

Tips from JustChildren: Giving Testimony at the Hearings

Who Can Testify At Public Hearings of the proposed changes to the Draft Regulations Governing Special Education Programs for Children with Disabilities in Virginia?

Anyone can testify at these hearings. The trick is finding out when the hearings are and the procedures for signing up to testify.

Hearings serve a variety of very important purposes:

- Hearings help to educate the Board of Education on special education issues.
- Hearings are a great way to generate media interest in an issue.
- Hearings are important places to network with others interested in your issue.
- At hearings, you can learn what others with different views on the subject are saying.

Remember that if no one comes to testify on the issue, the Board of Education can interpret that as support for their proposed revision to the Regulations: "No one commented against/for the Draft Regulations." Also, if there is strong turn-out in support of the Draft Regulations, but not many people testifying about the need for changes, the current Draft is likely to be approved.

How Do You Find Out About the Public Hearings?

Nine hearings will be held. JustChildren can provide you with a list of dates and times, as well as an Action Alert about the draft regulations and a copy of JustChildren's Platform. Contact Emily Dreyfus via e-mail: Emily@justice4all.org or phone 1-800-578-8111 X109 to receive this information.

You can also contact the Virginia Department of Education for more information about dates/locations of the hearings: [Melissa C. P. Smith](#), Coordinator of Administrative Services, Phone: (804) 371-0524.

Why Should I Go to the Hearing?

It may take some time and energy to get to the hearing and testify, but it is extremely important and can truly make a difference. We encourage you to come to the hearings and testify. If you cannot testify, attending the hearings in support of those who do testify is still very helpful.

Where can I find the Draft Regulations:

The proposed regulations can be found online at:
http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/dueproc/proposed_regs.pdf

Current regulations can be found online at:
<http://www.doe.virginia.gov/VDOE/Instruction/Sped/varegs.pdf>

Can I Bring Someone with me?

Definitely! Bring family members, friends, people who support – or simply care about – your child, and anyone else who's interested in improving the lives of children with disabilities! Encourage them to testify, if they're interested, and share this hand-out with them. Even if they don't testify, the number of people in the audience matters.

How Do I Find Out the Procedures for Testifying at a Hearing?

The usual procedure is that a "sign up" sheet is put out an hour before the hearing right outside the assigned hearing room. Speakers are taken in a "first come- first served" order. There may also be an opportunity to call and sign up for the public comment.

Speakers are usually given 3 minutes to speak and are asked to bring enough copies of their testimony for every member of the panel. Five-ten copies will probably be enough. (You are going to want to have a few extra copies for yourself and others who may be interested, as well.)

Who Sits on the Panel at the Hearing?

The panel will probably be composed of one or two members of the Board of Education, and at least one member of the Department of Education staff.

What Should I Expect at the Hearing?

Don't feel nervous about giving testimony, think of it as an exciting opportunity to make a difference!

Expect that there will be a wait. It is a good idea to listen to the testimony of the people before you, especially that of school representatives. It is a way to learn important information that could help refute the other side's argument.

Panel members have been known to read during hearings and to talk to each other while someone is testifying. While this may feel distracting, just remember it is the nature of the process. So, you need to do some things to be sure your testimony is heard.

- Personalize your testimony
- If your written comments are long, summarize your comments when testifying (don't talk for more than two or three minutes)
- If a speaker before you has already made some of the same points you intend to make, refer to those previous speakers

You should use the time while you are waiting to testify to listen to others' testimony.

You Have Been Called On, Now What?

The facilitator will call the name of the next person on the list to come up and testify. You go to the podium reserved for speakers and state your name and your organization (if you are testifying for an organization).

Hints For Your Testimony

1. Contact the Virginia Department of Education ahead of time to verify forum location, time, and speaker sign up requirements.

2. Arrive early, and sign up to testify. There will be a sign-up table at the entrance or at the front of the room.

3. Guidelines for what to say:

a. Be very polite and professional: anger only makes people defensive! Being threatening or angry rarely work. A compassionate, reasonable testimony builds support.

b. Keep your testimony short -- most committees limit testimony to three minutes. Don't repeat yourself, make your points clearly and briefly. (Your written testimony can go into greater detail, and you can bring copies for the panelists.)

c. Decide what you need to say: Ask yourself: what are the three most important things I want to panel to remember when I finish my testimony? Write them down and add a few details under each point. Now you can write out what you want to say. Give examples about how the changes in the draft regulations relate to your child, and other students with disabilities. Provide facts if you've done research about specific issues and are sure you're right. Be personal: help the panel understand why you feel how you do about **specific** parts of the draft regulations. Be focused: don't get off topic; keep your comments on the topic of the Draft Regulations. Be positive: be sure to mention the parts of the Draft Regulations where you're glad Virginia continues to provide additional protections for students.

d. When it's your turn to speak: identify yourself (as a parent (teacher, friend, etc.) of a student receiving special education services, and/or the organization you represent (if any). If you're with other people from the same organization, divide up the points to be made, so that each speaker addresses different areas.

e. Start your testimony by thanking the member(s) of the Board of Education and staff of the Department of Education for the opportunity to provide testimony. Then summarize your recommendation and then add your explanation. Remember, the purpose of special education is to help students have long-term success.

f. Be understandable and make a connection with the panelists: If there is a microphone, your mouth should be about six inches from it. Move the mike to the right position for you. Speak clearly and slowly. Be friendly, smile; try to look at the panelists when you speak.

g. Avoid arguing against people who've given opposing testimony. Your job is to persuade the panel that your point of view is the one they support. Don't be defensive or rude.

f. End your testimony by briefly re-stating your position and thanking the panelists for their work on the draft regulations.

4. If you bring written testimony: use double-spacing, and type on only one side of the paper for easy reading. Be sure to include your name, address and telephone number on your written testimony. Keep a copy of your statement in your files.

5. Rehearse your testimony. However, if you, or someone you come with, have not prepared a statement, but think that you have interesting testimony (or if you discover, after listening to others, that there is something you urgently wish to contribute) ask to sign up to speak. Sometimes these "from-the-heart" statements can be the most convincing of all.

6. If possible, follow up your testimony with a letter to the Board of Education addressing certain points that were raised at the hearing.

7. Use your testimony in other ways: submit it as an op-ed article or letter to the editor to your local newspaper or urge the editorial board of your paper to write an editorial on the issue; send it to members of your local School Board, your elected legislators and Board of Education members who didn't attend your regional hearing.