

ACT's Autism Manual for B.C.

Living and Working with Children and Adults with ASD

Chapter 8: THE ROLE OF PARENTAL ADVOCACY IN NAVIGATING THE SCHOOL SYSTEM

Contributed by Clair Schuman, former Executive Director, ACT – Autism Community Training



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The “Introduction to ACT’s Autism Manual for B.C.” provides valuable context to this chapter. Download at: www.actcommunity.ca/autism-manual.

8 THE ROLE OF PARENTAL ADVOCACY IN NAVIGATING THE B.C. SCHOOL SYSTEM

Parents of children with special needs are sometimes required to develop their skills as an advocate for their child. This is particularly the case when the child has behavior problems which impacts the classroom. However, many families are also concerned that the educational and social needs of their son or daughter, who does not have behavioral issues, are being overlooked. This chapter provides guidelines on how to advocate positively and effectively.

Clair Schuman, ACT's former Executive Director, has been active in supporting parental advocacy within the B.C. educational system for many years. This chapter builds on Chapter 7, "The B.C. Educational System – An Introduction for Parents of Students with ASD." While the advocacy examples in this chapter are based on the education system, the strategies presented can be used in many contexts.



Autism
Information
Database

"Like Google for Autism but Better!"

Throughout this chapter you will see AID links that connect to resources:
www.actcommunity.ca/aid-search/

ACT's Autism Information Database (AID) has over 2000 autism-related information and community resources. It is easy to search using keywords and postal codes, which saves time in finding B.C. resources. There are links to excellent international websites on a wide range of topics relevant to children, youth and adults with ASD and their families, which community professionals may also find helpful. ACT's staff has reviewed each of the resources we have included — our focus is on providing practical, useful resources that empower families and communities. Do you have a community resource to recommend for the AID? Go to www.actcommunity.ca/submit-resource/

UNDERSTANDING YOUR CHILD'S NEEDS: THE FOUNDATION OF BECOMING AN EFFECTIVE PARENT ADVOCATE

Although it is not expected that a parent of a child with ASD must become an expert on the condition, you will soon realize that you have considerable expertise in understanding how autism impacts your own child. This applies to most parents who have children with special needs. You have known your child since birth, you are your child's first teacher, you are a constant in his or her life, and you are the person responsible for his or her best interests.

Service providers, including educators and consultants, come and go in your child's life. While they have expertise about a specific domain, it is you, the parent, who has the most comprehensive knowledge of this human being, your child. Having your expertise acknowledged by educators may, however, require you to develop your skills in organizing and sharing this information effectively. Dr. Jill Calder provides insights into the parent as Case Manager in Chapter 2 of this manual, "Developing a Treatment Team for a Child with Autism Spectrum Disorder."

How can you become a better expert on your child?

- Think about your child's history. If you don't have a record of his or her developmental milestones, think about what you remember and write it down. Consider what you saw in your child's behavior that led you to seek an assessment and diagnosis for him. Write this down.
- Read your child's assessment report and work to understand it. Write down your questions. If you are struggling to decipher the assessment, contact the original assessor or another support person with knowledge of this area. You can call ACT for help with this. If your child has another special need, we can recommend other sources of information.
- Read about your child's special needs in books, magazine articles and on reliable Internet sites. Attend meetings and workshops about issues related to his or her condition. Consider what you have learned and how this information relates to your child and his or her needs. Work to recognize how ASD is expressed in your child. Write this down.
- Think about strategies and supports that have helped your child and those that have not been successful. Think about why these supports were effective for your child. Be prepared to convey this information to the educator as part of the planning process for your child's school program. Many parents find it helpful to do a brief profile (one to three pages) of their child to share with the school team.

How Do I Learn About Best Practices in the Education of a Child with ASD?

While you may not be a professional educator, there are ways in which you can increase your understanding of best practices in the education of children with ASD. An excellent source of information is www.researchautism.org/resources/reading/index.asp. Many of these techniques can help children with other developmental disabilities. To this background on best practices, you can add your own knowledge of your child's learning style based on:

- What has and hasn't worked well for your child when you have taught him basic skills;
- What you have discovered as you have worked with your child's behavior consultant in the process of autism intervention.

Once you feel you have a reasonable understanding of how your child's special need is impacting him or her, you will be a more confident and effective advocate.

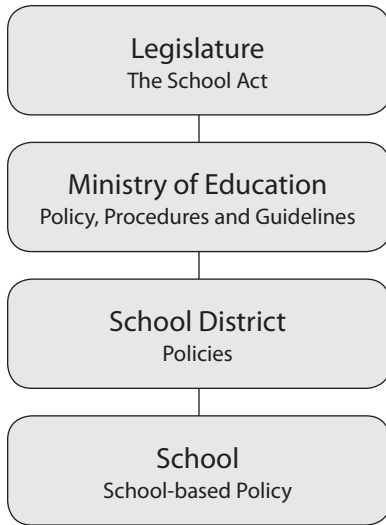
THE SYSTEM IN WHICH YOU ARE ADVOCATING

If you have not yet read the chapter titled "Children with ASD in the B.C. Education System," this may be a good time to review it. It explains the governing legislation that outlines specific requirements, roles and responsibilities and applies to all children with special needs.

Understanding Policy

Before you begin the advocacy process, it is important to become familiar with policy related to your specific area of concern. Part of this is being aware of the implications of the hierarchy of policy and how the subtle language of policy is essential to your success as an advocate.

The Ministry of Education website has a helpful section that provides the reader with an outline of what policy is and how to understand it. See AID Resource www.actcommunity.ca/resource/463/.



The Hierarchy of Policy

Hierarchy of policy means that, for example, the provincial *School Act* is more important than school level policy. In Canada, it is the provinces that are responsible for governing the education system. In B.C., the *School Act* is the major piece of legislation that sets education policy. From this legislation comes the policy as developed at the Ministry of Education level. School districts and schools themselves develop policy based on Ministry of Education policy.

It is the *School Act* that is the over-riding policy statement and is, in fact, the only policy that is enforceable by law. In plain language, all policy, whether developed at the provincial, district or school level, flows from the *School Act*, but is not within the *School Act*, and cannot be enforced by the courts.¹

The Language of Policy

As you review policy, it is essential that you look for specific language that may limit the policy. This includes words like must, should, and, may.

- A policy that uses the word **must** is most powerful as it requires compliance; it cannot be ignored.
- The word **may** or **should** in policy reduces the strength of the policy to turn it into a guideline. The should policies usually encourage compliance with incentives and the may policies enable but make compliance very much discretionary.
- When you cite policy to support your cause recognize that it is the **must** statements that give more legitimacy to your request.

Understanding the Players, Personalities and Politics in the System

Since the education system is a dynamic system that involves not only rules and regulations but also people, it is vital to pay attention to the people you will meet in the process of advocating. Recognizing their needs as people to be treated with courtesy is both prudent and respectful. Here are some simple tips:

- Make an effort to develop a collaborative relationship from the beginning. Then, if difficulties arise, you will have a positive foundation to work from.

- Communicate that you are concerned for your child and ready to help the teacher work to educate your child. Provide the teacher with helpful, relevant information about your child but don't overwhelm him or her with too much at once.
- Education is all about relationships. Although you don't have to like an educator and they don't have to like you, you must work together. Being personally angry or rude to someone only entrenches hostility and interferes with meaningful collaboration on common goals, in this case, supporting your child's educational progress.
- Model the positive behavior you want from the educator. If you want them to be patient with you in your role as a parent, be reasonably patient with them in their role as your child's teacher and others on the school team.
- Follow the manager's rule: Reward publicly (compliments and thank you's) but criticize privately (out of ear-shot of others).
- Ask yourself: Am I asking of this person something that I have not or would not be willing to do?
- When writing to an educator be sure to use their complete name with proper spelling and their correct title. Get this wrong and you may offend the sensitivity of some.

Following these simple guidelines and others like them can have a significant impact on your ongoing relationship with your child's teacher.

Another important element in advocating effectively is knowing who you are dealing with. It may be helpful to discover more information about the background of the educator who works with your child and/or the school principal. This may include their philosophy of education, communication style, previous job experience, understanding of disability issues, and beliefs about the role of parents. Educators are often happy to share their perspectives and other parents are also a good source of information.

It is always a good idea to be discreet. For example, while it is never wise to criticize another person working in the school district, it is even more ill advised when you are criticizing someone in the district who is the spouse, relative or best friend of the person in question!

When you begin an advocacy process it is important to analyze the “people factor,” including:

- Who is involved? (probably more people than you know)
- Who can, can't, or, won't help?
- Who are the behind-the-scenes people?
- Who will bend the rules/think outside the box?
- Who may present the biggest obstacle to finding a solution?
- Who has decision-making authority and who influences them?

Carefully considering these should influence the way you approach the problem in question.

MANAGING DOCUMENTS

As a parent of a child with ASD, it is very important to keep records and documents about your child. In an advocacy situation, the ability to access and provide information from documents significantly improves your power as an advocate.

Remember that as your child grows and develops and your life goes on you will not remember every detail about your child. Keep your own records about your child and his or her progress.

Save the documents, letters, and assessments about your child, and develop a method to effectively manage them. Keeping these records in a shoe box or tossing them in a drawer is not recommended! You need to be able to easily access and refer to these documents to do your advocacy work.

A portable and effective way to manage your documents is making use of a binder, sheet protectors, and subject dividers. Inside the binder, use dividers to separate your documents in a logical way. You may decide to divide documents chronologically by year or you may separate the documents by category, such as assessment reports, school reports and communications, and treatment reports, for example. Dr. Calder also has some excellent tips on this important topic in Chapter 3 of this manual.

The way you choose to divide them is less important than having a system that works for you so you can find the documents quickly and they don't get mislaid. By using clear sheet protectors you can insert copies of the original assessments or reports that you may wish to provide to someone who needs them. Never give away your original document. If you don't want to punch holes in your original document, using a sheet protector will allow you to store the document in your binder without holes.

When you have your documents in a binder, you are able to take the binder with you to appointments and meetings. If you use a binder with a clear cover in which you can slip a photo of your child, you can leave the binder on the table at the meeting to serve as a reminder to attendees that the meeting is about a specific person, your child. (Often in meetings it may seem that the individuality of your child gets lost in the discussion. A picture and your constant reference to your child by his or her given name will serve as a reminder to everyone why they are meeting.)

You may also choose to insert samples of your child's written or artistic school work on the back cover overlay of the binder to demonstrate possible areas of strength or challenge so you can easily show meeting attendees.

The Paper Trail

A common mistake made by beginning advocates is the failure to develop and maintain a paper trail. If it's important enough to advocate for, it's important enough to make notes and to put your concerns in print.

What Documents Do I Keep?

The work in supporting a child with ASD generates considerable paperwork. Sometimes it is difficult to decide which documents are worth keeping. Keep in mind that just because it's old does not mean it is not important. It is worth keeping all correspondence, sent and received.

Definite keepers:

- Individual education plans.
- Evaluations & assessments.
- Medical records.
- Progress & report cards.
- Standardized test results.
- Notes received about your child's behavior.
- Correspondence including emails (hard copy).
- Your notebook (see below for more about recording your advocacy activities).
- Child's work samples that demonstrate strengths or challenges.

Making Notes

A wise advocate keeps a notebook close at hand in which they record their advocacy activities such as telephone calls or conversations. Include the day and time of the interaction, identity of the person spoken to, and, the details of the conversation. Take notes on agreements made and/or the outcome of the call.



Recognizing the difference between objective and subjective comments made in notes is important. An objective comment is a statement of facts and is not based on assumption. For example, “Principal Jones said he was not interested in my complaint.”

A subjective comment is based on your impressions and interpretation of the event. For example, “Principal Jones sounded disinterested when I told him my complaint.”

The difference between these two examples may seem to be subtle; however, when you comment that “Principal Jones seemed disinterested,” Principal Jones can say you have made an erroneous assumption. Whereas, if you can state that “Principal Jones said he was not interested,” you are stating fact that is much more difficult to deny. There may be times when this difference becomes extremely important in getting what your child needs.

Effective Letter Writing

A coherent and informative letter is often essential in successful advocacy. A letter formalizes your efforts and is an important step in the ever-important paper trail. It clearly signals that your concern cannot be ignored and that a response is required.

There are many wonderful sources of information for writing effective letters from an advocacy perspective. The articles that appear on www.wrightslaw.com are highly recommended. This website is developed primarily for a U.S. audience and makes reference to U.S. laws that should be ignored, as it is not relevant to B.C. law. The basic advocacy information on this website, however, is invaluable.

An effective advocacy letter:

1. Tells your story in chronological order.
2. Provides brief background information.
3. Outlines your specific concern.
4. Requests a specific resolution of your concern.

This technique is far more effective than the letter that outlines all the mistakes made by the school. This type of letter does not entice the recipient to read further.

Important Letter Writing Considerations

A good letter is planned. Its composition and message requires thought:

- The first draft is a draft and should never be sent. Review it; edit it, ask someone else to read it and comment.

- An effective editing technique is to read the letter aloud. What seems coherent when you are writing may be quite different when you read it aloud.
- Take time between writing the original draft and reviewing the letter. Sleeping on it can help you find the right words to convey your concern.
- Although you know who you are sending the letter to, remember that your letter may not be read by that person only. It may be read by others within the school district who do not know you or your child. The impact of a complete letter is increased. *WrightsLaw.com* calls this a “letter to a stranger.” The impression you leave with this stranger is important.²
- A long, rambling letter is a waste of your time. Often it will not be read in its entirety and your message will not be received. Stick to the specifics. Be clear and concise. A letter should be no longer than two pages in most cases. You may wish to provide attachments to document your concern.
- Make your problem unique by outlining why your child requires what you are requesting. How is your child’s need different from every other child’s need? For example, if you are requesting a teaching assistant, you must present compelling reasons for this need that relate to your child’s particular health, safety or educational need.
- Clearly outline what you want and when you want it. Give a reasonable timeline for a response.
- Think about your c.c. list carefully. This list should not be lengthy and should only be sent to relevant individuals. The Press, the Prime Minister and the Queen can be of little or no help and a list that includes these people can backfire, making you appear to be “crazy”!
- Keep a copy of the letter you have sent and don’t forget to date it!

Email Communication

Instant electronic communication can be very convenient but also dangerous to the impassioned advocate. Use extreme care if you elect to communicate by email. This form of communication has its own rules and etiquette. Here are some important tips:

- A subject line is essential as it provides information about what the email is about. You may use the child’s name followed by a word or two about the specific topic. For example, Matilda Smith – Challenges at Recess.

- Single subject messages are best. Only one issue should be addressed in most email communications. In this speedy communication format most email readers see the first item and fail to read further.
- Watch the “Send” button. Any message you send is permanent. You can’t get it back. Think carefully about why and what you are writing. Some people choose to wait until they are ready to send the message and then fill in the “To” line of the email. This assures that you will not accidentally send an email before you have had the opportunity to fully consider the content!
- Remember that the recipient of your email has access to a forward button. Think carefully about the impression your email may have on a third party.
- Keep your intended audience in mind in terms of language choice and formality. Use a person’s full name with their title, Mr./Mrs. or Dr. When you usually call them by their first name, using their title can convey that this matter is particularly important and your communication takes on increased significance for the recipient.
- Identify yourself clearly with your full name. If you have a different last name from your child it is wise to clarify your relationship to the child.
- Keep the c.c. list to a minimum.
- Don’t use emoticons (☺ ☹) in advocacy communications. You may think they are friendly, but you risk trivializing your concern.
- Don’t fully capitalize words. This is the equivalent of yelling at the recipient.

YOUR CONDUCT AND BEHAVIOR – PROJECTING A POSITIVE IMAGE

Meeting Behavior

- Dress for success (jeans are not recommended, even if the teachers are in jeans).
- Arrive on time—not too early and never late.
- It is better to have someone attend a meeting with you. If both parents cannot attend, bring a friend or advocate. You don’t require permis-

sion to bring someone to a meeting, but it is polite to give the meeting organizer prior notice.

- Smile appropriately and project confidence.
- Introduce yourself and the person accompanying you to those in attendance and ask for their names and role.
- Bring your paperwork to show you are organized.
- Make a note of where each person is sitting even if you know everyone. You may forget during the meeting. A glance at the notes will help you. After the meeting, you will want to discuss the meeting with your friend or advocate. Referring to the notes re: seating may be helpful then.
- Take notes or have your friend/advocate take notes.

Managing Your Choice of Words, Body Language, Temperament

When you are advocating for your child, it can be a very emotional experience; after all, you are there to advance and defend their right to an appropriate and meaningful education. This is about your child's present and future!

It is important, however, when you are in an advocacy situation that you don't allow fear and emotion to colour your behavior.

According to research on human communication, at least 55% of our communication consists of body language, 38% is through our tone of voice or para language, and only 7% is through the specific words we use!³

It is also generally agreed that first impressions last a lifetime. So it is important to remember, particularly at the beginning stages of bringing forward a concern, that the way you express the complaint is often as important as the legitimacy of the issue itself. Your manner is critical. Be firm but calm.

Be prepared in meetings that something may be said or done that may be upsetting. Before the meeting, make a plan about what you could do if you feel you might lose emotional control. Will you count to ten silently, ask for a washroom break, ask your colleague to take over temporarily, advise that you must leave and will call later to reschedule? There are many choices depending on the situation and it is wise to think about this in advance and discuss the issue with the person attending the meeting with you.

When you are in the meeting, observe the emotions of others. Watch their body language. Frowns and folded arms are not positive signs, but someone nodding their head in agreement can be very encouraging and the beginning of influencing others to your way of thinking.

Effective Listening

An important skill that we all need to practice is effective listening. Too often we are so wrapped up in our side of a dialogue that we fail to really hear the other side. An online book called *How to Have Successful Group Meetings* provides helpful tips:

1. Face the speaker.
2. Keep an open mind.
3. Listen to ideas not words.
4. Don't interrupt.
5. Wait for a pause before asking questions.
6. Ask questions.
7. Be attentive.
8. Be aware of the speakers' feelings.
9. Give feedback.
10. Pay attention to what is not said.⁴

Assertiveness

Some people confuse advocacy with aggression. In your efforts to achieve your goal, obtaining services and supports for your child, being aggressive is self-defeating. Appropriate behavior for an advocate is assertive.

What is assertiveness?

- Expressing your needs clearly.
- Expressing ideas without guilt or intimidation—no sentences prefaced with the words “I’m sorry, but...”
- Sticking up for your child’s needs, even when professionals disagree. Don’t forget that nodding your head in an affirmative way implies you agree.
- Relating to professionals as equal partners. Remember, you have expertise!
- Effective communication—politely saying what you mean.
- Conveying your feelings of self-confidence through your communication.
- Being self-reliant and independent, while recognizing that there are times when you need to ask for help.

Practice developing your assertive communication every day. Some sentence starters or statements that could be considered assertive are:

- “In my experience...,” or conversely, “That hasn’t been my experience.”
- “Our time together is limited, so I think it’s important that we focus on the meeting agenda.”
- “I would like to defer this matter to another time when I am better prepared to discuss it.”
- “When can I expect a response from you on this matter?”
- “This issue is very important to me and my child, so I’m looking forward to a full discussion on the matter.”

DEVELOPING AN ADVOCACY PLAN

Now that you have grounding in the skills and knowledge required in advocacy, it is time to review how to plan your specific advocacy effort when a concern arises.

The Steps

1. Review the situation requiring advocacy.

- Is this a matter that is serious enough for you to exert your precious energy? It is important that you consider this carefully. As your child moves through school there may be many occasions in which you could choose to advocate. You need to be sure you are exerting your efforts on issues that are significant and that have the potential to effect an improvement.
- If this is worth advocating for, write down your story outlining the specific who, what and where. Be precise and concise.

2. Define the Issues

- Be sure you have all the facts. Review your story for accuracy regarding details, dates, names, etc.
- Set goals for the process. An example might be to plan how you will address the issue in a way that will allow for ongoing positive working relationships with the educational team.
- Set goals for the outcome, what you need as an outcome of your advocacy work.
- Set priorities and list them in order of importance.

- Review the priority list, selecting the “must haves.”
- Determine your bottom line, what you must have.
- Determine what you can dispense with entirely. For example, if one of your outcome goals is receiving a letter of apology, you can consider dispensing with it. It is extremely rare to receive a letter of apology unless a judge orders that one be written.

3. Develop your Action Plan

- Decide who you will communicate with. This decision should be made with consideration to protocols and the chain of command. If you fail to consider these factors you risk alienating the people you are seeking to influence and/or you will likely be sent back to those in the chain of command you skipped. It is possible your concern can be resolved at this level. If this fails, however, your next step is to direct your complaint to the next person in the supervisory hierarchy.
- Decide how you will communicate. Letter? Phone call? Meeting? The media? As you make this decision, keep in mind that it is never advisable to use a cannon when a peashooter will do. Contacting the press or calling a meeting with a large group of people is unnecessary when a letter or phone call may be effective.
- Plan in detail what you will communicate. Be clear on the issues and on what you wish to achieve. Then think about the words you will use. The language you use is important.
- Think about possible responses you may receive from the person you are communicating with and make plans about how you might reply. Common comments or variations of these by educators to parent advocates seeking resources or services for their child include:
 - There is no money.
 - You need to be patient. The waitlists are long.
 - You are too emotional. Leave this to the professionals.
 - If we give your child more services, another child will have to lose services.

There are assertive responses to these types of comments. For example, a response to consider when confronted with a comment like “You are too emotional” might be, “You are the professionals, but I am an expert on my own child. I know him better than anyone else. I was his first teacher. I have valuable input to offer.”

Rehearse your “lines” in advance. For example, it is a good idea to prepare an opening statement that provides a brief overview of what the issue is. It is also wise to have crib notes with you that summarize what your issues are and what you expect as outcomes. You may be nervous and forget some important information you need to share. Having notes helps keep you on track.

4. Execute the Plan

- When you communicate, always keep your eye on the prize. Don’t forget why you are there and what you want. Don’t allow yourself to be distracted. Stay focused.
- If you are going to be attending a meeting, review the above information on meetings. You may receive new information or insight during the meeting, so be prepared to adapt your plan as you proceed. The plan is a guideline.

APPEALS

Even the most prepared and compelling advocate receives the answer “no” to their efforts from time to time. If and when your request is denied it is time to review the situation.

Rethink your goal. Consider making some changes based on what you have learned from your advocacy efforts. If you conclude that it is realistic to have your concerns addressed, you should consider an appeal.

What is an Appeal?

In essence, an appeal uses the approach of asking someone else. That someone else is usually the person who has supervisory authority over the individual who declined your initial request.

How to Appeal

Your first step when your initial advocacy efforts are unsuccessful is to advise the person who said no that you will be appealing the decision. Ask them for a written copy of the school district’s appeal process. According to Section 15 of the *School Act*, every school district must have an appeal process. Each district develops its own process.

Read the formal appeal process, paying attention to details such as any paperwork or forms that must be completed, timelines or deadlines, and other rules that govern the process. In most districts the appeal process is not fully launched until the parent advocate reaches the upper level of district admin-

istration such as the Superintendent. Prior to the formal appeal, you will likely have met with the teacher, the principal, and either an Assistant Superintendent or the Director or Principal of Special Education.

At the initial stages before the formal appeal, your efforts to resolve the matter are directed to individuals in the system, such as the Principal and Assistant or Associate Superintendent. You initiate these steps by writing a letter to the person next in the line of authority. In the letter you again briefly outline the issues, your concerns and the fact that you have had your request declined by whomever your last meeting was with. Request a meeting with the person and provide a reasonable deadline for a response. In most cases, two weeks is more than adequate.

Prepare for your meeting by adding any new information that supports your case and try to find ways to address reasons why the decision to say no to your request was erroneous. Try to find out if there has ever been a precedent created where a child in the district, or perhaps the province, has received the service you are asking.

Bring an advocate to the meeting. If that isn't possible, call ACT and discuss your issues with an Information Officer who will help you prepare.

In a large number of cases, parental concerns and complaints are favourably addressed before you need to resort to the formal appeal process.

Once you initiate a formal complaint, you will first meet with the Superintendent to see if there is a way the matter can be resolved. If that is not successful, you will meet with either a committee of the Board of Trustees or with all Trustees. There will likely be a lawyer for the District present, as well as a least one or two of the people you previously had met with about your concern.

In most cases you are given an opportunity to submit your case, both verbally and with the written documentation, although you may already have provided that with your appeal forms. Your submission will be followed by questions from the Trustees. Then representatives of the district will provide information to the Board. You will likely be asked to leave the meeting and further discussion will occur.

In most cases you will be advised that a written response to your appeal will be provided to you in the future.

Should your formal appeal be declined, the internal mechanisms that are available for appeal are exhausted. You can consider other external avenues of appeal.

The Superintendent of Achievement

- In 2007, Bill 20 was passed by the B.C. legislature. Under this legislation, the positions of Superintendents of Achievement were created. Three Superintendents are employed by the Ministry of Education. Each has specific school districts as part of their portfolio of responsibility.
- Once all processes have been exhausted at the classroom, school and district levels, including an appeal under Section 11 of *School Act*, parents can raise concerns to the Superintendent of Achievement if they believe they have not been fairly heard.
- The Superintendent of Achievement may dismiss the appeal or refer it to mediation or adjudication.
- If referred to an adjudicator, s/he can refer the decision back to Board of Education without instructions, vary the decision, or uphold the decision of the Board.

B.C. College of Teachers

- The professional regulatory body for the B.C. College of Teachers certificate holders in British Columbia.
- Required by law to establish and promote standards for the education, competence and professional conduct of its members.
- Also responsible for assessing applicants for admission to the College, issuing teaching certificates, conducting certificate reviews and, where necessary, suspending or cancelling certificates.
- Governed by a 20-member Council and administered under the direction of the Registrar.
- Members include teachers, principals, vice-principals, assistant-superintendents and superintendents who have been certified by the College to teach.

Making a Complaint to the College of Teachers

- Prior to submitting a complaint, be sure whether the outcome you want matches what can be achieved through the College complaint process (see www.bcteacherregulation.ca/ProfessionalConduct/Commissioners-Office.aspx).
- Complaints must relate to the conduct of the educator.
- Call the College and speak to the Intake Officer who will explain the process.
- Submit your written complaint on the form provided.

In addition to the processes internal to the public education system, there are also external agencies who will hear parental complaints.

These avenues are also open to hearing appeals on complaints other than those related to education.

The Ombudsman

- Receives inquiries and complaints about the practices and services of public agencies.
- Focuses solely on the process that occurred, not specifically on the final decision. The issue is whether you have been given a fair opportunity to bring forward your concerns and have them fairly addressed.
- Conducts impartial and confidential investigations to determine if the public agency is operating in a fair way.
- Is responsible for ensuring the administrative practices and services of public agencies are fair, reasonable, appropriate and equitable.

The Representative for Children and Youth

- An independent officer of the Legislature who does not report through a Provincial ministry.
- Offices in Prince George, Victoria and the Lower Mainland.
- Mandate includes both individual and systemic advocacy for children, youth and their families.
- Contact info: phone 250-356-6710; toll-free 1-800-476-3933; email rcy@rcybc.ca.

The Human Rights Tribunal

- Independent, quasi-judicial body created under the auspices of the Human Rights Code.
- Responsible for accepting and resolving human rights complaints in a way that is fair to the complainant and to the person against whom the complaint is made.
- For more information, go to www.bchrt.bc.ca.

How does the HRT Resolve Complaints?

1. Through mediation, and/or
2. Through a hearing.

What complaints can they deal with?

- Only those covered by the Human Rights Code.
- Information about filing complaints appears on the website.

The Courts

- Choosing this course is a complex decision.
- The process can be expensive and time consuming.
- It requires consultation with a legal professional with expertise in the specific type of law required.
- Keep in mind that the outcome may not always be what is anticipated.

RECOMMENDED READING

There is always more to learn about advocacy and the general concepts can apply to all settings. Here are a few good resources.

- *Wrightslaw: From Emotions to Advocacy*, 2nd Edition, by Pam Wright & Pete Wright – This is an excellent source of valuable advocacy information. Readers from British Columbia must be careful to ignore any and all references to US laws and focus only on the chapters that deal with advocacy skills, techniques and strategies.
- www.Wrightslaw.com – This website is full of good resources about Advocacy. Again, it is written primarily for an American audience, so be careful not to focus on information about laws and policies. A good place to start on this website is to go to www.wrightslaw.com/topics.htm.

- *A Parent’s Handbook on Education* – This 145-page booklet is available online at www.inclusionbc.org/resources/everyone-belongs-our-schools-parents-handbook-inclusive-education-bcacl or in print by contacting Inclusion B.C. at 604-777-9100.
- “Your Parent Teacher Conference” by Tracey Wood – This is a brief article that outlines six steps to take when meeting with the teacher. You can find it at www.childrensdisabilities.info/advocacy/advocacy-conference.html.
- “Professional Ethics for Special Needs Parent Advocates” by Pat Linkhorn – A brief article that outlines important ethical considerations for you as an advocate. You can find it at www.comeunity.com/disability/advocacy-ethics.html.
- *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools* – A publication by the British Columbia Confederation of Parent Advisory Councils Advocacy Project. Can be ordered online or by contacting BCCPAC, tel (604) 474-0967, toll-free 1-866-529-4397, www.bccpac.bc.ca/resources/speaking.

References

1. Canadian Association for the Practical Study of Law in Education. December 2006, Volume 1, Number 2.
2. www.wrightslaw.com/advoc/articles/Letter_to_Stranger.html
3. Mehrabian, A. (1971). *Silent messages*. Wadsworth, Belmont, California.
4. <http://successful-meetings.tripod.com/id6.html>