

Classroom Advocacy



Parents often wonder when and how to approach their child's teacher if their child seems unhappy or not challenged in the classroom.

While there is no single recipe for how parents should develop a mutually supportive relationship with their child's teacher, there are some processes and best practices parents can implement as they work to bring changes to their child's educational experiences.

Difficulties parents often have in communicating with their child's school can be avoided by understanding the chain of command, doing advanced research and planning, and staying open-minded to solutions.

HOW TO GET STARTED

1. Always start with your child's classroom teacher. If the teacher perceives you've spoken to other teachers or to the principal before speaking with her, you'll start off on the wrong foot.
2. Do your homework! Talk with your child, make a list of your child's concerns (be as specific as possible), discuss various alternatives with your child, find samples of your child's work, understand your child's strengths and weaknesses, and know typical gifted terms and program options before contacting the teacher.
3. Do you have insights into the teacher's curriculum, teaching style, and philosophy? This information can be gleaned from open houses, curriculum nights, the classroom web site, and conversations you may have had with the teacher.
4. Plan in advance what you're going to say and write it down. This will keep you focused and ensure you remember the most important points.
5. Email or phone the teacher for an appointment. Don't approach the teacher in the pick-up line, on the fly, or at social events.

FOOD FOR THOUGHT

- » It's imperative to approach the teacher with respect, trust, kindness, and enthusiasm. Leave your anger and frustration at home.
- » Focus on one or two of your most important issues, not a laundry list of complaints.
- » Most teachers want to do the right thing for their students and want to give their best to all of their students. Often, teachers are also frustrated that their schools have limited resources for advanced learners.
- » Beware: Well-intentioned parents sometimes pass along inaccurate information about the teacher, programming, and/or services offered to gifted students. Get the facts first.



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DURING THE MEETING

- Start with "thank you." Let the teacher know that you realize he has many demands on his time, many students to consider, and that you appreciate him.
- Remain objective. Keep the discussion focused on the specifics of your child's characteristics, needs, and goals rather than a philosophical discussion about gifted education.
- Avoid using the words "gifted" and "bored." It's better to focus on specifically what you observe about your child related to the level of challenge, what she already knows, what she demonstrates at home, her love of a subject, and how her current classroom experience is affecting her emotionally (e.g. frustration, anger, anxiety).
- Be diplomatic, but firm. Do not make the teacher feel criticized or misunderstood. At the same time, politely convey your child's needs.
- Listen carefully. Objections to requests might not be rejections. Consider each other's point of view. Brainstorm the options; volunteer to assist if needed.
- Work for a consensus. You're looking for a solution, so be flexible where you can and be firm on the one or two points that really matter.
- Reiterate the commitments and agreed upon solution(s).
- Document the discussion, and create a timeline and action plan for follow up.

AFTER THE MEETING

- Send a follow-up thank you email, with the list of action items and deadlines agreed upon in the meeting.
- Take responsibility for tracking deadlines; send follow-up inquiries if needed.
- Talk regularly with your child and the teacher to see how things are progressing.
- Don't let the burden of extra work fall exclusively on the teacher. Is there a way you can help lighten the teacher's load?

If after you've made a valiant effort to work with the teacher—and the teacher has not responded or seems unwilling to implement the agreed upon solution—then it might be time to move up the chain of command. The next person to address may be the gifted coordinator, curriculum director, assistant principal, or principal. The same best practices outlined here apply to those meetings as well.

FOR MORE INFO

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1331 H Street, Suite 1001
Washington, DC 20005
202-785-4268
www.nagc.org