

EFFECTIVE ADVOCACY IS KEY IN THE AGE OF 'EMPOWERMENT'

"Empower."

That seems to be the buzz word of the 90s. According to Webster, to empower is to "give power to" or to "enable." Apparently someone somewhere along the way realized that human service delivery systems as we know them foster dependence rather than self-reliance.

Too often, recipients of those services are not given the tools to move ahead - they are not "empowered" - and the cycle continues.

Politicians are racing headlong in an effort to break that cycle. Systems are being dismantled and funding and services are being slashed in the name of "empowerment" - and yet (not surprisingly) those who need them most are still being denied the tools they need to become self-sufficient.

While this could indeed open the door for endless debate regarding social and political reform, it does lend support to the Parent Advocacy philosophical base. Parent Centers were established to help parents become better informed partners in the special education of their children with disabilities.

It continues to be our steadfast belief that parents can be the most effective advocates their children will ever need given the tools they need to do so. Even before it was politically correct, our charge was, and continues to be, to empower parents so that they are able to avail themselves and their children of the protections inherent in the Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA). There is certainly an advantage to understanding the language of disability law and the nuances of its interpretation.

Two points are clear to us. The first is that parents care deeply about their children's education - and indeed are concerned about a system of public education that does not always excel at meeting the needs of children with differing abilities and learning styles.

The second is that parents are, more often than not, highly capable of speaking, up on behalf of their children to see that their educational needs are met. What sometimes concerns us is that parents are sometimes encouraged - to ignore their gut feelings, to "wait and see" if problems will magically go away. While some situations do right themselves with time and growth, problems in school can easily become more pronounced as the years go by.

We urge you to err on the side of caution, to follow your instincts, for sometimes a little intervention early on can do much to help your child avoid major problems down the road.

Just as we believe that it is our mission to give you the knowledge you need to be confident in your work with your schools, we feel that it is the school's obligation to give our children the tools they need for success - during their "formative" years and beyond.

While the buzz word of the 90s is indeed overused, we believe in empowerment. It is our hope that effective advocacy - on our part and yours - will ultimately benefit all of our children, as well as those who follow in their footsteps.

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