

IS YOUR CHILD HAVING DIFFICULTY IN SCHOOL?

A Guide to Communicating
With Your School and District



Message From the Director of the Bureau of Special Education

To all parents of Pennsylvania school-age students:

You are an important participant in your child's education experience.

If you have concerns about your child's success in school, it is helpful if you can voice your concerns to school staff in a positive manner. When parents, teachers, and school officials communicate effectively and remain focused on meeting each student's needs, most concerns and issues can be resolved locally. This produces student-centered solutions and a team focused on providing quality education for your child. This information guide will provide you with a path for effective communication with school- and district-level staff.

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If You Think Your Child Could Benefit From Special Education Services

As a parent, you are an expert when it comes to understanding your child. You may, however, appreciate assistance in determining how to help your child succeed in school. If your child is struggling, you have a variety of options to pursue. Your child may need assistance in his or her general education program, which can take the form of extra help in a subject area such as reading or math; or your child may have a disability that requires specially-designed instruction/special education services to address his or her learning issues.

What is special education?

Special education is specially-designed instruction, provided at no cost to the parents, which meets the unique needs of a child with a disability. Specially-designed instruction means that the content, methodology, or delivery of instruction is adapted to meet a child's specialized needs that result from a disability. The instruction helps the child access the general education curriculum so that he or she can meet the educational standards that apply to all children.

Does your child need special education?

Your child may be eligible for special education if he or she:

- Has a disability as defined by IDEA 2004,
- and**
- Requires specially-designed instruction

Your child must meet both criteria in order to be eligible for special education.

Some indications that your child may have a disability that meets the first part of the two-part definition are:

- Exhibits an emotional disturbance over a long period of time that affects his or her ability to learn
- Has difficulty learning to read even with intense instruction
- Difficulty communicating
- Lack of interest or ability in age-appropriate activities
- Difficulty seeing or hearing that interferes with the ability to learn or communicate
- Health problems that affect educational performance

As a result of such disabilities, your child may need specially-designed instruction to make progress in school. This need for special education is the second part of the two-part decision to qualify a student for special education services. Pennsylvania has screening and evaluation processes in place to assess your child and confirm his or her need for special education.*

What is the first step to effective communication?

Start at the School Level—Discuss your concerns about your child’s learning with your child’s teacher, followed by the counselor, and/or the principal.

- **Start the conversation with what you know:**
 - ▶ My child is having difficulty in school...
 - ▶ I am concerned about my child’s ability to make friends...
 - ▶ I am worried about my child’s ability to succeed in school next year...

*For more detailed information, please see the *Pennsylvania Parent Guide to Special Education for School Age Children*. To request a copy, go to www.pattan.net or call 800-441-3215.

- **Ask questions:**
 - ▶ Does the school staff see some of the same issues?
 - ▶ What progress is my child making toward learning to read?
- **Discuss options:**
 - ▶ Share your proposed solution(s) to the problem.
 - ▶ Work with school staff to determine the next step.
 - ▶ Work collaboratively to meet the needs of your child.
- **Request an evaluation:**
 - ▶ You may ask your school to evaluate your child for special education at any time by asking an education professional or by sending a letter to your child's school principal.*
 - ▶ The school may also contact you to ask for written permission to evaluate your child.*
- **Have your concerns and questions been addressed?**
 - ▶ Is your child's program designed for educational benefit?
 - ▶ Are there indicators of academic improvement?
 - ▶ If you are still concerned and see no improvement, you can take your issues to the district level. (see pg. 7)

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If Your Child is Receiving Special Education Services

As a parent of a student with a disability, you have a variety of options to pursue if you are experiencing a concern about some aspect of your child's educational program. The concept of special education is straightforward. If a student with a disability has unique needs that require special education:

- Those needs are identified
- A program to meet those needs must be designed and carried out

However, the procedures and processes involved in designing and implementing the special education program are complex and may seem confusing.

What is the first step to effective communication?

Start at the School Level—If you have concerns about any aspect of your child's special education program, it is important to discuss those concerns with your child's teacher, special education teacher, school counselor, or principal. This can be accomplished informally through a conference, or you may at any time ask for an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting to review your child's program. *

- **Start the conversation with what you know:**
 - ▶ My child doesn't seem to be meeting her goals . . .
 - ▶ I am concerned about my child's fine motor skills . . .

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- ▶ I am worried about my child's ability to take the PSSA, even with accommodations . . .
- **Ask questions:**
 - ▶ Does the school staff see some of the same issues?
 - ▶ What progress is my child making toward his/her goals?
- **Discuss options:**
 - ▶ Share your proposed solution(s) to the problem.
 - ▶ Work with school staff to determine the next step.
 - ▶ Work collaboratively to meet the needs of your child.
- **Have your concerns and questions been addressed?**
 - ▶ Is your child's program designed for educational benefit?
 - ▶ Are there indicators of academic improvement?
 - ▶ If you are still concerned and see no improvement, you can take your issues to the district level. (see pg. 7)

If You Are Still Concerned About Your Child's Success in School

After discussing your concerns with school-level staff, if you are still worried about your child's success in school, you can take your issues to the district level. First, discuss your concerns with the supervisor of special education and, if you are not satisfied, ask to speak with his/her supervisor.

- **Explain your concerns regarding your child:**
 - ▶ Begin with written notes from school-level meeting(s).
 - ▶ Keep your focus on your child's needs, without placing blame or making accusations.
 - ▶ Remain positive and try to minimize thoughts of past problems, worst fears, and other negatives.
- **Can the district accommodate your child's needs?**
 - ▶ Is there an administrative directive that can help the school meet those needs?
 - ▶ What action will be taken by the administration to help with your concerns?
- **Have your concerns and questions been addressed?**
 - ▶ Is your child's program designed for educational benefit?
 - ▶ Are there indicators of academic improvement?
 - ▶ Has your child's situation improved?

Resources

- ▶ At any time during this process you may choose to:
 - ❖ Call the Special Education ConsultLine at 800-879-2301. ConsultLine is a statewide service of the Pennsylvania Department of Education, Bureau of Special Education, that provides assistance to parents and advocates of children with school-related concerns, special education regulations, and the special education complaint process.

and/or

- ❖ Call one of Pennsylvania's Parent Training and Information (PTI) centers to talk with an advocate. PTI centers are funded through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Parent Education Network (PEN)

800-522-5827 V/TTY

800-441-5028 Spanish

PEN is a coalition of parents and professionals providing technical assistance, on-site parent training workshops, and literature regarding early intervention, special education, and transition.

Services are provided in the eastern and south central regions of Pennsylvania.

Parent Education and Advocacy Leadership (PEAL) Center

412-281-4404

866-950-1040 toll free

412-281-4409 TTY

PEAL is a coalition of parents and professionals providing technical assistance, on-site parent training workshops, and literature regarding early intervention, special education, and transition. Services are provided in the central and western regions of Pennsylvania.

Before All Meetings

Be prepared:

- To provide documentation
- To ask questions
- To offer solutions
- To compromise
- To give the changes time to work

Keep complete records:

- All correspondence to and from school (letters, emails, etc.)
- Notes from informal meetings (phone or face-to-face conversations)
- Information from doctors and others who interact with your child



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Bureau of Special Education
Pennsylvania Training and Technical Assistance Network