



Advocacy Glossary: Who Does What? Who Should You Talk to When?

Have you ever wondered who you should go to with your questions about your student's school experience? Should you talk to the teacher? Is there someone else you should talk to?

Have you ever wondered who you should go to with your questions about your child's development? Someone at your school? A medical professional? Someone else?

This glossary is meant to be a starting point. In this glossary, we've identified a number of different people you may encounter in your advocacy work, and we have defined the typical scope of each person's role. This can help you better understand who can help you with particular goals.

Please note: Titles and responsibilities of the professionals listed below may vary based on the institutions or organizations you're working with. This glossary is meant to be a general overview of professionals you may encounter during your advocacy efforts.

School Staff and Professionals

School staff and professionals are often a parent's first contact when exploring advocacy options and goals.

The classroom teacher will most often be your first point of contact with advocacy. However, depending on the school or advocacy situation, there may be other people you need to work with.

- **Classroom/Homeroom Teacher:** This is the teacher that your child sees every day or almost every day. For younger students, this is your child's main teacher. This is typically your first point of contact for the school.
- **Course Specific Teacher:** This can be someone like an art, language, or music teacher. For older students, this can also mean any teacher who is not the homeroom teacher, such as a math, history, or literature teacher. Some students can form positive relationships with their teachers over a shared passion in a course. If you have a subject-specific question or concern, this is typically the first person you'd speak with about that.
- **Gifted Teacher/Coordinator:** This person is a dedicated member of the school staff whose job is to know about the school's policies and procedures for gifted education. Depending on the size of the school, there may be many members of a gifted education team, or it may be just a single person. Some small schools still don't have a gifted education teacher or coordinator, but they may have someone who unofficially fills this role. You can check with your student's classroom/homeroom teacher if you're not sure.
- **Special Education Teacher/Coordinator:** These professionals are teachers that have training and experience in working with disabled students. Special education teachers and coordinators usually develop and maintain IEPs, assess student performance, adapt curriculum, and provide individual instruction.
- **IEP/504 Team:** This is the team that is responsible for your child's special education services. To learn more about the differences between an IEP and a 504 Plan, check out Understood.org's article "[IEP vs. 504 Plan: What's the Difference?](#)"
 - **Members of the 504 Team:** There are less legal specifications for a 504 team. In general, to create a 504, parents work with teachers and school administration (like counselors and the principal). Typically, people who are familiar with the child and their support needs will be involved in creating and maintaining the 504. As a parent, you can request specific individuals to be on the team.
 - **Members of the IEP team include:**
 - **Parent:** You are your child's primary advocate during the IEP process. You can speak to their strengths, struggles, and goals.
 - **1 or more general education teacher:** This teacher can speak to your student's performance with regards to the general education curriculum. If you and your family already have a good rapport with a specific teacher, you can consider asking them to be part of the IEP team.
 - **1 or more special education teacher:** This teacher can help suggest modifications and accommodations to help students thrive in general education classrooms.

- **School district representative:** This person has the power to approve school resources for your child.
- **Interpreting the evaluation:** It is required that someone on the team be able to interpret evaluation results. Sometimes this can be someone already mentioned in this list, like the special education teacher. Other times, it will be someone like the school psychologist.
- **Your child:** When your child is 16, they get to join the IEP team themselves. This can empower students by teaching them vital self-advocacy skills.
- **A translator or interpreter:** If you need an interpreter or translator for the meeting, you are entitled to one. If you request one in advance, the school will have more time to prepare.
- **A parent advocate (optional):** Schools are not required to hire a parent advocate to be on your IEP team, but sometimes they can put you in contact with one. Some families choose to have a parent advocate there to help them feel more confident and to keep everyone on the same page.
- **A friend:** Some families choose to have a trusted friend sit in on IEP meetings to take notes and provide emotional support. IEP meetings can be stressful and emotionally draining, and having someone there to share the load can ease all that comes with this process.
- **School Counselor:** School counselors help with academic planning and goal setting for older students, but their jobs also include short term counseling, referrals for support, and advocacy during IEP/school meetings.
- **Vice/Assistant Principal:** Often called a vice principal in high schools and assistant principals in elementary/middle schools, these administrators work closely with the principal of a school. The vice/assistant principal is responsible for parent meetings, planning emergency drills, enforcing school rules, hiring staff, and handling school discipline at many schools. If you are thinking about reaching out to a principal, you can reach out to the vice/assistant principal first and maybe have things addressed with them instead.
- **Principal:** The principal supervises teachers, supervises the facility, and sets the objectives for students and teachers. If you are noticing a consistent issue with one of your child's teachers, you may consider reaching out to the principal.
- **District Level Administration:** District administrators are responsible, in part, for the evaluation of school systems. If you are having a consistent issue with the school including the administrators and principal, it might be time to climb the chain of command and reach out to the district. Contacting the district is typically a step that comes after working with your student's teacher, principal, and other school staff first.

School Adjacent and Community Contacts

Your child may be working with or learning from other adults through the extracurricular activities they are involved with. These activities may run through the school or through local community organizations.

Just as the classroom teacher would typically be your first contact within a school, the person your child works directly with in extracurricular activities is typically your first point of contact in those situations.

- **Coach/Extracurricular Leader:** A coach/extracurricular leader can be a good role model for your student as they grow up. This leader can also be a source of connections for further growth. For example, a music instructor may be able to introduce you to some kids looking for members for their band. A speech and debate coach may know a local lawyer who may offer an internship in years to come. You never know, but you can keep an open mind about the possibilities.
- **Mentor:** In a mentorship, the student is in the lead. Typically, a student is independently pursuing a course of study or working on a project. The mentor acts as a sounding board when the student runs into obstacles and might point the student in the direction of additional helpful connections, resources, or people. The mentor is there when needed, but it's typically the student that initiates contact on an ongoing basis as needed.
- **Tutor:** An advanced tutor instructs a student through advanced material; the tutor is finding materials and resources, developing a plan for working through that material, and designing projects and assignments. This may be less structured than a typical class and may have a lot more student input, but, at the core, the tutor is leading a student through the subject.
- **Parent volunteers/Classroom parents:** Room parents usually help teachers with class celebrations and activities. These parents generally volunteer for the position for the entire school year. They may ask you to help with planning committees, donations for teacher gifts, or updated contact information for the class list.
 - If you want to be more involved in your child's class, contact their room parent and/or volunteer to be room parent next year.
 - If your child has allergies or needs special considerations for class activities, establish contact with the room parent early in the school year, and keep it going. In order to develop a collaborative relationship with parent volunteers at your child's school, when asking for accommodations, you may find it helpful to offer suggestions for alternatives or to help with the execution of alternative ideas for activities.
- **Other Parents:** There are different types of parent-to-parent relationships, but the main point to all of these is to foster a sense of community. Other parents are on the parenting grind right alongside you. Whether you see eye-to-eye or not, other parents can be a great resource and can offer a sense of community and not being alone in your schooling experiences.
 - Child's friend's parents: It can be important to at least have a basic cordial relationship with the parents of your child's friends. Establishing friendly contact when you see them can set the tone for interactions that your children have. If parents don't know and trust each other, that may impact the ability of

their children to grow their friendship. If you don't want to have any kind of lasting relationship, that's perfectly ok; a little bit of common courtesy can still go a long way. Building a rapport with the parents of your child's friends can help make coordinating play dates or pick-up and drop-off from events easier. It can also be nice to have someone to call or text when you're not sure what the theme of a Spirit Week celebration is.

- Parents from activities: Whether your child is a dancer, pianist, robotics enthusiast, or anything else under the sun, you will probably have to take them and pick them up from their activities. If there is another parent at the activity that you find yourself always sitting with, wondering about, or talking about when you get home, it might be time to make a friend! Again, you can do this to your comfort level, and you can start looking forward to the extracurricular routine just like your child.

Parents often share that they are hesitant to connect with other parents they encounter because they worry about competition—competition fostered between students, as well as competitive parents. It is not uncommon to encounter competitive individuals in life. However, from our experience, more parents are looking for a parent-to-parent connection than many realize.

As we've explained above, there is no need to be best friends with all of the parents you encounter on your parenting journey. However, there is something powerful about being in community—even a loose community—with others who are at a similar point in their life, having similar experiences with their own children. Saying hi at your child's next practice or at the back-to-school open house might be a good place to start.

Other Professionals

As you work to support your gifted child, you may find yourself wondering if and when you should reach out to other professionals.

Below, we've listed some types of professionals families commonly work with or consult.

As Davidson Institute staff are not doctors or medical professionals, we cannot advise you on when exactly you should consider talking to one of these professionals. When in doubt, your family doctor or pediatrician may be a good person to start discussion your questions or concerns with.

- **Pediatrician:** Many times, the pediatrician will be the first person you call if you suspect something is going on with your child. They are the first point of contact for developmental milestones, challenges, or diagnoses in many cases and can provide referrals to specialists or give advice based on their expertise.
- **Occupational Therapist:** Occupational therapists help children learn and adapt tasks that foster independence. They can aid in offering suggestions for classroom accommodations and modifications.
- **Speech Therapist:** Speech therapists support children's language development through speech exercises that can retrain the mouth and tongue. Speech therapists can also sometimes help children build social skills through modeling exercises.
- **Audiologist:** Audiologists work with patients to diagnose, manage, and treat hearing and balance disorders.
- **Developmental Optometrist:** Developmental optometrists work with patients to identify and address issues with visual function. Optometrists Network identifies [17 key visual skills](#) necessary for reading, writing, sports, and daily activities. A developmental optometrist can help you identify and treat visual challenges that may impact a person's ability to learn or navigate and complete daily activities.
- **Therapist:** Therapists can have a number of different qualifications and specialties. Depending on their specialties and exact training, therapists' jobs are to give individuals an outlet for their emotions and a designated safe, non-judgmental adult to teach them skills to cope with struggles.
- **Psychiatrist:** The role of the psychiatrist is to work with therapists and other mental healthcare team members and prescribe a medication component to the treatment plan.
- **Tester:** This person can have any number of specialties. Psychologists, school counselors, or licensed therapists along with several other professionals can be trained to administer various intelligence tests. Just because a tester has assessed your child as scoring in the profoundly gifted range, doesn't mean that they have professional knowledge or experience with giftedness.