

Understanding and Working With Your School District

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I believe that the fact that I not only work in this field, but also live it 24/7, has given me a unique perspective on the topic. My experience has molded my life's mission: No other parent should ever have to walk this path alone, or re-invent this wheel and have to help educate the system. If I can be there with even one family and their school district to make the journey more positive and less stressful, then I know all that my daughter and I experienced has been for good reason.

When the school bell rings: A professional's perspective

Each year your child moves up a grade, or to a new school, there will be different teachers. That means new challenges in the school setting, both academically and socially. By establishing a positive relationship with your child's teacher, the school administrator, and the district representatives, you will begin to build your child's academic team; a team willing to address those challenges arm in arm with you.

Remember that, while we all know that academics are the priority of the school staff, our child's social experience and peer relations are equally important when considering their educational career. I remember attending a field trip with my daughter in 3rd grade. I noticed that on the bus (a very noisy environment) no one spoke to her, and that at lunch she ate with the group, but was left behind when everyone started running around.

Upon returning to the school a little girl ran by her and accidentally bumped into her. As the girl ran past she said, "Sorry! I didn't mean to!" My daughter looked at me and said, "She just called me mean." She had heard the word "mean" and put the rest together. It ended up being a beautiful teaching moment for both girls, that led to understanding on both of their parts. It became a huge "Aha!" moment for countless teachers and administrators who have since heard the story.

What challenges might I encounter as my child enters the public school setting?

- Teachers and other school staff not understanding their child's hearing loss and how it manifests in the educational environment.: This can be especially problematic if you have provided excellent Early Intervention Services and your child enters the school setting at grade level. General educators who see a successful child on grade level do not always understand how the ambient noise of a classroom negatively impacts our children's ability to discriminate and comprehend language. There are times, especially on the weekends, when I actually forget how skilled our kids get at "faking it." There have been many Saturday and Sunday mornings when my daughter and I have spent 2 or 3 hours talking before I realize that she does not have her processor on and has been speech reading all morning.
- Ambient noise in the educational setting: The audiogram shows us what our children are detecting in the ideal setting of a sound booth. We need to also ask

our audiologists to test with an increased signal to noise ratio and to look at how they discriminate single words and sentences with background chatter.

- Vocabulary development
- Staff who want the child to be placed in a separate DHH special Day Class (SDC)
- Teachers who, honestly, do not understand that DHH children can listen and speak and do not understand your child's technology: I have received phone calls from newly credentialed teachers of the deaf who met me prior to completion of their programs and who were then hired to open an auditory/oral DHH SDC. What these new teachers told me was that they needed support in creating an appropriate program, but if their advisors from their DHH credentialing programs knew they took the assignment, they would be angry.
- Access to the instruction in the educational setting
- Literacy: I have sat at IEP meetings with families where the teacher of the deaf actually leaned in and told the mother not to worry about the fact that her 6th grader was reading at a 3rd grade level because "all deaf kids plateau at 3rd grade."
- Educational audiological services
- Clinical audiologists who don't understand educational audiology and vice-versa
- Educators who disagree with your choice regarding mode of communication
- Misunderstandings related to the families language of choice

What steps can we take to ensure the best educational environment as well as a positive relationship with the teachers?

- Communicate with your school-district decision maker prior to the IEP. Introduce yourself and your child and establish an environment that is conducive to working as a team: I approach every IEP meeting with the attitude that everyone at the table wants the best for the child, there may be some information I can share that someone on the team did not know or learn about in their own education program. This has been confirmed by teachers of the deaf, speech/language pathologists, administrators, and general educators.
- Have a reason why you are asking for whatever you are asking for
- Record all IEP meetings. In California, we are required to give at least 24 hours notice so that the district can also bring a recorder. Check with your own school district for guidelines.
- Find someone to provide an in-service training for the staff in order to explain the best practices for teaching a deaf or hard-of-hearing child.
- Never go to an IEP alone. Having been at IEP meetings as both a parent and a professional for almost 20 years, I can assure you that there are moments when something is shared, either good or bad, that takes your mind off the meeting. Having a friend with you who knows what you want to cover, and can provide another set of ears, is always a good idea. Believe me, if you remember something you meant to say after the meeting is over, it is next to impossible to re-gather the entire team.
- Never sign an IEP at the actual IEP meeting, even if everything has gone perfectly. You have the right to take the document home and review it prior to

signing. In my professional experience I have found that district members of the IEP team respect this and appreciate the collaborative relationship. It's much more productive than signing and then finding an error or omission later.