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TIPS FOR YOUR NEXT IEP MEETING FROM A SPECIAL-ED ATTORNEY

Written by: Lara Cleary



After working as a special education teacher for a few years, I attended law school with the sole intention of becoming a special education attorney who represented parents of children with special needs. In 1998 right out of law school—I was lucky enough to get a job doing just that.

For years, I attended hundreds of IEP meetings involving all types of special education issues. However, about five years ago, my perspective and practice were forever impacted when my own child was diagnosed with a disability. I now better understand the emotions, including the fear, uncertainty and anguish, that can come when your child has special needs.

write down my best advocacy tips to share with anyone who asked. I hope that my varied experiences at IEP meetings can help others navigate the special education world for their own children: 1. Use private providers. The Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEA) allows

Following my child's last IEP meeting, held at a time when she was really struggling in school, I decided to

- parents to bring private providers to IEP meetings to share their expertise about the child. These individuals, such as an OT, SLP or therapist, can provide the IEP team with great information for the creation of IEP goals, accommodations, modifications and when discussing placement options. The IDEA also allows parents to obtain private evaluations and requires school districts to consider the information at an IEP meeting. If you are looking for an evaluator, find one that has experience with school districts and will accompany you to an IEP meeting. An evaluator who is reluctant to attend an IEP meeting is not one that you want to spend your money on. 2. Educate yourself. Learn your rights prior to attending IEP meetings with district personnel. Know the
- law, the procedures, and the special education terminology (there are a lot of acronyms). The Illinois State Board of Education's website is a good place to start as it contains hundreds of informational memorandums. You can also access both the federal and State special education laws and administrative rules on that site. In my experience, district personnel respond more positively to parents they perceive as informed, interested and involved. 3. **Begin preparing early.** Most school districts are willing to provide parents with draft copies of evaluations and goals in advance of an IEP meeting. Document your request in writing (more advice:

always document everything in writing) and send the letter or e-mail a few weeks in advance of the

meeting. I usually ask for the paperwork to be provided to me for a client at least five days in advance of

the meeting. You can also develop your own agenda and issues for the meeting. Make copies for each member of the team. 4. Stay focused. The most common mistake we see from parents who have reached an impasse with a school district is that they try to accomplish too many things at one time. Recently, a friend who also happens to be a very successful litigation attorney asked me to review a seven-page letter to the district following her daughter's IEP meeting. I edited the letter to 1.5 pages! Too much detail waters down your main issues. I'd have been surprised if district personnel could even get through half of the original seven

pages. Parents need to determine what they really want. Other issues can be brought up later; you don't

5. **Do not be intimidated.** The district IEP teams may, at times, seem voluminous and have a lot of varied or difficult opinions about your child. But who knows the child best? YOU! Parents should listen to the educational team and consider their recommendations, but should not be afraid to disagree. With that said, always be as kind and cooperative as possible. I have seen more parents get what they want with kindness and respect than by being rude and aggressive. Finally, if you are nervous, bring a support person to the IEP (spouse, other family member, friend) and ask them to take good notes.

have to worry about waiving them. Under the IDEA, an IEP meeting can be requested at any time.

and throughout the State of Illinois. If your child is struggling in school and is exhibiting emotional/behavioral difficulties, your child may have protections and rights under federal and State law. Please contact us at 847-715-2801 or through our website, hansencleary.com, with any questions.

Lara Cleary is a partner with the law firm of Hansen & Cleary, LLC. Hansen & Cleary is a boutique law

practice focusing on the representation of children and families, individuals with disabilities, medical and mental health practitioners, private schools, and other non-profit agencies in the greater Chicagoland area

Learn more about IEPs at our IEP 101 workshop at NPN's FREE March 11 Developmental Differences Resource Fair. Reserve your spot today!

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How to advocate for your special-needs child in CPS Chicago venues that cater to kids with special needs

The NPN blog gives voice to our members' thoughts about parenting in the city, and the views expressed don't necessarily reflect our own. Want to write for us? Email laura@npnparents.org with your topic ideas.

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