

Guidelines for Choosing a Special Education Advocate

The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates (COPAA) is an organization that serves as a national voice for special education rights and advocacy. COPAA suggests the following guidelines for choosing a special education advocate:

✓ **Select a trained, experienced advocate**

When you interview and advocate, you should ask about their education and training. You should also ask if the advocate stays current in the field by getting updated training and education through workshops, conferences, and continuing education programs.

✓ **Select an advocate with special education experience**

Experienced advocates can often help you obtain the educational services your child needs. Ask your advocate about his or her experience and specific skills. You need to be an informed consumer and ask questions that are important to **you**.

✓ **Select an advocate who understands your child**

You should expect an advocate to spend time visiting with your child or observing your child. Each child is a unique human being and has individual educational needs. Your advocate should be able to explain to you how your child's disability will affect him or her at school. A willingness to become educated about your child's disability is a quality a good advocate possesses.

Questions you might ask when hiring an advocate:

- ✓ What is the advocate's special education advocacy experience? Does he/she have experience in situations similar to yours? Has he/she worked with this school district or similar ones?
- ✓ How does the advocate believe your situation should be handled? What is the estimated time frame for completing the work? What will the advocate do?
- ✓ How will you be expected to assist and work with the advocate?
- ✓ How will you and the advocate keep each other informed about the case?
- ✓ What does the advocate charge and how will you be billed? How are fees determined? Will you be billed on a hourly or flat basis? What is the total estimated fee?
- ✓ Who keeps the copies of your child's records at the advocate's place of business, and how your child's files will be maintained and returned to you when you need them?

Parents play a vital role in every special education matter. Advocates can give you advice and opinions based upon their training and experience, but you - the parent - must make all of the final decisions about your child. After meeting with the advocate consider these questions:

- ✓ Will you be comfortable working closely with this person?
- ✓ Are you confident the advocate has the experience and skill to handle your case?
- ✓ Do you understand the advocate's explanation of what your case involves?
- ✓ Do you understand the proposed fee agreement?