recognize when there is agreement, and move on to the next issue.

If you are getting angry or confused, tell school staff that you would like a few minutes to yourself to calm down or gather your thoughts, or ask school staff to reschedule the meeting.

Positive Disagreement

Disagreement can be positive, if it helps to bring your child's education team to a shared solution, or consensus.

Most members of your child's education team will have the interests of your child in mind when negotiating with you about the best plan for your child. Parents and school personnel may, however, disagree about what is an appropriate solution to a problem or concern.

When there is conflict between you and the other member's of your child's education team, the final obligation for both parent and school personnel is to stop looking at each other as adversaries and to start working together to meet the needs of the child.

Resolving Conflicts So that You Can Go Back to Planning

One basic process for resolving conflicts among members of your child's education team is to re-focus on what is really important, your child's well-being and education. Probably, the first and hardest step in resolving conflicts is to stay calm, and to arrange a meeting of your child's education team. Your child's education team needs to come together when there are serious conflicts. You or the principal can invite a social worker, or arrange to have a supervisor from the school board be at the meeting. Bring a support person to the meeting.

The first thing your child's education team needs to do is to come to agreement on the problem or problems. This is a time for the members of the child's education team to re-focus on the child's needs and to really listen to each other.

Make sure that you and school staff have agreed on what the problem is. Once you and school staff agree on the problem, the focus of the discussion should

turn to looking for ways to resolve the problem, or ways to make sure that the problem does not happen again in the future.

Once your child's education team has come to an agreement on problems, you can return to the planning process. If your child's education team can agree on the problems, they can begin to work to find solutions to each problem.

1. Prioritize the problems.
2. Brainstorm solutions. This is a time to be creative, not critical, so welcome all suggestions or ideas.
3. Evaluate the suggestions. Eliminate those that will not work. Then discuss the strengths and weaknesses of the others.
4. Choose the best solution. The best solution will be the one that meets the needs of the student, and that all members of your child's education team can agree on even if it wasn't their first choice.
5. Decide what steps need to be taken, by whom, and by when. Get this plan in writing.
6. Implement the plan.
7. Evaluate the plan. A date and time should be set to talk about how the solution is working.
 - a) If there is a problem, make improvements to the plan.
 - b) If the plan was not implemented properly, make sure that the Principal or School Board supervisor accepts responsibility for making sure that the plan is implemented, and that they understand that they will be held responsible if the plan is not implemented properly.
 - c) Maybe a different solution is needed. Go back to brainstorming and work from there.

Access to School Premises

Teachers, Principals, and other school and school board personnel have a right to work in a secure and harassment-free environment. If school personnel are threatened or harassed, the principal can ban parents from school premises.

This is a worst-case scenario for the parent-advocate, but does happen.

If you are denied access to the school premises, it will be almost impossible to advocate for your child because you will have lost direct contact with the people directly responsible for providing your child's education.

If your emotions are getting the best of you, if you feel that you are about to act in a threatening or aggressive way toward school personnel, excuse yourself and get out of the school, or get off the phone.

When you have calmed down, think about the situation, re-focus on the needs of your child, and call the school to arrange another appointment or telephone call. Talk to your support person if necessary.

I Have been Banned from School Premises!

If you are refused access to school premises under the *Education Act*, you will not be able to participate in the decisions made by the school about your child's education. This is a worst-case scenario, because unless you can talk to your child's education team, you will not be able to advocate.

No Right to Review or Appeal

Even if you do not think that you have done anything wrong, the *Education Act* does not give you any rights to appeal or call for a review of a decision to ban you from school premises.

If you do lose access to school premises, you should be working to have the access ban lifted. This may require a period of mutual trust building.

Establish regular contact with a School Board supervisory officer to help you restore trust between you and your child's school, so that the ban from school premises can be lifted.

Find a person who works for a community organization, and that works with parents on education matters, to support you, and to assist you in restoring the lines of communication between you and your child's school.

During this process, you will need to be patient, and communicate in a calm and non-threatening way.

Involving Your Child in Decisions

Children need to feel that they are valued. When parents and other members of the family speak in a positive way about a child, and treat him or her with respect, this will help that child to feel valued. They will think of themselves as having self-worth. If children feel valued, they are more likely to have the confidence that they need to speak up for themselves when there is a problem.

If your child is included in the decision-making process, he or she will become better at identifying and communicating their needs, including what they need to learn. They will also be more likely to think of themselves as partners in the process, to participate in developing their own education goals, and to help in the development of their own education plan.

When meeting with your child's education team, ask whether it is appropriate for your child to attend a portion of the meeting.

Teachers, students and parents must work together to decide on appropriate tools to accommodate a student's learning needs; these include calculators, computers, spell checkers, or extra time on tests, for example. Parents may advocate for the use of tools to accommodate their child's learning needs but it is the child who will use these tools and determine what works best for them in a variety of situations. A child who knows she has short-term auditory memory problems, for example, can explain to the soccer coach that it's best to write the plays down on paper so that she can visualize them.

Children whose parents have been active as parent-advocates know that they have supportive cheerleaders at home. Parents can also work with their children on ways to communicate best with the teacher. You might say to your child . . .

"Do you feel comfortable telling Mrs. Jones that the book report was too difficult, or would she appreciate a note from me?"

As children enter high school they are often unprepared to communicate their learning needs to others. However, adolescents who have been involved in their parents' advocacy efforts in elementary school or junior high will be more likely to see it as normal behaviour to ask for help with a problem, or express fears or concerns