



Key Questions for Parent Leaders to Ask

Someone once said, “Forget the answers; focus on asking the right questions.” Influential leaders who bring about change are not necessarily the people who have the right answers. Effective leaders do, however, share this common trait: they ask the right questions.

If you are a parent of a child receiving special education services and serve as a representative on your school district’s special education advisory committee, knowing what questions to ask is essential to your effectiveness.

Rather than stating opinions and positions prematurely, try asking a well-timed key question. Offering a conclusive statement usually results in *agree versus disagree* dialogue. A good question, on the other hand, engages people and sets the direction for a focused discussion of the issue. And often, as a group works together to come up with an answer, a common vision for needed change emerges.

When working as a member of a school district committee, the timing of questions and the way they are asked is important as well. Delivering questions in an *us versus them* manner may close down communication, as will questions asked with a hidden agenda or motive. It may be helpful to prioritize your concerns and carefully select questions which will open communication in a targeted area. Be ready to ask your questions at an appropriate time. A thoughtful question sincerely asked will be perceived not as a threat, but as an invitation to work together in finding solutions to common concerns.

To help get you started, here is a list of possible questions to consider:

General Questions

- Does our district currently face any major issues?
- Do these issues affect the education of students with disabilities?
- How can our SEAC help?
- How is our district addressing the issue of Response to Intervention (RTI)? How might this affect students with disabilities?
- How many children receive special education services in our district?
- What percentage of children are in regular education settings most of the time? Special settings? Separate sites?
- Have these percentages changed? Why?

Comparison Questions

- What are the student suspension rates in our district?
- What percentage of students suspended are children with disabilities?
- What percentage of children in our district graduate on time?
- What percentage of children with disabilities graduate on time?
- How do these rates and percentages compare to other districts in the state and nationally?
- What is the school district budget? The Special Education budget?

-
- How has this changed in the last few years?

Special Education Accountability

- How many complaints/hearings has our district had over the past two years? How were they resolved?
- Does our district currently have any areas they are required to address with corrective action plans?
- How does our district measure post-school outcomes for students with disabilities?
- How does our district survey parent satisfaction with special education services?
- How does our district share information with families of students with disabilities?

No Child Left Behind (NCLB)

- What percentage of regular education teachers are highly qualified? What percentage of special education teachers are highly qualified?
- How are special education students as a subgroup performing on state-wide assessments?
- Does our district have any Title I schools?
- How many children with disabilities attend Title I schools in our district?
- What percentage of paraprofessionals in Title I schools are highly qualified?
- Are there “schools in need of improvement” in our district? In what year of improvement is each school?

While many committees do well in obtaining the concrete information answers to questions like these provide, groups often fail to move on to equally-important follow-up questions. Gathering information is not an end in itself. To move forward on the path to a desired outcome, analytical questions will need to be asked by the committee as well:

- How well is this working?
- Is there a better way to do this?
- What do we need to make change possible?

In order for the committee to determine goals and create action plans, *why* and *how* follow-up questions will be necessary. *Why* questions, which get to the reason behind a course of action, enable the group to determine overall goals. *How* questions, on the other hand, help the group move from general goals to the specific steps needed to produce positive results.

When PACER recently surveyed parents about the obstacles they face in serving in advisory positions in their school district or county, many cited a “lack of knowledge” as a major barrier. To gain knowledge, it is very important to know how to ask questions. Your experience as the parent of a child who is the recipient of the services being delivered will enable you to help keep things focused and relevant. By asking key questions, you may improve the way all children with disabilities receive the help they need to succeed in school and in life.