

What parents wish we had known about special education before we started:

- 1. Educating yourself is key** to helping your child get help. The law sets out in detail how decisions in special education are supposed to be made. The law is focused on collaborative decision-making, with parents an important part of the team. There are lots of free resources for learning about your child's disability and your and the school's rights and responsibilities.
- 2. Assessments are your friends.** They are opportunities to get supports that your child needs. Request an assessment for special ed. as soon as you suspect a problem. You need not do SST first, and you can do both tracks simultaneously. You can get a "second opinion"—an independent educational evaluation. The discrepancy between where your child is and where s/he needs to be represents the power to change things.
- 3. You should ask to receive all reports in advance of meetings.** It's your legal right, and it gives you time to think carefully about what they are saying about your child's needs.
- 4. You can direct the discussion in team meetings.** Bring a list of the issues you want to make sure to address. Ask the team to address each of the issues. Record what was said, whether the issue was solved, and who is responsible for implementing the solution you agreed on. If the issue is not solved, ask the team to suggest next steps and record those.
- 5. You can and should ask lots of questions** in team meetings—to make sure you understand everything that is being said and to require other team members to spell out exactly what they're recommending and why. Questions aren't a sign of weakness; they are most powerful tool you have.
- 6. Strong goals are the core of the IEP**—all services derive from them. If the goal is to be at grade level (or beyond!) in a general education setting, for example, the intermediate goals should be on track to get your child there. If the goals aren't being met, don't just water down goals; figure out what's needed to meet them.
- 7. There are always other options, and you should know what they are.** There is never only one way in special education, because the process is focused on each child's unique needs. There are always various teaching methods, alternate tests, other classrooms, altered schedules, different schools in the SELPA, nonpublic schools, private schools, etc. Knowing what these options are will help you to evaluate whether the services offered are appropriate for your child.
- 8. Record-keeping is essential.** Take notes of all contacts with the district and keep records of your child's progress. Consider recording meetings (but only after notifying other parties).
- 9. You need not sign the IEP at the meeting.** If you are not satisfied, do not understand, or simply want more time to think about it, you may want to take it home to review—just like any other legal document. You do not have to sign the IEP to get services. The IEP represents the minimum of what the school must do, not the maximum it can do.
- 10. Follow-through is your job too.** Make sure you know how your child is doing on his/her goals. If you don't get reports, initiate contact with teachers. If your child isn't making progress toward goals, ask for a new meeting to adjust the methods. You can request an IEP meeting at any time.
- 11. You will make mistakes;** figuring out this process will take time. Raising kids is a marathon, not a sprint, and that goes double for special education. Accept that district staff and teachers will make mistakes too. Leave room for everyone to learn from their mistakes. Unless mistakes or omissions make a real difference, just correct them; don't sweat the small stuff.