



## Fighting the Good Fight: How to Advocate for Your Students Without Losing Your Job

By: Rick Lavoie (2008)

One of the greatest blessings of my professional life is the opportunity I have to talk with hundreds and hundreds of my Special Education colleagues. Before and after my seminars, I have conversations and discussions with countless teachers from coast to coast and everywhere in between. It is truly a joy, and these on-the-fly exchanges give me an updated perspective on the changes and challenges in America's classrooms.

These conversations are an ongoing source of information and inspiration for me. They confirm my long-held belief that some of the finest people on the planet are toiling daily in America's classrooms...and particularly in our Special Education programs!

Most of these exchanges are reassuring and reinforcing, but occasionally I have conversations that are troubling and disheartening. These disturbing conversations remind me that the inclusion battles of the 1970s continue in many American school districts and that the rights of struggling kids continue to be violated and ignored.

Among the most disturbing comments that I hear are these:

*I have a student who really belongs in a regular math class, but the math teacher won't allow it.*

*I wanted to advocate for my students' needs, but I don't want to lose my job.*

*I am new to my school and the other teachers have warned me that I shouldn't rock the boat. The Special Education teacher at the school last year got fired for defending parents at an IEP meeting.*

*The administrators at my school told me not to mention the new Resource Room to Michael's parents when I met with them because there was no more room in the program... but that's where he belongs.*

It saddens me greatly to hear these all-too common complaints and concerns from my colleagues. I worked as a school administrator for thirty years and always felt that teachers' willingness to defend and advocate for students should be **encouraged** and **reinforced**... not **discouraged** and **criticized**. One of the most sacred responsibilities of a Special Education teacher is to advocate for her students and their needs. We need to be voices for the voiceless.

After all, that's why they call it **SPECIAL** Education.

For the past several years, I have delivered a seminar entitled "Other People's Kids: The Ethics of Special Education." In this workshop, I outline a dozen basic ethical tenets that must be understood and followed by those of us who toil in the vineyards of Special Education. These tenets involve confidentiality, collaboration and parental interactions. But the main emphasis of the workshop is the premise that "The professional's PRIMARY loyalty and commitment is to the CHILD."

That statement appears to be simple and basic, but it is—in point of fact—quite profound and significant.

Consider: Reflect upon the last time you wrote and Individualized Educational Plan for a student. What was your motivation? Who was your audience? What was your goal? Who were you writing it for? Did you design the document primarily to please the child's parents? To impress your supervisor? To meet your budget? To adhere to school policy? To adjust your workload?

If you answered "yes" to any of those questions, you have violated the primary ethical tenet of our profession: Your fundamental loyalty and commitment must be to the child. His needs should be foremost in your mind... and in your actions and decisions.

Now, if you are able to meet the child's need and simultaneously keep your superiors, colleagues, parents and budgets satisfied—TERRIFIC! But when faced with the choice of serving the child and /or pleasing your other constituencies... you must ALWAYS focus on the needs of the child. It is as simple as that.

But — as we all know — some things that are SIMPLE are not EASY.

In a perfect world, no teacher should be criticized for defending, protecting, or advocating for a child. But, the world is imperfect and teachers often find that they are asked to compromise students' services in order to maintain budgets and other real-world constraints. Teachers face this conundrum daily. Their allegiances are torn: How do I meet the needs of my students while also being a loyal, responsible, and responsive school employee?

So, what can the teacher do? For your consideration, I offer some basic suggestions for the teacher who attempts to juggle her commitment to kids along with the realities of today's school workplace.

The underlying theme of these suggestions is that schools are political. In order for your voice to be heard and your advocacy to be effective, you must play and win the 'political game' in the hallways, the teachers' lounge, and the administrative suite.

- Understand that the PRINCIPAL is the key player in this drama. You must have the loyalty, support, faith, and cooperation of your principal in order to advocate effectively.
- If you are a new teacher, find a mentor in the school. Find a successful, respected teacher in your building and become her protégé. She can provide you with invaluable counsel and advice.
- Ingratiate yourself to colleagues in all departments and at all levels. It does, indeed, take a village to raise a child and you will need all the teachers, secretaries, custodians, lunch ladies, and ancillary staff in order to assist you in your advocacy. Write thank you notes. Be polite. Show interest. Be kind. Don't complain. Share ideas and materials. Compliment. Support. Smile.
- Get out of the Special Education classroom... on a regular basis. Become an integral part of the school community.
- Get involved in staff development and in-service programs. Promote the idea of using these programs as vehicles to educate and sensitize your colleagues to the unique needs of students with learning disabilities.
- Promote the concept of Universal Design that holds that Special Education strategies are effective with **all** kids! If a teacher learns a few "special ed" techniques to use with the child with

LD in her class, she can also use those strategies with her "best and brightest" student who may be unable to understand a specific concept. Remind your colleagues that Special Education is simply really good education.

- Organize and participate in Teacher Assistance Teams. This innovative, transdisciplinary approach consists of teachers and support staff who voluntarily gather on occasion in an informal setting. One of the team members presents a brief outline of a difficulty that she is having with a particular student. The group then brainstorms various suggestions and solutions. This strategy is often used in business or medical settings with great success.
- Be positive and upbeat about your Special Education students. If you constantly vent (loudly and publicly) about how difficult, complex, and challenging these kids can be... your colleagues will be less willing to work with them. Give your kids good, positive, constructive PR.
- Propose a study group or Great Books Club where you and your colleagues read and discuss an educational book. Brainstorm ways that the author's concepts can be used in your school.
- If you are frustrated or troubled by a colleague, take care NOT to communicate your feelings to parents or students. Nobody wins in that type of conflict. It is unprofessional and unfair to undermine a colleague's authority or reputation.
- Observe your colleagues in their classrooms and encourage them to visit your class, as well. Learn from one another.
- Volunteer for committees and assist with school functions and events. If you help the yearbook advisor design the layout, he will be more likely to assist "your" Special Education students who are assigned to his English class. Again... schools are political: You scratch my back and I'll scratch yours.
- Deal with conflict effectively. Recognize that—in the overwhelming majority of conflicts—no party is all wrong (or all right!). Try to see all sides of an issue. Walk in the other person's shoes. Adult conflicts tend to—eventually—impact on the child. When elephants fight, it's the grass that gets trampled.
- Avoid negativity and do not get involved in the negative teacher cliques that are common in schools. These destructive groups will often try to sabotage the administration's goals and plans. Be cordial with these folks, but don't allow them to sap your energy or enthusiasm.
- Don't get involved in gossip or destructive rumor-spreading. If you hear a troubling rumor, go directly to the principal to request clarification or confirmation.

## **Getting colleagues to assist**

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The key to getting your colleagues to provide the support and assistance that your students require can be summed up in one solitary word: PERSUASION!

You need to persuade your colleagues to invest the extra time, energy, and resources that the child requires. You must motivate and/or inspire them to make and maintain this commitment. Persuasion is far more effective than threatening, cajoling, or ordering.

In order to persuade a person to do something, you must look at the situation from that person's perspective. Walk in her shoes. This will make you better able to understand—and allay—her objections and concerns.

There are five basic steps that you should follow if you are trying to persuade someone to do something.

**1. Show them the benefits of your idea.**

If possible, show how the child, the school, and the teacher herself will benefit.

**2. Be prepared for contradictions and objections.**

Think of issues or concerns that your colleague might raise and prepare effective responses.

**3. Be willing to be agreeable... even if you don't agree!**

Say, "I can see your point, but if we make a few compromises and adjustments, we can make this work."

**4. Admit mistakes or miscalculations.**

Be willing to say, "Well, I hadn't thought about that..." This approach makes you seem more trustworthy and flexible.

**5. Ask her to consider your recommendations and agree to continue the discussion at a later time.**

If you insist on an "immediate answer," she may feel intimidated or defensive.

It is also effective to use a persuasion method known as "Discovery". This strategy allows the other person to feel that your suggestion is actually her idea... therefore, she feels more ownership for the suggestion.

As an example, suppose a special educator (Mary) wants a history teacher (Max) to modify his testing of a student (Alex) by eliminating the essay section of his monthly exams. The conversation could go like this:

**Mary:** I appreciate your extra efforts with Alex. He really seems to enjoy your class and raved about the museum field trip.

**Max:** I know he likes history and he participates often in class, but his exam grades are really poor.

**Mary:** I wonder what we could do about that. I looked at his last exam and he did really well on the multiple choice items and the true/false. It was the essay section that pulled him down.

**Max:** Yeah. And that's too bad. I know that he knows the material because of his comments in class.

**Mary:** So I guess that he knows the stuff—and can explain it verbally—but just can't get it down on paper. That seems to be the problem...

**Max:** Wait a minute. What if I give him the essay section orally? I could meet him at lunch on the day of the test and he could explain his response to me. Would that work?

**Mary:** BRILLANT! Wish I had thought of that...

With this approach, Max is very committed to making the strategy work because he feels that it was his idea.

Manipulative? Sure. But effective.

## Why do systems place obstacles in the way of student services?

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In order to "fight the good fight," you must know the dragon that you are fighting. When advocating for students, you will confront common obstacles and objections from your colleagues. This does not necessarily reflect that they are insensitive or uncaring. Rather, their objections are often rooted in the reality that available time, energy and resources are limited. Every established organization has a tendency to resist change and defend the status quo... even if the status quo is not working!

I recall a teacher once entering my office and saying, "I have kept Joshua in for recess for 15 days in a row and he STILL isn't doing his math homework!" Well, let's circle the 'slow learner' in this picture... IT AIN'T WORKING!!!

In their brilliant and groundbreaking book, *From Emotions to Advocacy*, Pete and Pam Wright outline the most common objections confronted by those who advocate for special needs students:

1. Insistence on adhering to longstanding policies and procedures (We've **always** done it this way).
2. Resistance to making exceptions (If we do this for Allison, we will have to do it for everyone).
3. Resistance to setting a precedent (This will open the floodgates and all the parents will want these services).
4. Insufficient training (Our teachers don't know how to do that...).
5. Insufficient staff (We simply don't have enough people to do this...).
6. Unavailability of services (Our school doesn't do that... we never have!).
7. Commitment to a one-size-fits-all approach (All of our students with LD use this reading system).
8. Insufficient Funds (That would cost too much... we don't have the money).
9. Overwhelmed (We've never seen a kid with such complex needs before...).
10. Lack of understanding of legal aspects (Even if the law requires it, we can't do it...).

You should prepare effective, accurate, and appropriate responses to each of these objectives BEFORE you approach the powers-that-be with your proposals.

Although these objections are understandable from the other person's perspective, all of them are contrary to the letter and spirit of current Special Education law.

The Wrights cite an eye-opening 2001 study conducted by Galen Alessi. She reviewed 5,000 evaluations written by school psychologists in order to determine the factors the psychologists felt were contributing to the child's failure/frustration in school. She listed five factors (inappropriate curriculum, ineffective teaching, ineffective school management practices, inadequate family support, child-based problems/disabilities) that are widely accepted as reasons why kids fail in school.

Her review found that in 5,000 reports, the factors listed above were cited in the following manner as primary causes for the child's failure.

Inappropriate curriculum	0% times
Ineffective teaching practices	0% times
Ineffective school management	0% times
Parent/home factors	20% times
Child based problems	100% times

When in doubt, blame the victim!

## Getting the support of your principal

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As an advocate, your key and indispensable ally is the building principal. No matter how talented or devoted the faculty is, no matter how powerful or influential the parent body is, no matter how committed the School Board is... the child will NOT get responsive, effective services unless he has the support of the person in the principal's office.

Every time I have observed a school program that is exceptional in its responsiveness (or lack of responsiveness!) to the needs of struggling children, the primary influencing factor is the PRINCIPAL.

A landmark study of management styles of principals rendered the following profound results:

*We found some BAD schools with a GOOD principal... but we found no GOOD schools with a BAD principal*

However, research indicates that many principals hold very negative feelings about Special Education and may view these students as a "drain" on a system that is already strained to the breaking point.

In order to effectively advocate for children with special needs, and in order to be a "shepherd of change" in the school, the principal must understand and embrace ten basic concepts.

1. Change is a process, not an event.
2. Change requires intense preparation.
3. In order for organizations to change, individuals must change.
4. Change generally occurs from the top down.
5. Mandates do not make change work; only a sound, supportive process makes change effective.
6. Change will be effective only if accompanied by support.

7. Under legislative guidelines, students are entitled to services. You are not "doing the family a favor" by creating and implementing responsive programs. You are just doing your job.
8. Each child is an individual and must be viewed as such. There is no one, solitary program or approach that works effectively with all kids... even if they have the same diagnosis or label. If the child can't learn the way we teach, we need to teach the way he learns.
9. Special Education is not a place or a program. Rather, it is a flexible set of services and supports.
10. Effective Special Education services do not exist in a vacuum. Neither do they exist detached from the general program. They must be an integral and important part of the school-wide culture.

The key to dealing effectively with your principal or supervisor is to view situations and issues from the principal's perspective. I learned two important life lessons from two unlikely sources: a former boss and a U.S. President.

When I was appointed headmaster at a residential school on Cape Cod, I had a meeting with the chairman of the school's board. He provided me with some significant and valuable advice at our initial meeting, "Run this school in the way you think is best. I will not interfere. But don't ever let me be surprised."

Always keep your superiors informed. Tell him about any problems that may be "bubbling." Don't wait until small problems grow into a crisis. If a child or a parent is having difficulty, mention it to the principal. In this way, she won't feel blindsided if the problem does become critical.

The second lesson came from Ronald Reagan. Prior to his presidency, Reagan honed his daily management skills as Governor of California and he knew how to run and manage a complex organization. He continually reminded his staff, "Don't bring me problems, bring me solutions."

When an aide entered the Oval Office, he would not merely announce a problem or a challenge that required the President's attention but, rather, the aide would verbally outline the problem and offer three or four viable solutions for the President's consideration:

*Mr. President, we don't have sufficient Congressional votes to pass House Bill #94-266. We could shelve the bill and re-introduce it next session, OR we could remove the objectionable amendments and, thereby, gain some votes, OR we could add several of the important provisions of the bill to another piece of legislation.*

*What course of action would you suggest?*

This approach will greatly enhance your effectiveness with your principal. All day long, people enter the office and present her with problems, challenges, difficulties, conundrums, and crises. What a refreshing change to have someone offer solutions!

*Dr. Harding, several of the parents of my Special Education students are upset that the kids' grades in their subject areas are being negatively impacted by their inability to complete their homework. The parents made some pretty compelling arguments that the assignments are overly difficult and that the kids' after-school therapy and tutoring commitments prevent them from getting the homework done.*

*Some of the parents told me, frankly, that they are unable to assist the kids with the homework because of their own language difficulties. A few of them are very upset and indicated that they might bring the issue to the district office.*

*I have a few solutions. First, we could assign one of our aides to work with the kids after lunch everyday so they could get assistance with the more difficult assignments. Or we could meet with the content area teachers and discuss modifying the assignments. Or we could establish a policy where these kids get two separate report cards: one for classwork performance and one for the homework performance.*

*Which solution do you think is best?*

This approach is effective for two reasons: 1) It clearly demonstrates that your solutions will benefit the principal because it prevents a potential conflict with the district office, and 2) It gives her input into the decision so she is more likely to be committed to its success.

### **Some other "principal pleasing tips"**

- Share good news with your principal occasionally. Don't go to her office ONLY when you have a problem or a request, soon she will dread seeing you. Stop by to share good news about your students or colleagues.
- Don't overuse the principal for discipline problems. Try to handle most disruptive behavior on your own. If you don't, you begin to develop a reputation among your students that you have a very limited repertoire for dealing with disruptive behavior, and they will continually push you to the edge with ever escalating behavior difficulties: You can do anything you want in Mr. Malzone's class, but don't push him too far or he'll send you to the principal.
- You will impress your principal—and make him your ally—if you "play by the rules." Be punctual. Submit paperwork on time. Stick to the schedule. Be positive. Volunteer.
- A hint: Most principals work during the summer months. Visit the school and spend some time with her. Ask if you can help in any way. The summer is a great opportunity to build and enhance your relationship with her.

### **Conclusion**

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In summary, if you wish to be an effective advocate for your students, remember the eleven P's that will enable you to enhance your cooperation and collaboration with your colleagues.

- Principal:  
  
Gain the support of your school's leader.
- Problem Solver:



Be viewed by your colleagues as a person who solves problems, rather than causes them.

- Planning:

Have specific, observable, understandable goals for each student.

- Practical:

Provide your colleagues with suggestions and solutions that are pragmatic and workable.  
Consider their time and energy constraints.

- Participate:

Be an active, contributing member of the school community.

- Passion:

Share your passion with your colleagues.

- Positive:

Try to remain positive when dealing with colleagues.

- Potential:

Be ever mindful of the potential of your students.

- "Polish the Apple":

Give compliments and praise willingly and often.

- Prepare:

Always have evidence and data to support your suggestions.

- Pray:

It couldn't hurt... and it just might help.

But the most important **P** is **Protect**. It is your sacred duty to protect all students from harm, humiliation, or hurt. You simply cannot stand by and watch when a student suffers.

As Dante reminds us:

*"The hottest places in Hell are reserved for good people who — in times of moral crisis — choose to do nothing."*

### **Do you want to read more articles by Rick Lavoie?**

Then go to Rick Lavoie's **Contributor Page** and read his "**Tales for the Road**", "**Tips for Parents and Teachers**," and some **Book Excerpts**. You can also purchase Rick Lavoie books and videos at our online store, **LearningStore**.

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