

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
- 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 chain of command.
- Understand that Gifted teachers do not have authority over general education teachers -- they can offer support, resources, and ideas.
- Make an appointment.
- Understand roles.

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.
- 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

- Define the problem.
- Envision end goal.
- Work on specifics.
- Adjust your speed.

Be educated

- Learn about process, legalities, parameters. Do your research.
- Garner outside information and sources.
- Understand limitations of what can/can't be done.
- Read about gifted education and about parenting gifted students.
- Don't be a "know-it-all".

Share information

- Don't assume teacher knows student
 - is gifted.
 - is accelerated (and therefore a different age).
 - 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.
- Form partnership with teacher.

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.

“I explain to my child, it's not that the teachers aren't doing it right, it's that they aren't doing it right for you.”

Be willing to reinforce at home

- Offer to work on skills at home – time management, organizational skills, social interactions, etc.
- Take a concept that your student enjoys from class and ask for an extension to be done at home.

“What can I do at home to 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.
- Everyone is on the same team.
- All members have valuable input to share.
- 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.

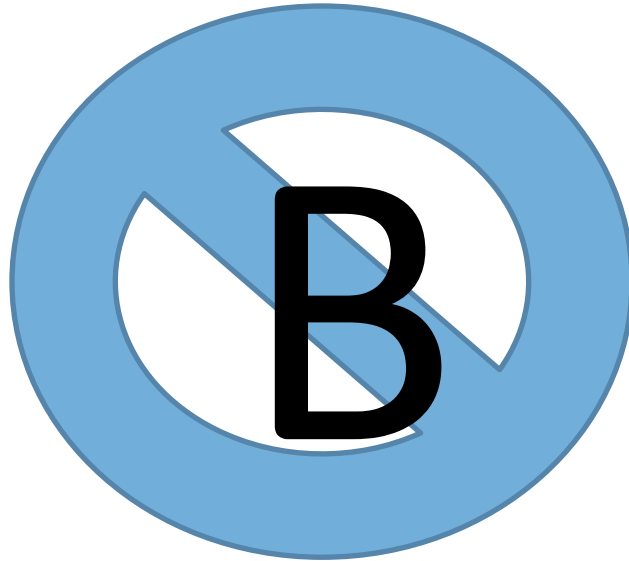
“When working on a problem with parents, I sit with them on the same side of the table and put the problem on the opposite side. This shows them visually that we are working together and we are on the same team.”

Involve your child!

- 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.”*
- Include students in the planning and problem solving process. *“Students take more ownership of the plan when they were there when it was developed.”*
- *“Kids really value when their voice and choice is taken into account.”*
- Don't make excuses for a child's behavior.
- Students earn grades. They are not given grades.

- 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.
- *“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.

Pitfalls to avoid



Avoid the “B” word! (BORING)

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

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.

Don't speak negatively in front of student or badly of 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

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.”

“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.”

“Take a concept that your child enjoys from class and then ask for an extension to be done at home. "Mr. Jones, Suzy just LOVED that unit you taught on fractions... do you have some ideas for other activities she could do at home? She really loves math games!"

Resources

BVPAGE (Blue Valley Parent Advocates for Gifted Education)
Our mission is to advocate to enhance services for all Blue Valley gifted students, and provide information and support for their parents. www.bvpage.org

A Parent's Guide to Gifted Children by James T. Webb,
Ph.D.

KGTC (Kansas Association for the Gifted Talented and Creative) www.kgtc.org