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**Abstract**

This brief paper explains that a parent's role as a child advocate is both a natural and a difficult one. The author goes on to offer parents a five step program designed to make sure their children are receiving an appropriate education. **Keywords: Education, School age**



# Parent Corner



The following article by Andrew Nikiforuk appeared in the Globe and Mail on Feb. 21/92 under the FIFTH COLUMN: EDUCATION section.

This article "outlines five steps to take to make sure your child is being taught well."

When I taught children with special needs in Winnipeg and Toronto, parents often asked me how they could make schools function better for their kids.

And my basic reply was then, as it is now, that a parent's role as a child advocate is both a natural and a difficult one. Then, somewhat hesitantly, I offered parents a five step program designed to make sure that their kids got an appropriate education.

It's partly derived from Seigfried Engelmann's "Your Child Can Succeed" and from my own experiences with parents, teachers and principals.

**STEP 1: Knowing your school.** Visit the school and keep track of school developments. Meet your child's teacher and principal in person. If possible, work in the school as a volunteer or aide. Join the Home and School Association. Principals and teachers listen to familiar faces, and good schools welcome parental involvement. And the more you have in what goes on in the school, the more your child will consider it an important place.

**STEP 2: The teacher interview.** Ninety-nine per cent of all problems can be solved with a teacher interview. So go in prepared. Talk to your child and identify the specific problem. Write down your questions. Establish a goal and a purpose for the meeting. If possible, bring in proof of concern [spelling or math samples]. Never go in angry.

A teacher interview should yield the following:

- \* What is the problem?
- \* What can the teacher do about it?
- \* Why will the agreed-upon solution work?
- \* How can the parent help?

Be polite and self-assured. State your expectations clearly. Acknowledge any positive things your child has mentioned about the teacher or class. Do not accept evasive or vague replies to your questions. Take notes. Have the teacher clarify anything you don't understand. If appropriate, arrange for a follow-up meeting. Don't expect immediate results. Trust your instincts: every family has its own curriculum and every parent is a teacher too.

**STEP 3: The classroom observation.** If you still have doubts about the quality of instruction your child is receiving, arrange to observe the classroom. This can be done through the principal and teacher. Make sure you observe the specific lesson that has become a problem for your child.

The purpose of an observation is to document whether or not your child is receiving good teaching. You can do this with a tape recorder or note pad. Sit quietly in one place and watch for the following:

- \* Extreme management problems [are the kids hanging from the ceiling?];
- \* Tasks students don't understand after instruction;
- \* Tasks students are asked to perform that are not related to the subject being taught;
- \* None of these problems [good teaching].

**STEP 4: The principal interview.** The research says that principals set the academic tone of a school. So a problem with a laissez-faire teacher with low academic expectations might merely reflect a principal who likes to clip his nails all day. But always be prepared and civil.

Present your documents or tapes that show your child is not receiving good teaching. Take note of the principal's familiarity with the problem. Request that your child's teacher change his or her teaching methods to meet your child's needs. If necessary, ask that your child be assigned to a competent teacher who can do the job. And consider the following questions:

- \* Is this teacher a competent professional?
- \* Can I see the achievement-test results on student performance in this teacher's class?
- \* How many children failed in this class or were still below grade level at the end of the year?

**STEP 5:** Go to the top. Arrange to meet the following people in this order: school superintendent, school trustee and your local member of the legislature. Explain to each your child's academic history and produce your evidence of educational malpractice. This is the end of the line, and if you don't get satisfaction here, it's time to hunt for a good school in a neighbouring school board. Generally, when parents run into deep educational holes and find themselves exhausted and angry at Step 5, it's either a sign the principal is incompetent or that the community itself is not functioning as a community. Schools, after all, often mirror the lives of their neighbourhood. Although schools should be accountable to taxpayers, they don't work very well without responsible, continuing parental involvement and support. The best schools are always the ones in which the principal, teacher, parents and kids are all accountable partners.

Every time parents treat schools as glorified baby-sitting service or neglect their duty to make the schools work, they weaken an already unbalanced system and, ultimately, get the schools they deserve.

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