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Abstract

This article is by a group of people who have supported many families to secure and maintain their children in neighbourhood schools. It was written to share what they have learned about support groups which are committed to the belief that every child has the right to attend a neighbourhood school. It describes a support group in a month by month format, covering some of the issues a group may have to face during its development. "Every time we are involved in assisting a family we share what we have learned from helping the last family and realise we will continue to learn in assisting the new family..." **Keywords:** Education, School age, Community Development

REFLECTIONS ON A SUPPORT GROUP

We have been getting many requests to describe what a support group is. Since being involved in IA-A we have supported many families to secure and maintain their children in fully integrated school placements. The shape of the support involved has been varied depending on the strengths of the individual families, their child's needs, and the particular school and school board they are negotiating with.

The shape of the support groups has been very diverse. In one circumstance it may be discussing and planning strategies with a parent over the phone, in other situations it can involve bringing a large group of people together made up of family, friends, IA-A members, and professionals to assist in enabling the child take their place in the neighbourhood school alongside their peers.

Be it two people talking over the phone or ten concerned individuals meeting around someone's dining room table, we feel a support group has been formed. There is no magic number as to how many people should be involved or what their backgrounds should be. There is no cookbook as to how to form a support group. There may be many paths to achieve the desired goal. The only consistent criteria is a commitment to the belief that every child has the right to attend the neighbourhood school in the same classes as their friends and neighbours and the courage to do something about it. This last point is what we believe constitutes a support group, and as long as this criteria exists, a support group may be said to exist, be it only one person supporting a single parent or hundreds of people acting on behalf of the family, standing beside them as they deal with school board officials or simply writing a letter of support. In the latter case each can be said to be part of the support group as they have acted on their beliefs.

Every time we are involved in assisting a family we share what we have learned from helping the last family and realise we will continue to learn in assisting the new family to achieve an integrated placement.

One of the most important things we have learned in this is to continuously reflect on what has happened and build an information base to draw on for the future. Through this we begin to understand our strengths and weaknesses, what is important and what isn't, and how to best approach the different school boards.

One of the support groups we were involved in was formed to enable a child to attend the school down the street from his home. The following information comes out of the reflections on our involvement. This information was then shared with other families to assist them.

What did we learn from being part of this support group? We will take you through a year's worth of reflections. Hopefully this will be useful to you, letting you know your experiences are similar to others, that no matter what school administrators tell you, your request for an integrated placement is reasonable.

Month One

We didn't know what we were getting into.

We saw the importance of parents never going to meetings alone.

It is important to sit down and reflect after each meeting with the family and support group members. This was not something we did consistently and now we see this as an important strategy in supporting parents.

Importance of each member of the support group to reach out to their own individual network trying to get as much support and ideas as we can. Not to feel we had to have all the answers ourselves

Networks can include relatives, friends, neighbours, clergy, professionals, other advocacy groups.

The sheer volume of ground work that is necessary. Such as phone calls, organising and attending

meetings, locating resources, and making sure people follow up on what they said they would do.

Families strong commitment was a source of strength for all involved.

Month Two

Letter campaign reinforced taking advantage of every opportunity to solicit support.

Grapevine goes both ways, the board heard about the letter campaign before they received any letters. The energy the board put into finding out who was involved and we were surprised how they tried to bully us into retracting our statements.

The need to shelter and protect any member of the support group that might be seen as in a conflict of interest by others.

To be prepared for internal conflict and to resolve the conflict as soon as possible.

The need for ground rules for a support group. In this particular situation the ground rules were:

- 1) need for a consistent chairperson at each meeting
- 2) a secretary to keep minutes
- 3) the support group is autonomous from IA-A and answers only to the family
- 4) the family is the final decision maker and must approve of all actions taken.

To constantly remind people that the purpose is to support the parent and child and that members of the support groups personal needs are secondary.

Out of struggles you get stronger and clearer.

Sometimes you have to give up personal things like your birthday because the need to support the family was more urgent.

We acted too quickly on advice to get our own psychological assessment without being clear why we needed this. The end result was that it was used against the family in the appeal. We learned that for every action you take there is potential side effects and it is important to anticipate these.

The assessment focused on the child's intellectual ability which is irrelevant to the issue of integration. How intimidating an appeal is and how unfair it is that a parent with limited resources and expertise is

expected to plead their case to a board with virtually unlimited resources.

Time is the most precious resource and we need to ensure we don't waste time and this can be done by

being well prepared. In this situation we knew nothing about the appeal processes and had to spend much time getting this information.

Month Three

People who you assumed were your allies can turn into adversaries.

Be prepared for the unexpected.

How complicated things can get very quickly.

Reach out continuously.

Keep telling your story whenever and wherever you can.

No matter how down or scared you are it's important to persevere.

The system is not to be trusted no matter how fair their policies may appear. This was seen in the difficulty in trying to access the child's education file.

Month Four

The need to take the time to reflect back on what happened to figure out where to go next. It allows you to see past opportunities missed.

Three lawyers were members of the support group. Their different interpretation of what to do next was an example of "you can get too much of a good thing".

We were not always sensitive to how the on going struggle was effecting the family as a whole.

Learned how tiring and draining it was on the support group members and sometimes we needed to shut down and take a short break to get ready for the next push.

The importance of being in control of the situation as much as possible and not letting the other side being in control.

You can say no to them.

A lot of support from other organisations may come with strings attached.

Month Five

The support members were from across the country. There is a lot of difficulty of having a support group which stretched across the country.

It's possible to have a support group that stretches across the country and still meet regularly through conference calls.

The support group became biased that support can only come from people that are within the area of education or mental disabilities. We learned when we turned to the families' church for help that good ideas can come from anywhere and anyone.

There were a lot of good ideas generated but it was unrealistic given the manpower to do all of them.

When you're overwhelmed it is still important to keep generating new ideas. You never know which one will make the difference.

It is important to keep detailed minutes and correspondence organised and to ensure its getting out to everyone.

Not to be easily intimidated (for example, the threat of being sued).

Month Six

To keep listening to the parent and that professionals in the support group may be quicker to compromise.

When people are volunteering their time (lawyers) it's difficult to hold them to task.

Keep up the pressure.

Money kept being an issue and takes up a lot of time and energy. We needed to do a lot of political activity to maintain a secure funding Without money you can still do a lot.

How interested people were across the country and how important the on going story of our struggle was to others.

Making sure you send the right people into meetings.

Even when you're waiting for a decision you don't stop putting the pressure on.

We hadn't anticipated how the sharing of this families struggles were impacting on other advocacy groups and challenging their values.

The need to follow up on everything.

Even in a cooperative group you need to have a person responsible to ensure people do what they promised to do when they promised to do it.

The importance of hope and prayer.

Month Eight

In this month the family was granted their wish for their child to attend their neighbourhood school.

The need to celebrate.

Victory is only a beginning not an ending.

Know when to stop fighting and when to start working together with the school board.

After winning you can't stop building on what has been accomplished for the benefit of those that will be following.

Believe in the other kids and record the stories.

Give the school time to learn how to include the child.

Be ready for the fact that it won't be a perfect situation when the child's placement is secured. Integration is not synonymous with quality education just a precondition for it.

It takes time to build a relationship with those that blocked your inclusion.

Month Nine, Ten, Eleven ..

How much hope and strength was given to other families as a result of one families actions.

The need to support the school in their struggles to include the child.

OVERRIDING ISSUES

Parents are easily intimidated by the schools.

Parents can be put through humiliating experiences.

What appears to be a reasonable request in our minds is an unreasonable request in the system's eyes.

The experiences we have with one board do not automatically apply to the next board.

We need a better understanding of the organisational structure and how decisions are made in school boards.

We didn't and still don't have a total understanding of the stress the family was under. We need to be more sensitive to the whole family.

Group approach to solving the dilemma is a more powerful approach than an individual directed approach.

See the gifts in each member of the support group and use their strengths.

Be daring as long as you keep the goal in sight.

It is not a simple process.

Don't try to package this as being the way to support a family. Rather an example and stress the importance of listening to each family to find out what they need.

It never ends.

To be passionate.

To have fun - it's okay to enjoy yourself sometimes.

It's not an academic exercise but hard work.

Being part of a support group we benefited by making new friends.

Problems, crisis, and disaster are opportunities for learning and growth.

Collective action is much more effective than individual action in having school boards listen to parents requests to have their children integrated.

We learned a lot by being a part of the support group and we still have a lot to learn.

Editors note:

Being part of a support group can be a lot of work. It takes a lot of your personal time but the rewards are worth it when a parent says guess what happened to my child at school, he/she has been invited to a party etc.

When the time comes to support another parent please offer to be a member of their support group. We can only make it happen when we all work together. The times together planning are wonderful in that you make new friends and really are making a difference for a child and his/her family. Remember you don't have to have special skills to be a member of a support group just someone who cares and is willing to give some of your time to help a child go to their community school.

We look forward to learning from you when we reach out and help another child's dream come true. That is to attend the community school with their neighbourhood friends and brother and sisters.