

7 BEING AN EFFECTIVE ADVOCATE

As society makes the transition from a history of segregation to being more inclusive, your son or daughter may encounter prejudice and discrimination. Your child will fare better if you can become an effective advocate. An advocate is someone who stands for something; in this case, your child's right to an inclusive education. A critical first step in being an effective advocate is to embrace your natural authority as a parent. You know your child best and you hold the vision for their future. Your child needs you to be a decisive voice for them.

TO HELP YOU ADVOCATE:

- Learn about the policies, standards and legislation around inclusive education, and anti-discrimination legislation. It helps to know your rights.
- Know yourself and your strengths and weaknesses as an advocate. As a family, strive for a united front and don't be a lone-ranger; call on supporters who can help you, particularly at times of high emotion.

BUILDING PARTNERSHIPS

Advocacy at school requires the building of a positive relationship with the school, even if there are times of disappointment or disagreement. If you focus on the vision and progress, it is easier to find common ground and keep discussions moving forward.

- Speak positively and enthusiastically. Aim to inspire something better rather than being tempted to criticise. Remain calm and factual.
- Your views are more likely to be heard if you acknowledge and appreciate what is done well by the school. Thank and praise regularly and publicly.
- Be an involved member of the school community – being known as a contributor helps you to build allies and your advocacy is more likely to be well-regarded. (You get to have different conversations with school staff while doing tuckshop!)
- Look for ways to bring your child and their voice into the conversation. Remember to be a good ambassador for them, bringing their strengths and gifts forward, even when they make mistakes.
- Be curious rather than defensive when faced with a proposal you are not sure about e.g. "Tell me more about how that might promote Stella's progress in Maths?"
- Strive for a resolution and sort out the big vs little issues. Don't get caught into micromanaging the school. You may have to let some things go to maintain a positive relationship.



EFFECTIVE SCHOOL MEETINGS

Successful school meetings require effective pre-planning:

- Know who will be attending and their role and reason for being there.
- Know the proposed agenda but also identify your goal/purpose and stay focused on this.
- Try to never go alone. Take an extra person as a support, a witness, a note taker and someone to debrief with.
- Look the part. Dress to feel confident and “professional” and take organised paperwork in a folder or briefcase.
- Set the tone. Be calm, friendly, willing to listen – but also confident and assertive. Use “I” and “we” language not blaming “you” language. Breathe!
- Model being “solution focused” which is not the same as you needing to solve all problems.
- Take notes to record key discussion points and what is agreed. Try to summarise what you understood as the decisions. You can email those notes as your minutes of the meeting.
- Mentally prepare for tricky conversations with scripted answers. Even if things are going well, be aware of common myths (see **Fact Sheet 8**) to avoid being ambushed.
- After the meeting debrief and plan something relaxing.

ADVOCACY OVER THE LONG HAUL

Your child will have many years at school, with ups and downs along the way, so it’s important to be organised and vigilant.

- Keep good records – brief notes of phone calls, conversations, meetings (dates, who was present, what was said) and an organised email file.
- Be disciplined with emails – never send one in haste and, if necessary, seek a second opinion about the tone. Use the BIFF technique (Brief, Informative, Friendly, Firm).
- Don’t overwhelm the teacher with information or demands. Identify one-two changes that would make the biggest difference to your child’s success.
- Keep promoting the best while accepting people will not always get it right.
- Focus feedback where possible on the issues with a system, method or practice that requires improvement – try to avoid individual blame which makes the feedback personal.
- Don’t react but think strategically. Pay attention to the school dynamics. Who will be the best person to raise an issue with, and how and when?
- Use the formal processes if you can. Try to give the teacher and the school a chance to do better before you escalate an issue.
- Pick your battles but don’t be afraid to have some. Know your bottom lines and speak up if something is not acceptable.
- Build your allies within and outside the school.
- Stay connected and keep learning. When families are isolated, it is very easy to become demoralised and defeated.
- Don’t be pressured to agree to something on the run. Take time to think. If you are uncomfortable with a decision, be brave and speak up.
- Be vigilant – no news may not be good news.
- Aim to be diplomatic and respectful. Apologise if you have reacted badly.
- Accept that you will not win everyone over. Don’t take negative reactions personally or allow these experiences to defeat you.
- Allow people time to process ideas that challenge old beliefs.
- Formal advocacy can be hard to access but is essential in serious situations. In Queensland, start with Queensland Advocacy Incorporated www.qai.org.au. If they can’t help they will direct you to people who can.