

Running Towards the Goal

Be a star player on your child's special educational team

By Dona A. Durham

Change is a part of life and can bring with it new and exciting possibilities, but it often causes us to feel anxious and apprehensive. We can feel better and cope more easily with change if we have done some pre-thinking and pre-planning, strategies that are particularly important at the start of a new school year.

For families with children with special needs, this new school year brings an even bigger passel of changes than it does for other families. Santa Fe Public Schools has a new (actually, returning), interim superintendent — Dr. Veronica Garcia — and new principals at several schools. In addition we'll see several administrative staff changes. The director of Exceptional Student Services (ESS), Julie Lucero, has herself been in her new role only since January and will be joined by a new assistant director. Finally, SFPS is bringing on many new service providers (speech/language therapists, occupational therapists, physical therapists and social workers), who have a direct effect on a child's daily school experience.

If you are the parent of a child receiving supplemental services through an Individualized Educational Program (IEP), that plan must be reviewed at least once a year to reassess the student's needs and line up new services as necessary. An IEP is required for every child with diagnosed special educational needs, outlining the supplemental services that the child will receive through the school. There are a number of things that you can do to help prepare for this review, so your child will have the smoothest possible transition to a great school year.

Review Your Child's Most Recent IEP

If you are like most of the parents that I have worked with over the years, your organization of special education paperwork falls somewhere between maintaining labeled binders of every paper ever given to you by the school system, and wondering what you did with last year's IEP.

No matter what your organizational style, you need to review your child's most current IEP. (If you don't have a copy, call either your child's school or the Office of Exceptional Student Services at Santa Fe Public Schools, 467-2503, to request one.) You should check the date of your child's annual meeting, the date that your child's three year re-evaluation is due, the pages of goals, the accommodations/modifications page, and the prior written notice page, a document outlining important school district decisions about your student's special education program.

After reviewing your child's most recent IEP, if you discover that there is not a current IEP in place (that is, if there wasn't an annual meeting within the previous 12 months to review your child's program), contact your child's school and request that an IEP meeting take place as soon as possible to review and update the current IEP and, if necessary, develop a new one.

Contact Your Child's Case Manager

Every child with an IEP is assigned a case manager, whose responsibilities include communicating important information about your child with this year's teachers. Find out who your child's case manager will be this school year and the best way for you to contact him or her. Check to make sure that the case manager has your child's current IEP. You will also want to ask how the case manager will be communicating with your child's teachers. Specific information



Photos by Dona A. Durham.

that should be shared includes accommodations and modifications documented in the IEP and goals for your child.

If a meeting to plan for this school year did not take place at the end of last school year, or if there have been relevant staff changes, you may want to request a team meeting with school staff to review your child's IEP, learning strengths and challenges. You do not need to request that an IEP meeting take place unless changes to your child's IEP need to be considered and discussed. Please notice that I am using the word *request*, not *demand*. Starting the school year off as a concerned yet polite and calm parent will take you far in building a positive and helpful school team for your child.

Don't forget to contact the school nurse if your child has a health plan or any medical issues, so that you can review the plan with the nurse and find out how information will be shared with necessary school staff.

Other Sources of Information and Help

What if you think you need more information or assistance to navigate the

sometimes confusing “Land of Special Education?” Where else can you find support and guidance?

Santa Fe Public Schools currently has a Parent Education Coordinator, Jeff Abbott (467-2512), who provides information for parents to explain the special education process and services, and can serve as a liaison between you and your child’s school. The ESS website, sfpsess.info, includes a staff directory and online Resource Guide, with numerous programs for students and parents in the greater Santa Fe area.

Rights and Services for Private School Students

If your child attends a private school, it’s important to know that some schools offer support for students with different learning styles and special needs, and some offer little to no support for these learners. For example, some schools offer the services of a learning specialist to support students identified with special needs, while other schools may provide a few accommodations, such as more time to complete tests or access to the teacher’s notes, but may not offer additional services.

The Individuals with Disabilities Act (IDEA), enacted by Congress in 1975 to ensure that children with disabilities obtain the services they need to receive a free, appropriate public education, states that a private institution student *does not* have the same legal rights to special education services as does a student in public school. Services and rights

afforded your child at a private school are therefore something to consider carefully before enrolling your special needs child.

IDEA does, however, require public school districts to look for and evaluate *all* students who are suspected of having disabilities, whether or not the child attends public school. This requirement is called Child Find. If you or your child’s teachers think that he or she might have a disability, a request for an evaluation can be made through to the Office of Exceptional Student Services. ESS will consult with your child’s school before deciding if your child needs an evaluation, and it will be responsible for conducting that evaluation if it determines that one is necessary.



All children with diagnosed special educational needs are entitled to an Individual Educational Program (IEP), that should be reviewed at least once a year.

You, as parent or legal guardian, must give written permission before an evaluation can be conducted. A written report of the results will be provided to you as the parent or guardian and to your child’s school.

The Santa Fe Public Schools employs a private school liaison, Lisa Fan (467-2512), who works with private schools to initiate and conduct meetings to develop, review and revise an Individual Services Plan (ISP) for a private school child designated to receive special services. The ISP plan is generally less comprehensive than an IEP.

Be a Proactive Member of Your Child’s Team

Regardless of the Santa Fe school, public or private, that your child will be attending this school year, it is crucial that you take an active role in starting and keeping the school year moving in a positive direction. Don’t wait until there is a problem in school to get involved. Review your child’s IEP or ISP, meet your child’s teacher and case manager, ask questions, use Santa Fe Public Schools or private schools’ website to find information and be an involved team member of your child’s educational team. You’re not just another member of this team; you’re the most important one.

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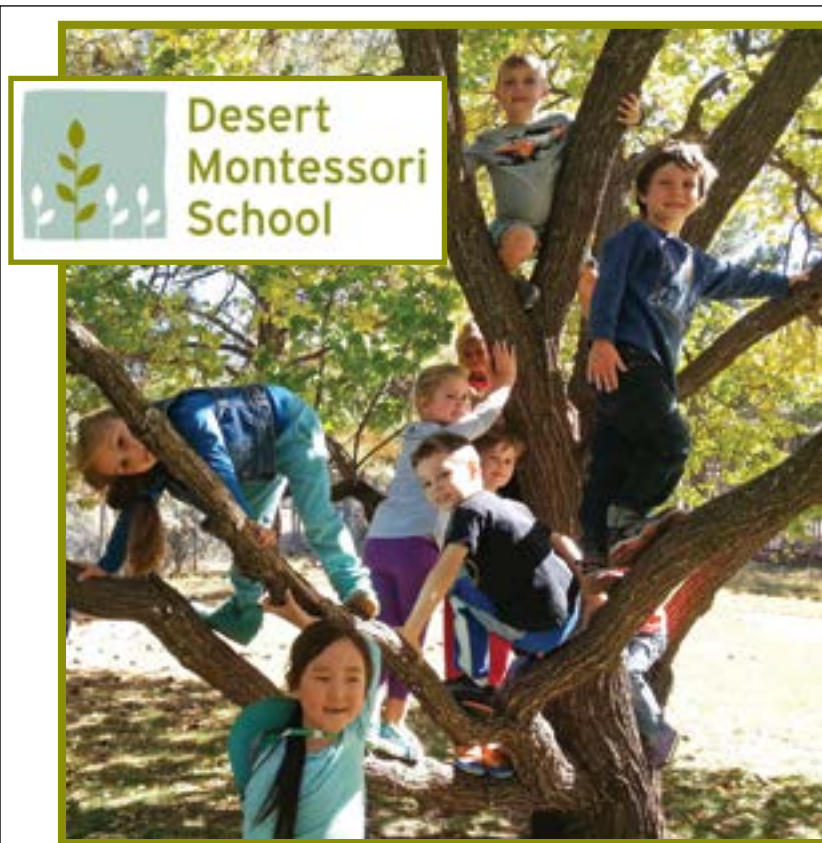
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