Know Your School District: Tips for Parents

Becoming familiar with your school district will help you to become an active and involved parent in your child's education. Research has demonstrated that family involvement in children's education can boost their academic success. Knowing about the following areas can help your involvement at school be effective.

Policies and Procedures
Students who receive special education services are also part of the general education population. They are subject to the policies and procedures that govern all students in the district. It is important for you to be aware of any district policies that may affect your children. This will allow you to better advocate for them when writing an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and considering accommodations, modifications, or supports that they may need to be successful. District policies are often published in booklets for students and on district Web sites. These policies may include:

- Transportation
- Bullying and harassment
- School discipline
- School choice
- Attendance policies
- Absentee and tardiness policies
- School year calendar
- Attendance area boundaries
- Deadlines for enrollment
- Graduation requirements

General Education Curriculum
The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA 2004) makes it clear that students receiving special education services have a right to be involved and make progress in the general education curriculum. This means it is important for you to know and understand the curriculum being used in your district. It is also important to be aware of any specialized education programs that are available to students in the district and the requirements for those programs.

Policy Decisions
Parents have an important role in guiding policy decisions at the school district level. You can help to identify issues, influence decisions, and improve school programs. You do not have to be an education expert to ask good questions. Becoming involved in advisory councils and district-wide committees can give parents the opportunity to move from advocating for your own child to advocating for all children in the district and working toward increased achievement for all students. District-wide committees may include:

- Special Education Advisory Council (Check with your school district to see if they have one.)
- Local Interagency Coordinating Council (LICC) (Services for children and families from birth to 5 years)
- Transition Interagency Committee (services for students ages 14-21)

Advocating
There may be times when issues come up that affect not only your child but concern all children in a particular program or all students in the school district. The issues may have to do with budget cuts, changes in district-wide programs, location of particular programs, or staffing changes. When the issues arise, it is important for parents to take an active role in advocating not only for their own child but for all children involved. The school board is the best place to take your concerns. You can

do this by contacting the school board members or attending a school board meeting. To do this you will need to know the following information:

- Members of the board and their contact information
- Dates and times of school board meetings
- Location of the school board meetings
- The process to follow in order to be put on the agenda
- What matters are excluded from public discussion

This information about the school board can be obtained by calling the central phone number for the school district. Many school districts also have Web sites that will link you directly with information on the board. Many local newspapers also publish information on school board meeting dates, times, and locations.

Reporting Requirements

No Child Left Behind has reporting requirements for school districts. A "School Report Card" is issued for each school and school district each year.

To access these report cards go to the Georgia Department of Education Web site. This will provide you with information on the following:

- Student population and demographics
- Attendance rate
- Graduation rate
- Report on '"Adequate Yearly Progress" (AYP)

You will also want to learn what types of assessments your child's school district does and when the tests are given. How do special education students fare on these tests compared to children in regular education? It is important that students on IEPs take part in these tests or alternative assessments so that the district is held accountable for educating all students. Learning about your child's school district may take some time and effort on your part, but the result of helping your child receive an appropriate education is worth the investment.

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