Asking the Right Questions

Every spring at meetings across the state, IEP teams are planning services for students with disabilities for next school year. As a parent, you are an important part of that team. If your child attends a private school – or any out-of-district program – one of the questions that will likely be asked is: “Is THIS the year that he or she will be coming back to district?”

The decision about placement is important, and should be re-considered every year as part of the annual review process. But make sure you and the other members of the Child Study Team (CST) are asking – and answering – the right questions. It is not a matter of your child being “ready,” but rather, a matter of the district being ready.

If the issue of placement comes up at your child’s IEP meeting, and it is suggested that your child return to an in-district program, get ready to ask some questions. Begin by revisiting the initial decision to place your child in an out-of-district program.

- Were there issues around the need for behavioral supports for your child?
- Did your child need highly specialized instruction?
- Was it a concern for your child’s safety and well-being?
- Did your child need “wrap around” mental health services?”
- Did your child need intensive therapies and related services not readily available?
- Was your child unable to make friends?
- Once you have considered these questions, ask next: what has changed for my child? Are these needs no longer part of my child’s learning profile?

Then, ask the most important question: “What has changed at the district?” What supports and services are now in place and working well enough that my child’s placement should be changed?

Parents often ask if they can be ‘forced’ to try out a brand new program at the local district that has yet to be established. The answer is no. In order to be an equal member of the IEP team, parents need information, including the opportunity to observe potential placement options. Parents have the right to see any program in action and ask questions.

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Celebrating Accomplishments – Today and Tomorrow

One of my favorite parts of being the Executive Director of ASAH happens in the spring. Each year, I get invited to attend graduation ceremonies across the state, and join thousands of students with disabilities as they toss their caps and tassels into the air in celebration!

Graduates of ASAH member schools hold a diploma that can open the door to a job, higher education, community-based volunteer experience, and independence. We are proud of our students and take great pride in their accomplishments!

Ours is a pride based on data. A team of researchers has looked at the outcomes for students who graduate from ASAH member schools, and the results speak for themselves! Students with disabilities who exit ASAH member schools are more likely than similar students in public programs to have jobs, community connections or go on to higher education. In fact, 43% of our graduates have plans to go on to college or post secondary education.

And results show that these positive outcomes continue even years after graduation: 91% of our alumni were productively involved in mainstream, or community-based adult activity five years after they left our schools.

So to those of you with students graduating this year – congratulations! There is a promising future ahead.

For those of you with younger children, that day may seem light years away, but I assure you, it WILL come!

When it does, rest assured that the leaders at your child’s school share your dream that the day AFTER graduation day is of equal cause for celebration.

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The decision to change a child’s placement from a private school to a local public program is usually framed within a review of Least Restrictive Environment (LRE). LRE has two important aspects: proximity to home, and access to typical peers.

And while it is true that placement must be in the least restrictive setting, it must also be “appropriate.” An in-district program that lacks some of the vital features of your child’s current placement may be closer to home, and provide access to typical peers, but it is not a good match if it cannot meet your child’s needs.

Courts have also found that being in a regular class or in a school with typical peers does not guarantee full inclusion. In some cases, the degree of supports needed in and of itself can be isolating and stigmatizing, making it hard for the child to feel like – and be treated like – other kids.
THREE YEARS AGO, ASAH LAUNCHED ITS ADVOCACY TOOL KIT, DESIGNED TO HELP FAMILIES SECURE AND PRESERVE APPROPRIATE SPECIAL EDUCATION SERVICES. HERE ARE JUST A FEW OF OUR SUCCESS STORIES:

- We helped a Spanish-speaking family of a student with multiple disabilities remain in his private school placement. The district told parents it would no longer agree to an out-of-district placement, but it was clear that none of the alternatives were appropriate. With help from ASAH’s advocate, the district revised the IEP and the child remained at the out-of-district school.

- We helped the mom of an 18 year-old student remain in her out-of-district school, after her CST decided that she should be placed in the district’s program for her final year of school. The mom wanted her daughter to complete her last year of school at the out-of-district program, and in spite of evaluations and recommendations from the girl’s private physicians, the district refused. After meeting with the director of special services, who was responding to pressure from the superintendent and school board, ASAH’s advocate was able to offer strategic suggestions that allowed the girl to remain at her private school. She graduated last spring.

- We helped the family of an 8th grader with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder who had been asking for – and was denied - an out-of-district placement, in spite of the fact that he was often suspended and was failing classes. With help from the ASAH advocate, the family requested a psychiatric evaluation, and other documentation to support that request. The district immediately agreed to the placement, and within his first week at his new school, the boy was learning again.

ASAH’s advocate also helps parents seeking appropriate supports needed for a student to return to the local district program. We have helped parents advocate for and secure:

- a one-to-one aide for academic support.
- a home program component.
- after school instruction.
- assistive technology.
- related services, including a feeding therapist to train the school staff in feeding techniques.

Do you need advocacy assistance?
Our support is offered at no cost to parents.

Check out our Tool Box on line, at www.asah.org, or call our parent information line at 1-877-287-2724.
The Governor has proposed changes in the service delivery system for children and teens with developmental disabilities. If approved by the legislature, family support, crisis services and other supports that are now provided by the Division of Developmental Disabilities (DDD), would be provided by a new state agency: the Division of Child Integrated System of Care Services (DCISCS). While special education services would continue to be provided by the local school district through age 21, this new division would become the single point of entry for family support services for those caring for a child with complex needs.

Starting in July, children through age 21 would receive support services provided through DCISCS – a shift from DDD. DDD would continue to assist with eligibility determinations until January 2013. When a child turns 16, caseworkers at the DCISCS would begin planning with families to coordinated with DDD for transition into adult services, and provide families with planning tools and strategies. At that time, DDD would evaluate the child for eligibility for the Community Care Waiver under Medicaid, and determine an appropriate level of services.

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