

Fight the Good Fight: *Getting Special Education Services for Your Child*

“Resilient, resourceful, determined...” These are words Gary L. Wise uses to describe parents who pursue getting an education for their children with special needs. Wise has earned the Chartered Special Needs Consultant (ChSNC)¹ designation and is a Special Care Planner with MassMutual Financial Group in Maumee, Ohio, (near Toledo) a general agency of Massachusetts Mutual Life Insurance Company (MassMutual).

“If a parent is not all this and more,” he explains, “the child’s education suffers.” It shouldn’t be this way. Parents shouldn’t have to fight for their child’s education. Not in this time of No Child Left Behind² legislation, and especially not with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).³ But it is this way.

How the system fails your child

Why must you fight? For many reasons, regardless of the best intentions of legislators, administrators, case workers, teachers, and others. We have:

- legislation without full funding and support
- government administrators who are burdened by paperwork, red tape, and inefficiencies
- school systems that rely on test scores to earn them government grants they need to supplement tight school budgets
- teachers who are overworked, ill-equipped, and frustrated.

And following that, we have you, trying to get your son or daughter the education he or she has a right to and deserves.

In a blog post⁴ published in July 2012 on SchoolBook.org (a microsite of nytimes.com created by the New York Times and WNYC), eighth-grade teacher Laura Klein shares her personal experiences. She states, “There’s a lot to criticize about the way special education works in this enormous system. It is cloudy and incongruous, difficult to define, and difficult to find any universal truths when you talk about it.

I see its deficiencies with much clarity, because I see the way that it fails my students, year after year.” She admits that perhaps “the failures stand

out more than the successes — when it works, you don’t think much about it.” She also affirms that “the system relies heavily on parent advocacy and participation.”

A Serious Responsibility

We can tell you that you aren’t alone, that there are nearly 6.5 million⁵ kids in the special education system with parents like you who want the best for their children. Perhaps that’s reassuring on some level, but in actuality, you are alone. You are the one worrying about your child, trying to learn how the system works, where it might be broken, and what steps you must take. You are the one trying to stay on top of it all and fighting the fight for your child. Even with the support of family and friends, a special ed advocate, an attorney, and others, the level of your child’s academic success – aside from the effort your child puts in – depends on you.

Wise has spoken with school counselors, teachers, and special ed administrators, as well as other parents whose children receive services, and he’s navigated the special ed waters for his own child, so he can empathize. He’s dismayed, but not surprised, when counselors tell him parents often don’t participate in their children’s education.

“I can understand it,” he says. “It’s all foreign to parents. There’s so much to learn about the process and how to make it work. On top of that, parents must carve out time from busy schedules. I’m used to meetings and appointments – it’s part of my job – but for some, it means shuffling responsibilities, taking time from work, perhaps even dealing with transportation issues. One obstacle upon another can make it difficult to get and stay involved.”

However, when parents aren’t involved, kids can’t be helped. Parental approval must be given before a child can be evaluated for special ed services.

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Overcoming obstacles, pushing forward

Here are tips and issues to consider.

- Some students who'd qualify for special ed services but don't get it may have trouble socializing or may hang with the wrong crowd. Getting your child the academic help he or she needs can help prevent emotional or behavioral issues from developing.
- If your child is evaluated, but denied special ed services, and you believe there's a real need, have your child tested outside the school system.
- Even with political correctness, increased understanding, and acceptance of people with special needs in mainstream society, the "short bus" jokes still continue. Your child may be teased and bullied. Plan ahead: Talk to professionals who can help you and your child prepare for and

handle it. Encourage your child – and teachers – to tell you about bullying.

- Once a plan is in place, monitor it. "You can't let go," warns Wise. "You must be dedicated to work the program through, hand in hand with teachers." Your involvement may be welcomed or resented, but either way, you have a right and obligation to be involved. Review and return communications and paperwork promptly. At team meetings, ask questions, be forthcoming with concerns and suggestions, and request improvements to services if you believe it's appropriate.
- In her article, Klein states that "we lower standards for special education students – a trend that perpetuates the academic inferiority that these students feel." This is especially the case for students considered to have an emotional disturbance, she explains. Hold yourself and teachers

accountable for helping your child achieve the level of success he or she is capable of reaching – not the pre-conceived standard the industry has set.

- Teach your child to self advocate – to know what to expect, speak up when it's not delivered, and ask for help when it's needed.
- "It's all about your network," says Wise. "It takes time to build one, but when a question or problem arises, having a network of peers and experts will help you get from point A to point B as efficiently as possible. I work in the midst of the community of people with special needs and those who provide services to them. I can often suggest someone to help a client begin to find solutions and achieve their goals."

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- In single-parent households or when both parents work, life can be hectic and time constraints, huge. Find ways to get and stay organized in all aspects of your life. The effort pays off in the long run, helping you reduce stress and manage time. Additionally, when you can easily find information – such as medical documents or last year’s special ed reports – you’re less likely to put off getting paperwork completed or preparing for school meetings.
- If your school provides private, remote computer access to your child’s records (grades, teachers’ comments, etc.) or e-mail access to teachers, use it. It’s available at your convenience – late at night or on weekends, for instance. It’s a great way to work with teachers to oversee your child’s education and stay abreast of important projects, tests, and other events.
- If the special ed plan isn’t working or the school isn’t providing services your child needs, there are steps you have a legal right to take. When you first requested special ed services, you should have been given this information. If not, ask for it, research it, check with your network, hire an advocate, call an attorney, whatever you must do to know your rights. If issues can’t be resolved, you might consider changing public schools or looking into private education. “Parents may feel private school is unaffordable,” says Wise. “I suggest they avoid making assumptions by first looking into their options and learning the real costs. Once that’s done, I can help them troubleshoot. We’ll look at spending habits and their overall financial situation to see where their strategy can be adjusted to work more effectively or free up cash.”

Go ahead, take up the fight

Author Toba Beta said, “If you’re confused about what to do, it’s a sign that your enemy is winning.” We aren’t saying your special ed staff is your enemy, but as mentioned earlier, there are many reasons why the system can fail you. So equalize the battlefield. Educate yourself, know the system, know your rights. Be resilient. Be resourceful. Be determined.

1. Chartered Special Needs Consultant – a professional designation awarded to those individuals who’ve completed 120 hours of academic classes in addition to previously completing the Special Care Planner certification program and has also earned at least one other advanced financial planning services designation (such as ChFC, Chartered Financial Consultant). The ChSNC designation was developed by The American College in Bryn Mawr, Pennsylvania. The certification program and the professional designation evolved from MassMutual’s SpecialCareSM Program.

2. <http://www2.ed.gov/nclb/landing.jhtml> – information about No Child Left Behind

3. <http://idea.ed.gov> – information about the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act

4. www.schoolbook.org/2012/07/23/the-special-education-problems-we-arent-solving/

5. Source: U.S. Department of Education. In 2009-2010, 6,481,000 students were served under IDEA, which equates to 13.1% of all students in public schools. <http://nces.ed.gov/programs/coe/tables/table-cwd-1.asp>

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* The Special Care Planner received advanced training and information in estate and tax planning concepts, special needs trusts, government programs, and the emotional dynamics of working with people with disabilities and other special needs and their families. The certificate program was offered by The American College in Bryn Mawr, PA, exclusively for MassMutual financial professionals. State insurance departments recognize that the Special Care Planner certificate program provides essential information on the profession of special care by granting continuing education (CE) credits (varies by state).

A Special Care Planner through MassMutual’s SpecialCareSM program can assist parents in drafting Letters of Intent and can help make a difference in the quality of life for an individual with special needs, their caregiver and other family members. Through SpecialCare you will learn valuable financial strategies, identify financial strategy solutions, access vital information, and meet certified specialists who will work with you and your professional advisors – your banker, accountant or financial planner, lawyer, social workers and health care providers – to review your financial picture and offer options to fit the needs of each situation. For more details, visit MassMutual’s website at <http://www.MassMutual.com/specialcare>, or call 1-(800)-272-2216.

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