

What Parents Can Do to Help Their Child

Adapted from *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools*

1 Decide when to act
When you believe something is happening at school that is affecting your child, you may need to act.

2 Listen to your child
To be able to help, you need to listen carefully and consider your child's views.

As children mature, a parent's role changes from representing them to helping them build the skills they need to represent themselves. The age and needs of your child will determine how you are involved. Being there to support your child is appropriate at any age.

3 Identify the problem
It is very difficult to solve a problem if you don't know what it is!

- Is your child being bullied?
- Are you concerned about your child's progress in school?
- Do you think your child is being mistreated by a staff member?

4 Prepare
It is important to plan your approach to the problem. If you need support, talk to someone you trust. Respect your child's and others' right to privacy by avoiding unnecessary or public discussion.

5 Learn how your school district deals with problems
Each school district has written policies and procedures to determine what and how things happen and to deal with problems. Some schools and school districts have brochures or handbooks describing the steps to take when parents have a problem.

In most cases:

1. You speak first to the person with whom you have the problem (e.g., teacher, teacher's assistant).
2. If you are unable to solve the problem there, you then speak to the person's supervisor; most often that is the principal.
3. If you still can't solve the problem, you move up to the next level of authority in the district.



Ask if the PAC, DPAC or school has a copy of the self-help guide "Problem-Solving." It is available individually, and it is included in *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools*. Copies are also available from BCCPAC.



■ For more information

The school library, principal, PAC or DPAC may have copies of *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools*.

The guide provides:

- an outline of parents' rights and responsibilities.
- a guide to working through a problem.
- an approach for dealing with parents' fears.
- information about the public school system.
- tools to help parents stay on track.
- places to look for more help.

Guides are also available from BCCPAC. Contact info@bccpac.bc.ca or visit the website at www.bccpac.bc.ca

6 Take notes

If you have someone with you in a meeting who is able, ask the person to take notes. Record the dates of meetings, phone calls, who you speak to, etc., and keep copies of everything you send or receive.

7 Commit to solving the problem

Work to solve the problem using the steps outlined in your school district policy.

- Assume the best of others.
- Face difficult situations with courage.
- If things get difficult, look for more information and support rather than give up.
- Learn who is willing and able to make the changes necessary and share your ideas with them.

8 How will the problem be solved?

Be flexible and open-minded about possible solutions. Focus on what will solve the problem for your child; the solution might be very different from what you expected. Explore how possible solutions will work for your child.

9 Decide whether you need a meeting

Often you find that you need to meet with the people who have the ability to help solve the problem. A meeting that includes the right people can be helpful in finding possible solutions and developing a plan.

10 Set up a meeting

Once you have identified the person you should talk to, call them to let them know what you want to discuss and to set up a meeting. Let the person know if someone will be attending the meeting with you. Ask who else will be at the meeting. If you are asked to attend a meeting by the school or district, don't be afraid to ask questions.

11 Stay involved

At the end of the meeting, it is a good idea to quickly go over where you have reached agreement and confirm the action and follow-up plan. Make sure you and your child are part of any on-going plans. If one solution does not work out, request another—plans must be workable to be able to meet your child's needs.



Ask if the PAC, DPAC or school has a copy of the self-help guide "Meeting Survival." It is available individually, and it is included in *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools*. Copies are also available from BCCPAC.

“Students and parents who learn to advocate for themselves gain an understanding of their rights and responsibilities. They develop the courage to stand up for themselves and know how to approach problem-solving in an appropriate way.”

Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools 2005

Dealing with Problems

Most districts use a process like this. Parents can find information about the district policy to deal with problems by contacting their school, district office, PAC or DPAC, or by checking the district website. Please make sure the policy on the website is the most recent version.

1 Step One

Discuss the problem with the person involved: e.g., teacher, teacher’s assistant. Problems are often solved here.

IF NOT SOLVED

2 Step Two

Discuss the problem with the employee’s supervisor, most often that is the principal.

IF NOT SOLVED

3 Step Three

Discuss the problem with the person next in authority. That person may be the director of instruction, assistant superintendent, or another person named in policy.

IF NOT SOLVED

4 Step Four

Discuss the problem with the person next in authority. That person may be the superintendent.

IF NOT SOLVED

5 Step Five

Students or parents may appeal.

The School Staff Representative

Sometimes a teacher will take the school staff representative (staff rep) to the meeting. The BCTF Members' Guide outlines three main roles for the staff rep.

Communicator: The staff rep is the liaison between the school staff and the local union office. The rep holds meetings with teachers in the school about union issues and provides their ideas to the local union's elected officers. The rep also provides teachers with news and messages from the local and provincial union offices.

Advocate: The staff rep is the advocate for teachers in their school in matters regarding the collective agreement. Section 12 of the Labour Relations Code says the union has a duty of fair representation.

Teacher leader and union organizer: The staff rep ensures that democratic processes are followed, that teacher concerns are communicated to the principal and that teachers have a process to voice their opinions and recommendations on professional and union matters.

Advocacy for students works when:

- advocacy is seen by all partners as a way to help people solve problems
 - school and district policies and processes are fair, user-friendly and easily accessible
 - parents are encouraged to bring issues regarding their child to the school's attention
 - students are encouraged and supported in acting as self-advocates
 - parents are encouraged to advocate on behalf of their children and seek support and help when necessary
 - parents and students build advocacy skills
 - PACs and DPACs fulfill their roles as systems advocates and provide help to individual parents
 - the dignity, due process, privacy and confidentiality of all partners is respected throughout the advocacy process
 - parent advocates and all of those involved abide by their respective codes of ethics.
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Parents need to think about whom they will choose to take to a meeting for support. Do they need someone who can take accurate notes? Are they confident the person can respect the privacy of everybody involved and will not make matters worse?



A Parent's Story

"I had a problem with my child's school and didn't know what to do or where to turn. What helped? It was incredibly helpful to find someone who was willing to take the time to listen to my story without judgement. It was really helpful to be given loads of information about the school system. I was able to understand what I could expect from the school and how I could bring forward my concern."



What Works for Parents and Students

1. The appeal process is provided to parents and students at the time the decision is made.
2. The appeal process says that parents and students can bring someone for support.
3. Information is provided about how the appeal process works, such as:
 - who will be there
 - how long it will take
 - how the final decision will be made
 - what information will be considered.
4. Parents and students are encouraged to ask questions so they understand the process.
5. The appeal process is:
 - accessible
 - fair
 - timely
 - user-friendly
 - clearly focused on resolving issues.
6. The appeal process addresses a parent's or student's fear of retribution.
7. The appeal process ensures respect for all individuals involved.
8. The appeal process provides for follow-up communication.

Finding Information

Sometimes parents are tempted to skip the steps in the process for solving problems in their district. They may not know that a policy or process exists. They may not know that there is other information they need. Parents can find information in many places. They can ask the school secretary, teachers, the principal or vice-principal or members of the PAC or DPAC Executive for help. They can check the school or district website for information about district policies. Many schools publish the complaints process and other information about school and district policies in a school handbook. The school may post information on a bulletin board. Parents can also call a school trustee who can explain the process for solving problems. If parents have a complaint about the action or behaviour (conduct) of a member of the BC College of Teachers, they can call the college for information. (See page 72).

Appeal

There are times when an individual parent or student disagrees with a decision made by a staff member. The following information is from *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for children in public schools*.

Section 11 of the *School Act* gives parents and/or students the right to have the school board review decisions school staff make, or fail to make, that “significantly affects the education, health or safety of a student.” Section 11 also says every district must have an appeal procedure.

The *School Act* says school boards can make rules about appeals. Appeal procedures are different in every district and may be called policies or bylaws. There may be certain steps and timelines to follow. Make sure you have a copy of your district's most recent appeal procedure and any forms that might go with it.

When you appeal, ask that your appeal be heard as soon as possible. Request time to fully state your case, and ask to be present to hear the information the staff member gives. Ask questions about how the appeal hearing will be conducted:

- Who will be there?
- Will there be a chance to ask questions of others?
- How much time do you have to present your information?

A school board appeal is the final step within the district process. If you think you were treated unfairly by the school board, your next step would be to file a complaint with the Office of the Ombudsman. See Finding More Information, page 71.

BCCPAC Advocacy Project

Parents can look to trusted friends, family members, parent leaders and staff for information and support. They can also find information and support from the BCCPAC Advocacy Project. The project began in 1994 to help parents advocate for the best interests of their children and solve problems in a positive way.

In its first year, the project identified the barriers parents faced in trying to solve problems in the public school system. Since then, the project has provided education and training to parent leaders in the province dedicated to helping parents advocate for their children. Some DPACs have parent leaders who can help parents. Parents can call a member of their DPAC Executive for more information.

The project is grounded in the needs, rights and entitlements of children and youth. Many of these rights and entitlements as they relate to public schools are outlined in the Fair Schools Report published in 1995 by the Office of the Ombudsman. The Canadian Charter of Rights and Freedoms, the *School Act* and its accompanying regulations and ministerial orders, the Ministry for Children and Family Development and other information published by the Office of the Ombudsman support the foundation for advocacy in BC's public school system.

The Royal Commission's Report on Parents in Education recommended that:

“Mechanisms be established for defining the roles and relationships among students, parents and educators to set up processes which enable advocacy on behalf of students and parents at the provincial, district, and school levels.”

Parents in Education, “Report of the Working Group on Parents’ Role: Rights and Responsibilities,” Report 2, April 1988

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- 1 Henderson, Anne T., Karen L. Mapp, A New Wave of Evidence: The Impact of School, Family, and Community Connections on Student Achievement, Annual Synthesis. 2002
 - 2 Epstein, Joyce L., L. Coates, KC Salinas, M.G. Sanders and B.S. Simon. *School, Family and Community y Partnerships: Your Handbook for Action*. Corwin Press. 1997
 - 3 Renihan, Frederick I. and Patrick J. Renihan. “Encouraging Meaningful Parental Involvement” The School Trustee, February 1994
 - 4 Wong, Eric D., *Anti-racism Toolkit Activity Set Educational Activities for Use in Workshops and Classrooms*. First Nations Education Steering Committee, 2002
 - 5 At the time of publication, members of the British Columbia Teachers’ Federation (BCTF) had voted at their 2006 Annual General Meeting to withdraw from participating in the School Planning Councils. PACs and DPACs are encouraged to have a conversation about this decision with their school staff and/or with their local teachers’ association.