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## Experts Urge Active Participation by Parents

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Heavy special education caseloads and budget constrictions can leave schools without enough time, money, or energy for every child with an individualized education plan.

Parents must be active participants in the system, said Lana Hurt, executive director of The Arc of Northern Shenandoah Valley.

Parents willing to learn how a school system operates, build relationships with administrators and teachers, and work with statistics can make IEP meetings more productive and ensure that their children receive the most appropriate education for their abilities.

From the very beginning, parents must advocate for their child, according to [www.wrightslaw.com](http://www.wrightslaw.com), a special education law advocacy and education Web site created by lawyer and former IEP student Peter Wright and his wife, Pam.

Parents who suspect their child has a disability should request an IEP eligibility screening, Peter Wright said.

Because IEPs can change curriculum and learning environments and provide extra services to a child with a disability, both Wrights say the earlier an IEP is provided to a child, the better.

Once a child qualifies for an IEP, parents must learn the school system and build a relationship with the teachers, therapists, and administrators dealing with their child.

"This is a marriage without the possibility of divorce," Pam Wright said.

Both sides must work hard to create mutual respect. Parents, however, have the advantage of dealing with one set of people. School officials must deal with hundreds of students and parents.

Clarke County parent Catherine Burzio tries to talk to her child's teachers and principal regularly, not just when things are going poorly.

Special education coordinators and specialists at all three local school districts — the Clarke County, Frederick County, and Winchester public schools — agree that the best IEPs are created by good relationships.

"Parents need to communicate with the school and be involved with what a child is doing," said Clarke County Public Schools Special Education Specialist Jill Sours.

Asking questions — and having a relationship where questions are encouraged — also is vital to the IEP process, said Frederick County Public Schools Special Education Coordinator Lynnette Johnson.

Parents should tell school representatives everything they can about their child, said Winchester Public Schools Special Education Director Susan Groom.

Even if parents think it's something the school knows or "something they think is none of our business" complete information is key to a complete IEP, she said.

Everyone agrees that IEP meetings, in which school officials are letting loose all the information they have about a child's disability, can be a difficult, saddening, or anger-inducing situation for parents.

But parents who let that anger or sadness rule them will fail their children, Pam Wright said.

Burzio said that after eight years of IEPs, she's learned "to keep her mouth shut" when something upsets her in a meeting.

"There's a candid and tactful way to handle that information," she said.

The Wrights encourage parents to learn to use statistics and test data to chart their child's progress.

Knowing about standard deviation, bell curves, and percentiles empowers parents and allows them to make decisions using facts, not feelings, Peter Wright said.

Although some parents use professional advocates at IEP meetings — people hired to procure services for a child — Hurt, at The Arc NSV, and the Wrights discourage it, as do schools.

"No one knows your child better than you," states an advocacy book by the Wrights.

The Wrights, who have gone through the IEP process with their children, encourage parents to have a child tested through an agency independent of the school.

Private tests give parents a measure of the child to which they can compare school tests.

According to the book, “From Emotions to Advocacy,” private consultants are detached observers who look at a child like a mechanic would look at a car — determining what needs to be fixed and how to do it.

“It takes parents out of the lightning-rod position,” Peter Wright said.

Parents also should have a clear understanding of the Individuals with Disabilities Act that created IEPs and the purpose of the plans, said the school directors.

The information is available online, but parents also can request information manuals from their schools, Johnson said.

Frederick County has a parent resource center to help families navigate the special education maze.

Each school has a Special Education Advisory Committee that can offer help.

Parents also can find support groups and mentoring programs — veteran IEP parents teaching new ones — through the Arc NSV and the Parent Education Advocacy Training Center.