Interfacing with School Support Systems Effectively: *Best Practice for the Guardian Ad Litem*

A presentation to the *DuPage County Bar Association by*
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Overview of Today's Presentation

- Brief review of best practice

- Tips to enhance your communication with schools

- Presentation will be available online at www.iepguardians.org under "Presentations"

- Our practice overview

- Our background as special education and general education administrators and –now-- layadvocates

- We offer free consultations to family up front to ensure our services are a good match

Common Requests To School Staff

Grade updates

Discipline/behavioral update

Attendance updates

Course Selection updates

Progress Monitoring Updates (RTI/ MTSS)

Request to observe student

Request for initial case study evaluation for special education (see sample letter)

Interventions/Supports Being Provided (see Accommodations vs Modifications)

504 Plan Requests

Request for CSE/IEP

Request for Private School

Consideration of outside evaluations

Records requests

Inspection of file

Communication and School Teams: Understanding the School Support Staff Structure

- Familiarize yourself with the lay of the land….know the structure of the school environment and the roles that all the players have. Each school is unique.

- As a rule of thumb:

  - Elementary Schools start with classroom teacher. He/she can direct you as to who best can answer your questions

  - Middle Schools start with Guidance Counselor if available or Assistant Principal.

  - High Schools start with Guidance Counselor or with Case Manager if applicable.

- Depending on the need/type of support your key contact person will direct you to the correct person.

- All schools have a hierarchy of problem solving teams. It is best to start at the ground floor and follow the correct process/procedure the school has in place. This is the collaborative approach rather the combative approach. Ie…calling or emailing the Superintendent right out of the gate

Escalation and De-Escalation in School Matters:
A Continuum of Responses

Efforts to De-escalate (less intensive, less formal requests) in descending order:

Team agrees on common goals or student outcomes for child.

Team agrees to make decisions based on data.

Team agrees to try research based interventions for periods of time and re-meet to report back on data

Team agrees to be transparent. GAL has access to all necessary information to progress monitor child. Such as access to online grade book, attendance reports, discipline reports, and any important anecdotal reports that impact the students education.

All team members are included on correspondence that is pertinent to the child being academically, socially and emotionally successful at school.

GAL can request the notes from any problem solving meeting that staff may have that directly relates to the student being served.

GAL can request the need for the team to look at opening up a 504 plan or initiating a CSE if the interventions/strategies being implemented are not effective.

Escalation and De-Escalation in School Matters:
A Continuum of Responses

Efforts to Escalate (more intensive, formal, timeline-oriented requests) in descending order:

GAL requests that the student be brought up at Pupil Problem Solving Team meeting to address a specific issue

GAL requests the notes from that meeting and weighs in on specific interventions/supports to be put in place

GAL requests a formal meeting 30-45 days after the intervention/supports were implemented to review data.

If the intervention/support had no impact on student GAL can request a more formal plan which can include:

Moving to a 504 plan (provide accommodations)

Open up a CSE in anticipation of obtaining an IEP

School District has 10 days to respond to such a request. At this time a meeting will be held to accept or deny the request to open up a case study evaluation or a 504 plan.

If unhappy with the results of the meeting it is now time to kick up the request to the Director of Special Education for the District.

What are signs that lead to escalation in school support scenarios?

Communication difficulty/breakdown (jargon, timelines, steps in process, RTI, data collection, rights, etc.)

Team is –unknowingly– operating on faulty or outdated assumptions (e.g., "*well, that is what parent wanted/told me last year!*")

Parents feel unqualified or underprepared to raise or respond to specific concerns (e.g., Parent has to triple task; at the meeting, "*I'm not going to say anything*")

Meetings can be overwhelming from parent POV ("*They made me cry, so I want you to make them cry…*")

Options are not fully explained to parents and parents aren't informed of what they can request ("*We don't know, what we don't know!*")

Parents do not feel they are participating/collaborating meaningfully in the process

Parents and school often see different versions of the student, and may have competing theories of how the child learns best

Escalation likely needed after a meeting like this…

- **Parent had no clue what the meeting was about, who was at the table, and what was proposed**
- **Parents expected to triple task: listen, take notes, and digest new information on the fly**
- **Meeting suppressed the opinions of the staff and or the parents, and only the 1-2 staff were talking**
- **There are team members who <u>never</u> spoke up at the meeting… on anything**
- **Feedback and documentation broad, general, and loose, with clear pride of authorship reflected in proceedings**
- **Meeting went well over budget; staff came and went without introduction or explanation**
- **Items discussed and agreed to not summarized, and left to parent to follow up**
- **Record issued with no reflection of actual conversation**

Escalation not needed after a meeting like this…

- Parent, and LEA collaborated and agreed to purpose, agenda, format, and timeline

- Parents had time before the meeting to review and evaluate proposed information (goals, reports, scores, etc.)

- Appropriate balance between elasticity (to permit team members to extend a point) and structure (meeting accomplished objective, i.e., domain for re-evaluation)

- Team members stop frequently and check for understanding

- Team members have avoided the "love-in" and disingenuous compliments

- Meeting did not exceed appropriate time limit

- Follow up items were recapped, "timelined", and issues deferred to another meeting encapsulated

- Ideally, additional comments were projected for parents to see or read back. Alternatively, parents were invited to contribute to proceedings under "parent concerns"

What a GAL should focus on before contact with school staff is made

Identify Needs → Respond to Needs → Measure Results → Report Progress → (cycle)
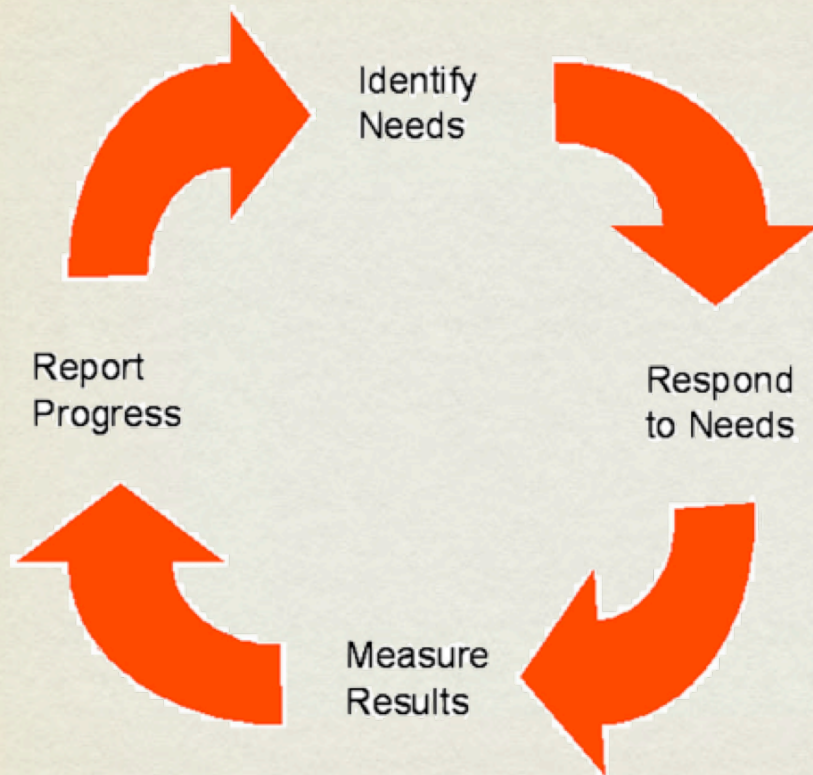
- Meet with parents/caregivers to establish common goal(s) and measurable student outcomes. If consensus is not possible, discuss and prioritize educational matters beforehand.

- It is imperative that parents are in collaboration that the purpose of meetings and communication with school is student centered. Schools tend to take passive approach in matters of parent disagreement.

- Agree on a set agenda and the roles of each parent and the GAL.

How to Support Success After the Meeting Has Taken Place?

- Establish who your point person/contact person is if questions should arise and the best means of communication.

- For each action step in plan establish who is accountable for success.

- Set up follow up meeting 30-45 days out to review plan (with data).

- Decide as a team what criteria is used to determine that the plan is successful.

- Decide as a team what the continuum of services will be (where the student will be headed) if the plan is not supportive enough.

General Support Plan Overview

- Response to Intervention (RTI/ MTSS)

- Section 504 Plan (accommodations and related services only)

- Individualized Education Program (IEP): need for specialized instruction to meet needs of learner

- Consult handout: comparison of supports

School Responsibilities for Data Collection/Progress Monitoring

- Brief overview of RTI/MTSS

- Tier 1 (progress monitoring 3x a year)

- Tier 2 (progress monitoring 2x a month)

- Tier 3 (progress monitoring weekly)

- Interventions must be peer reviewed, research based, and effective for the population targeted

- See: "what works clearinghouse" at http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/

Data and its Role in Positive Student Outcomes

- Data drives all decision making. Some schools have leaders that are more data driven than others

- Multiple sources of information must be consulted

- Schools have legal obligation to consider outside clinical evaluations (need 10 school days to fully consider)

- Data drives instruction (tempo, methodology, evaluation)

- Data drives placement decisions

5 Important Considerations for the GAL
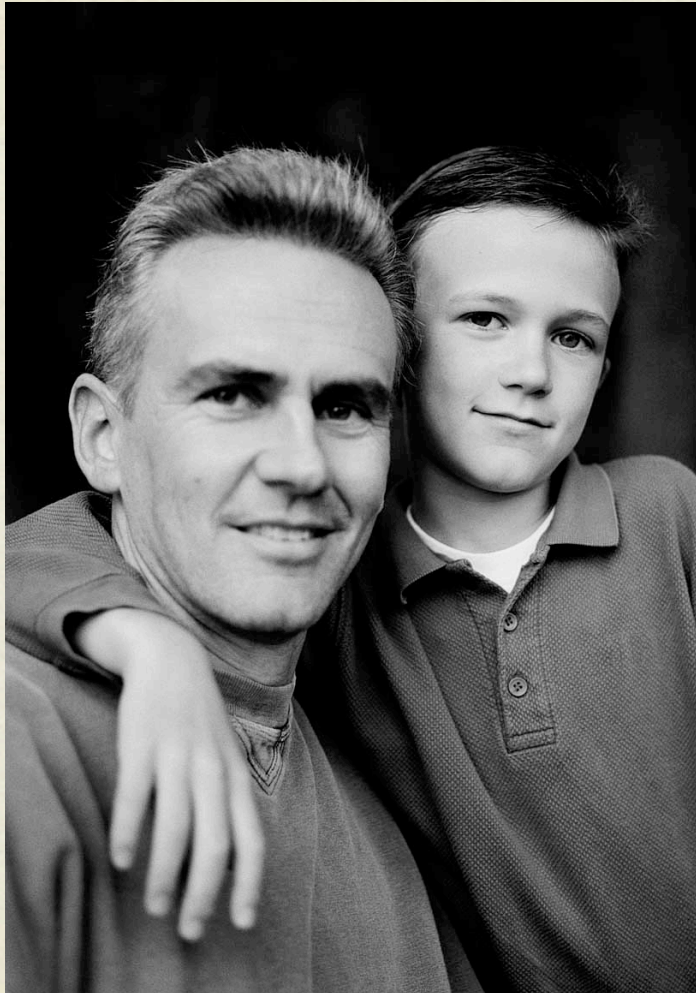
- Establish consensus between parents that the focus of all meetings and conversations is student centered.

- Establish a clear goal(s) that is measurable and focuses on positive student outcomes.

- Know the lay of the land. Learn who the key players are at each school environment to avoid potential landmines.

- Advocacy is situational: measure your reaction to the context and audience

- Put your mantra ("what is best for the child?") into practice with every connection with school staff.

Some important, effective words overhead at effective meetings…

"I've been wanting to try something new. What do you think about this?"

"We've put a great deal of time and energy into this plan: I think we should stick with it."

"Would the team be open to trying…"

"What does the data suggest?"

"Would you be willing to give us a little more time on this plan? We'll make a commitment to come back and evaluate this on…"

"Have you asked Billy what he thinks about this change?"

"Can you think of other ways we can support Johnny?"

"I saw your kid do the coolest thing the other day…"

"We can do better than this, and I'd be willing to offer…"

"What option we've discussed is the 'least dangerous assumption' for the kid? What are the pros? What are the cons?"

"Suzie has shown us she is really ready for this…"

RESOURCES

- www.Wrightslaw.com
- http://isbe.net/spec-ed/
- http://www.fetaweb.com/free.htm
- http://www2.ed.gov/policy/speced/guid/idea/index.html
- http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/
- https://sec1.isbe.net/sedsinquiry/dueprocessdecisions.aspx
- Copy of todays presentation available at www.iepguardians.org under "Presentations"

In closing...