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Put It in Writing – Building a Better Understanding for Your Child

By Cherie Takemoto

“I’ve told them over and over again, but they never listen to me.”

“They keep promising me that they will do something about it, but they never do.”

“They just don’t like my child or understand her individual needs.”

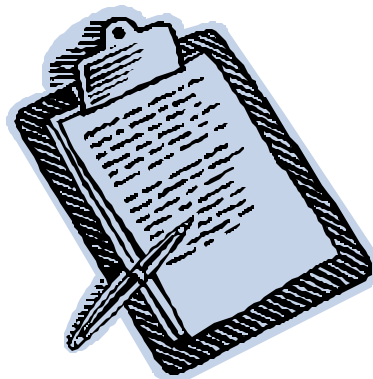
“I can’t tell you how frustrated and angry I am.”

At PEATC, we get hundreds of calls from parents who are frustrated that school personnel will not do something about problems that their children are having at school. A large number of complaints center around how school personnel don’t understand; or how they are not carrying out what parents thought would happen. If this is your experience, what can you do to avoid this dilemma? How can you increase the chances that the schools will understand your perspective, or that you share the same understanding of what is expected or what will happen for your child? Put it in writing!

One of your greatest assets when it comes to being your child’s advocate is the strong love you share and the high hopes you dream. However, these feelings can become so intense that it is difficult to focus on the issues. Use your feelings as a source of strength. Understand that when you feel the anger coming or the tears welling up, it means you care. Your child’s progress means that much to you. Be careful, though, about how you express your feelings.

Often, misunderstandings or future negative relationships result from strong emotions being expressed or feelings of guilt or blame.

Put It in Writing



How do you channel your feelings into strong and effective communication? Put it in writing!

After all these years, it is a rare IEP meeting when I don’t cry. I

know this about myself. I know that there are some things that are difficult to talk about without getting upset. I also know that when I’m feeling this way, things may not come out the way I want. I might say something in frustration or anger that I really don’t mean. Someone may think that because I am angry it means that I am blaming them, when often the issue is that I don’t know the answers either. I have found that organizing my thoughts and putting things in writing before or after a meeting can often open the doors to what it is that I want for my son. In fact, that preparation and follow-through may make all the difference in the world.

Here are some ideas for channeling your energies into powerful writing:

- 1. Think about it. Talk about it. Jot down some ideas.** Discuss these ideas with a friend, loved one, teacher and/or your child. What are some of the facts? What would you like to happen? What are some of the important categories of information you would like to convey?
- 2. Write down the purpose of the communication.** Be brief, with specifics to follow. If you are requesting a meeting, evaluation, extended school year, or response to a concern that you have, write that in the

first paragraph. You can also let the school know that this communication is your “*Parent Statement of Strengths and Priorities*” that you would like to be a part of the evaluation or IEP, if that is what you want. If you do so, your written statement will become a part of the record of the meeting. If it is a part of the IEP, you can later build goals and objectives based on the needs and priorities you have identified.



3. Give some background information.

What are your concerns? What are some examples? How are they affecting, or how can changes affect, your child’s progress or individualized needs? What have you done to address the issue at home? What do the experts say? What previous attempts have you made to work with the teacher or school staff? What were the results? When do things seem to go well?

4. Give concrete examples. Avoid the use of words like “always” and “never.” Don’t just say, “Your expectations of the work you want Renee to do at home are unrealistic.” Give examples, with dates of the homework that Renee came home with and why you believe that it should be adapted for her individual needs. Rather than say, “You have yet to give Marshall any exposure to a systematic reading program,” say “According to the last progress report, Marshall is not making expected progress in reading.”

5. Highlight each main point. In this world of quick fixes and sound bites, you need to make it clear what you are writing about. Bullet or number each separate idea or each specific action you would like the

school to take. Underline or bold the main idea as I have done here.

6. If appropriate, cite federal, state, or local laws and policies that support your points.

Is what you are requesting required by IDEA? You can access a copy of federal or Virginia regulations by visiting the PEATC website (www.peatc.org) and clicking on “Legislative/Regulatory News”. Other resources from attorneys like Peter Wright (www.wrightslaw.com) and Reed Martin (www.reedmartin.com) offer e-mail newsletters and topical writings that you may find useful.

7. Reasonably calculated to incur educational benefit.

I love this phrase. Attorney Tom Gilhool says that to be reasonably calculated means that the approach being utilized must be a practice supported by research. The “Children and Youth” section of www.disabilities.gov has educational resources related to researched-based practices. The Virginia Training and Technical Assistance Centers (T-TACS) have established curriculum available at school or parent request. When a child fails to make expected gains, it may mean that your child is not benefiting from that mode of instruction.

8. Be specific about what you are requesting.

You may want to number each request, giving each request a specific title. For example, under the topic of “extra-curricular activities,” you might write something like, “Consistent with the provisions in IDEA that support access to extra-curricular activities, Maria would like to join the Social Services Club. To do so, she will need support in taking the late activities bus and will need a sign lan-

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guage interpreter so that she can communicate with her peers.” This is saying why Maria should receive a service and specifically what you think will address that concern.

9. Prior Written Notice in IDEA requires that the school give parents prior written notice when they propose to initiate or change the identification, evaluation, or educational placement of the child or the provision of a free appropriate public education for the child. Prior Written Notice is required if a parent makes a request as a part of the IEP process (before or during the IEP meeting), or the school proposes an action. When this occurs, the school must provide a written explanation of their refusal to take the action, other options they considered and the reasons for the rejection of these options. They must also include a description of each evaluation procedure, test, record or report used as a basis for the proposed or refused action. If your request, with reasons, is made in writing, it will make it easier for the school to better understand and consider your proposal.

10. Offer a time frame for a reasonable response. If you are requesting an evaluation, a positive behavioral support plan, new IEP, or other action, give the school a reasonable time to respond and put this in writing. For example, if the letter is a record of your understanding of a meeting or conversation, you might ask them to get back to you within a week if your understanding of the situation is not accurate.

11. Review what you have written or ask someone whose opinion you value to read it for you. Check to make sure that you have kept the issues on your child’s individualized needs rather than on blaming a staff person for your child’s situation. Are the examples clear and specific? If you were in the shoes of someone at the school, how would you react to this communication?

12. Some key words to consider using:

- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- Prior Written Notice

- Reasonably calculated to incur educational benefit
- Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)
- Extended School Year (ESY)
- Equal Access to Services
- Individualized Needs
- Measurable Goals and Objectives and Benchmarks
- Informed Consent
- Compensatory Services
- Functional Behavior Assessment
- Behavioral Intervention Plan

One parent who used this approach to putting things in writing had a troubling response from a principal. “*Why are you putting things in writing? Don’t you trust us?*” A good response might be, “*When it comes to building a clear understanding about my child’s education, putting it in writing is a great way to build mutual trust and understanding of my child’s special and individualized situation and needs.*” Words can be powerful. Use your power wisely.

Additional note:

Leslie E. Packer, Ph.D., an advocate, Tourette Syndrome expert, and parent of two children with Tourette Syndrome has written an easy-to-understand tutorial on special education and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Her site is <http://www.tourettesyndrome.net/advocacy.htm>. From that site, click on *Choosing for Your Child’s Special Needs*. This tutorial goes into greater detail than this article and is an *About the Best on the Net Choice*.



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