

Advocating without Alienating

A helpful compilation of insights and experiences from parents, teachers, and administrators in Blue Valley

Advocate

- To support or speak in favor of something
- To act or intercede on behalf of another

(Webster's Dictionary)

Purpose of the discussion

- Share best practices
- Learn effective techniques
- Avoid pitfalls
- Raise awareness of importance of positive advocacy
- Allow opportunity to share experiences
- Insights will be documented and posted on BVPAGE website:
www.bvpage.org

“Instead of being a horrible experience, advocating can actually strengthen your bonds with your child’s teachers and school. It also helps other parents, who might come along later, find an easier way.”

~ survey response

Survey Demographics

- 46 people took the online anonymous survey on Survey Monkey from September 25 – October 4
- Responders represent: (could select more than one choice)
 - 52% parents
 - 40% teachers
 - 22% gifted teachers
 - 2% administrators
- Parents have children in these age groups: (could select more than one)
 - 2% Not in school yet
 - 2% Preschool
 - 37% Elementary School
 - 32% Middle School
 - 22% High School
 - 12% College
 - 29% Post college

“Success is knowing the difference between cornering people and getting them in your corner.”

- Bill Copeland

Getting started

How do you introduce the topic and start the conversation?

Start with the right person

- Go through a chain of command. Start with the person with immediate authority over the area of concern and then move up the ladder as necessary. It can be hurtful and ineffective to jump steps.
- Understand that Gifted teachers do not have authority over general education teachers. They can offer support, resources, ideas.
- Make an appointment. Find the right time and place for the conversation.

Seek to Understand:

- Ask questions to seek understanding
- Set aside the need to be right.
- Ask for clarification to provoke the thought process
- *“My child’s perception of the situation is... Before reacting, I want to make sure I understand the whole picture. What are your observations?”*

Start with positives

- Build the sandwich – positive, areas of concern, positive
- Establish mutual respect.
- Be grateful for efforts and willingness to work together
- Empathy for teacher constraints. Understand that teacher has many other students and must balance needs of all kids.
- List what is/has been effective. Share what is working.
- *“I appreciate all that is currently being done for my student. Can we look at more ideas?”*

Helpful Phrases:

- “How can I help or partner with you?”
- “We are open to suggestions about...”
- “What do you think?”
- “Help me understand...”
- “We need help.”
- *“I would like to explore ways we could increase challenge for my child. I know you are busy, but I have some ideas I would like to share and would love to hear your ideas too. When would be a good time to get together?”*

Key concepts when advocating



Techniques to try

Know the goal

- Be clear and specific about end result you want – but be open-minded about different possible ways to get there. End goal may change.
- Know when to slow down and when to move forward
- Define the problem.

Be educated

- Learn about process, legalities, parameters. Do your research.
- Garner outside information and sources.
- Be informed.
- Understand limitations of what can/can't be done.
- Read about gifted education and about parenting gifted students.

Share information

- Don't assume teacher knows that the student needs differentiation. May not have experience or knowledge in how to handle gifted students.
- Hear all sides and suggestions
- Share what happens at home and your insight about your child

Focus on the child

- This is not about you as a parent. Park your ego and baggage at the door.
- Phrase concerns in child-centered manner.
- Don't make comparisons to other children, other teachers, other situations.
- Realistically understand your child's strengths and weaknesses.
- One size does not fit all.
- Think about what will benefit the child emotionally, intellectually, and socially. Social and emotional needs are just as important.

Be willing to reinforce at home

- Offer to work on skills at home – time management, organizational skills
- Take a concept that your student enjoys from class and ask for an extension to be done at home.
- *“What suggestions do you have to help me support my child at home and reinforce what you are doing in school?”*

Be calm

- Keep emotions in check. You can still be passionate.
- Focus on finding solutions and not on placing blame.
- Use a waiting period to cool off if necessary.
- Write down thoughts and goals to stay focused.

Be persistent

- Don't give up. "If it feels wrong, it is wrong. Fix it."
- It may not be a quick fix. Put in the time and energy to go the distance. May take multiple meetings to see change.
- Stick to your guns.
- Evolutionary vs. revolutionary change
- *"I had to be firm and polite and explain that I would not sign anything that didn't feel like it met the best interest of my child. I was willing to compromise and suggested multiple compromises."*

Use Team approach

- Teachers are professionals who want to help your student
- Know that everyone is on the same team
- All members have valuable input to share.
- Understand the motivation and perspective of all parties
- Problem solve in a way that respects everyone's time
- Use "us" and "we"
- Be seen throughout school as someone who works together well
- Be open-minded to possible interventions and solutions
- Bring suggestions and options
- *"When working on a problem with parents, I sit with them on the same side of the table and put the problem on the opposite side. This shows them visually that we are working together and we are on the same team."*

Involve your child!

- *“Refrain to the best of your ability from hovering over your child, swooping in, and "fixing" all of their academic problems for them. This can create a learned helplessness and can inadvertently help gifted children become more afraid to take academic risks to try something new or when a task is perceived as too difficult. In order to help your child increase his/her own self-advocacy over time, it is important to let kids attempt to solve their own problems (appropriate to their age-level and the situation, of course), so they can learn how to struggle through an issue and increase their autonomy in figuring something out.”*
- Get your child’s input on what they want.
- “Be careful – what is best for a child and what a child wants can be different things. Therefore, advocating for a child means learning the difference between going to bat for them to foster success and giving in to the whims of our children.”
- “Kids really value when their voice and choice is taken into account.”
- Include students in the planning and problem solving process. “Students take more ownership of the plan when they were there when it was developed.”
- Don’t make excuses for a child’s behavior.

- Allow students to figure some things out for themselves. They will feel great if you believe in them. “When you rescue them, you deprive the student of the opportunity to work through things on their own. Your actions tell the child that you think they are incapable.”
- “You are always a role model for them. They should see you being polite and using teamwork.”
- Teach them effective ways to self-advocate. (Possible BVPAGE program?)
- Students earn grades. They are not given grades.
- “Golden opportunities to learn that things won’t always be smooth and easy in life.”
- “Learn how to ask for something she needs without being afraid.”
- Teach that it’s okay to fail sometimes.
- Let natural consequences work.

“Sometimes as parents we are so focused on our kids and their feelings that we sometimes can't see the big picture. While our children's feelings are important, it is also important to learn Life lessons in school too. Sometimes that means experiencing natural consequences for their action and behavior. Even when those consequences are hard for us to see happening to our kids. Realizing that consequences in school are much smaller than consequences when they get out of school as adults. They can learn much from experiencing this in school as well as home.”

Pitfalls to avoid

Don't assume

- Get all the facts. Collect all necessary and correct data.
- Listen to all sides of the story. Don't assume you know the whole situation.

Speak negatively in front of student or other teachers

- Kids hear everything!
- No trash talking about other teachers. *"They are my colleagues and friends. It is uncomfortable and painful."*

Use "I" vs. "You" language

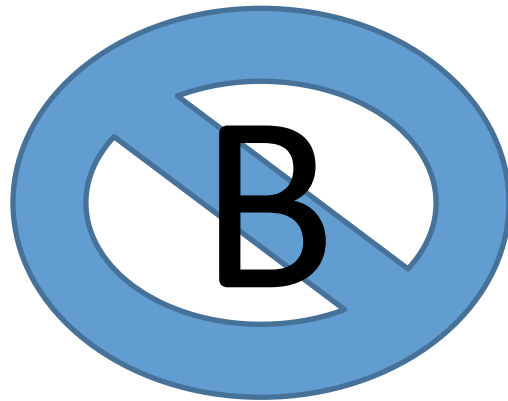
- Take ownership of problem.
- *"Since I am having trouble keeping things on a challenging level, I was hoping you could help me."*

Bullying is bad

- Don't be bossy or threatening

Don't be defensive

- Watch non-verbal clues
- Keep emotions in check
- Be open.
- LISTEN
- Focus on the positives. Don't dwell on the negatives
- Breathe



Avoid the “B” word! (BORING)

- Saying that your child is bored can feel rude, defensive and not helpful

Success Stories

- Years ago, a teacher would give my daughter more work to do because she finished regular classwork so quickly and easily. My daughter quickly figured out that the slower she worked, the less she had to do. Then the teacher thought she was being lazy and not meeting potential. I made sure first to get my daughter's perspective so that I understood the situation from both sides. I don't automatically assume my child is in the right. I do automatically assume that the teacher wants my child to do well and is trying. I wrote the teacher a note explaining what I would like to talk with her about, and I stressed my concern over what my daughter was doing rather than the teacher's approach (even though I didn't agree with the "differentiation"). Because I gave the teacher time to consider rather than pouncing, came in with some possibilities (but not demands), and brought my daughter in to the conversation after the teacher considered which possibilities would work in the classroom, everyone felt more ownership in the decision. It gave us more of a feeling of working together.

Our child had attended a private school and so we were concerned about appropriate academic placement when entering BVSD. We spoke with the GT Coordinator and the teachers, and also presented outside testing results to the school's acceleration team which included teachers, the school psych and the principal. We had realistic expectations on how long the process would take (it wasn't quick) but recognized that the process was in place for the benefit of the child, not to "thwart" us. Our child was grade-accelerated and is doing really well!

We have found that "planting positive seeds" first is very effective. So we would ask: "Mrs. Smith, have you noticed Johnny doing x, y and z in class?" If they say yes, then there is an opportunity to discuss a little further. If they say no, then we leave it with a "hmm! that's funny because at home, he does x, y and z, and we were just wondering what it might mean." You can bet that teacher will be on the alert from then on to notice those things, even if she hadn't before. Also, take a concept that your child enjoys from class and then ask for an extension to be done at home. "Mr. Jones, Johnny just LOVED that unit you taught on fractions... do you have some ideas for other activities he could do at home? He really loves math games!"

Follow Up

This power point presentation will be available on the BVPAGE website.

www.bvpage.org