

Parents enlist help in education battle

Advocates help resolve disputes with schools

By Lauren Roth
The Virginian-Pilot

VIRGINIA BEACH

For five years, every time Lona Hyde has gone to her son's school to discuss his special education needs, she's brought along a paid advocate.

"As a parent, you don't know the laws inside and out. I don't have time to research the laws and know if they're telling me the truth or not," said Hyde, a mother of three.

Special education advocates were rare before 1997, when a federal law began requiring schools to involve parents in placement decisions for special education children.

Now, there are at least a half-

dozen local advocates who say their phones ring day and night. Some perform the service as an outgrowth of their work with children or disabled people, while others dedicate themselves full-time to advocacy. Some charge nothing, others cost \$75 to \$125 an hour.

Most parents don't hire advocates. But like most parents who
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Cheryl Poe, who has a disabled child and has made representing other parents in schools her profession, consults with John Jamison about his son.

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NO TEST OR CERTIFICATION IS REQUIRED

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do, Hyde said she is frustrated. She knows that her son, Trevor, has a legal right to a good education, but doesn't trust the educators.

"It's the school system versus the parent. It is not a team," she said.

Hyde has used two advo-

cates. The first was her son's psychologist, Jeffrey Katz, who helped her set goals for her son with the school. But when the seventh-grader got in trouble in November, Hyde brought in Cheryl Poe, a parent of a disabled child who has made representing other parents in schools her profession.

"I'm direct. I'm to the point,"

said Poe, who speaks often at School Board meetings. "My job is to make sure parents' needs are heard and respected."

Advocates are not always welcomed by educators. Sometimes, schools perceive them as antagonistic.

Twice, Katz said, a school called in its police officer when

he asserted his right to attend a meeting with a parent.

"I've dealt with all kinds," said Robert Mitchell, director of special education for Beach schools. "Some come in and want to build bridges. Others are aggressive and come in and challenge people."

For Poe, her activism was spurred by her own experience. About six years ago, while trying to get diagnosis and treatment for her son's learning disability, she said a school speech pathologist told her she was the problem, that she must have been speaking black English to him at home.

"To assume that because I'm a different race, I speak a foreign language that's confusing my child, that hurt my feelings," Poe said. "Nobody was there to help. It was horrible."

Poe, who has a master's degree in urban education and counseling from Norfolk State University, began to bone up on education law. She attended seminars and training sessions and joined advocacy groups online.

There is no test or certification to become a special education advocate. That means the backgrounds and qualifications of advocates vary. Locally, they include a parent, a teacher, a psychologist, a medical professional, a testing expert and a service provider to the disabled.

Schools are required to have an individualized education program, known as an IEP,



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Cheryl Poe, advocate, and parent of a disabled child

for every special education student. Under federal law, at least once a year, a team of educators meets with parents to decide the goals and services that go into a child's program. That can include an array of teachers, a principal, a special education coordinator, therapists and others.

"So many parents don't have a clear perspective on their rights and responsibilities," said Cheryl Baker, graduate program director of special education at Old Dominion University. "The special education process is a very complex process, and advocates can really fill that role. It's very, very necessary for many, many parents who are overwhelmed."

Most advocates attend meetings with parents, conduct phone consultations and make personal visits.

The state Department of Ed-

ucation is considering allowing school divisions to terminate special education services without a parent's consent. The state department plans to hold a meeting at Norview High School in Norfolk on May 28 to hear from the public on the proposed changes.

Gov. Timothy M. Kaine has said he will not support any changes that would reduce the role of parents, a stance also taken by advocates.

Currently, a parent who feels a school is violating the law can file a complaint with the state Department of Education, and advocates can help them do that. Some parents also request a due process hearing, but most advocates won't argue a case in court, leaving that to lawyers.

"I've run into advocates who don't appear to know the law or special education, and would be what I would consider a hindrance," said Kathleen Mehfood, who has been practicing special education law for 30 years.

More often, the disagreement between parents and educators is resolved at the school level.

"People come to me because things aren't working," said Amy Courtney, a testing specialist who also does advocacy. "I would like parents not to need me in the schools."

Virginia Beach public schools have more than 10,000 students with disabilities, one of the highest enrollments in the state. The disabilities range from mild reading difficulties to severe mental and physical impairments. A plan has to be written for every child, Mitchell said, and resources must be used fairly.

The remedies vary widely and include separate classes, one-on-one therapy or instruction, individualized curriculums and specialized equipment.

"If one parent is not satisfied, I'm concerned about it," Mitchell said.

The School Board has recognized there is room for improvement. During the summer, special education was chosen as one of the focus areas for the year. A Florida company, MGT of America, was hired to audit the program. It is scheduled to present its report in May.

The audit is evidence of how much has changed. In the early 1970s, disabled children were barely educated - when they were in schools at all. Now, enrollment is mandatory, and laws require schools to set ambitious academic goals for special education students.

"I've seen an evolution in education," said Honey Low, an advocate for special education children for nearly 40 years. For the past decade, she has focused on military families.

"There is always going to be a need for advocates in education," said Low, who doesn't charge a fee for her services. "I've been at this since 1971."

For Trevor Hyde, who has attention deficit hyperactivity disorder and anxiety, his mother and the division disagreed over where he should attend school. His middle school recommended he be sent to the city's alternative middle school. When Lona Hyde objected, the team proposed he attend a different middle school.

In the end, with Poe's help, the school division agreed to pay for a tutor to work with Trevor at home for the rest of the year.

"It's worth the money, because you're fighting for your child," Hyde said. "I'd spend it all again."