

ADVOCATING FOR STUDENTS

advice for parents

Elissa Allen, president of PC READS

Navigating the school year is challenging for all parents, especially for those with students who have learning and attention difficulties. Ensuring your child receives the support needed while building your child's independence requires a delicate balance.

Each year, it's necessary to develop new relationships with classroom teachers, which are numerous once your child is in middle school. Parents are often apprehensive about speaking out on behalf of a student, as they know it's important for such conversations to be beneficial, rather than harmful or embarrassing, to their child. However, children with learning differences need advocates who can help ensure that their needs are met as they move through different classrooms and new schools.

Becoming your child's advocate requires knowing strengths and weaknesses about yourself, your student and your child's teachers. Effective communication skills are necessary to create healthy, working relationships with teachers and administration, as well as to assist your child with building positive relationships with teachers.

The following are some recommendations to assist parents with developing effective advocacy skills.

Build your knowledge: Research and learn about your child's learning differences, common educational terms — there are so many acronyms — and legal rights and responsibilities.

Be organized & prepared: Maintain a three-ring binder with all important documents, including EPs, 504 Plans, report cards, DIBELS scores, writing samples and school correspondence. Prepare your questions before school meetings and be respectful of a teacher's time, especially during planned parent-teacher conferences. If your conversation needs more time, ask to schedule a follow-up meeting. Always aim to stay focused and calm.

Bridge transitions: Help make transitions

to each grade and new schools more fluent by asking teachers at the end of the year what they think would be important for future teachers to know about your child's learning environment. Share this information with new teachers at the beginning of each year.

Communicate with your child: Ask your child specific questions about their school day and support them at home by assisting with organization. As schools are using more online programs, it's easy to check grades and assignment deadlines. It's best not to have any surprises at the end of the term. Also, seek extra help for students when needed, either by reaching out to classroom teachers or private tutors.

Develop teacher relationships: It is imperative to have a positive working relationship with your child's teachers. Ask about their preferred method of communication and honor it. Share goals you have for your student, such as building independence and self-advocacy skills. Listen to teachers' suggestions and collaborate with the school

to solve concerns. If your child is working with a private tutor, connect the tutor and teacher with each other.

Build a support network & seek help when needed: Parenting a child with learning differences is often exhausting, especially as homework time comes at the end of long days for everyone. Reach out to other parents in similar situations so that you can share resources, as well as both frustrations and celebrations. Consider consulting with the Utah Parent Center or PC READS about their advocacy services.

PC READS is a local nonprofit advocating for recognition and education of dyslexic students. We promote elevating literacy through early identification of struggling readers, effective reading interventions and appropriate classroom accommodations. Through its advocate program, PC Reads' Certified Dyslexia Advocates assist families with developing action plans to ensure children receive the support needed to become successful students. To learn more, visit parkcityreads.org.



PHOTO BY NATHAN ANDERSON ON UNSPLASH