

## Reports from Recent Conferences: Special Education Wednesday Workshops

Each Wednesday in the month of May, Abilities Network in Towson hosted presenters from Parents' Place of Maryland for a series of five free workshops on parent advocacy in special education. I was able to attend the first three sessions and was sorry to miss the rest.

The first week discussed "Basic Rights in Special Education." It included an overview of basic concepts from the IDEA law, such as requirements for free, appropriate public education (FAPE) provided in the least restrictive environment (LRE), and an overview of the individualized education plan (IEP) process. While parents whose children with autism have been in the special ed system for some time are familiar with these concepts, the trainers made lesser known points, including one about parent signatures on the IEP. Under the law, parent signatures are only required to authorize evaluations or reevaluations and to implement the very first IEP. Schools have the authority to implement changes to subsequent IEPs with or without your signature, leaving mediation or due process as the parents' only options. Parents' Place said in their experience this is rare in the counties, but happens more commonly in Baltimore City schools.

The session ended with a valuable "Ten Rules of Advocacy." While some were common sense guidelines (stay focused, ask questions, keep your emotions in check), others brought practical tips. A strategy to implement the rule 'document, document, document' is to follow up IEP meetings with a letter or e-mail stating your own understanding of what was agreed. This is to assure important points are in the record. I used this tip with surprising success recently – the school used my write-up to form the basis of the official team summary. The rule to 'know your rights' highlighted a right some parents aren't aware of – your right to excuse team members. This can be helpful if you feel overwhelmed by the number of school staff surrounding you in the meeting.

The second week's presentation on "IDEA 2004: What's New" highlighted two points – less is changed under the new law than some feared, but less than we'd like is known about what the law will mean in detail since implementing regulations from the federal Dept. of Education have been delayed. Many local school districts in Maryland are holding off on significant changes until the regulations provide guidance. One key IDEA 2004 provision requires educational services that are "based upon peer-reviewed research to the extent possible." Disability advocates have looked forward to using this to argue for well-documented interventions (such as the use of ABA for children with autism), but since the bounds of this provision are not set out in regulation yet, there has been little success so far.

Another key IDEA 2004 provision showed up in the third session, "Dispute Resolution: When Things Go Wrong." This is the new 'resolution session' prior to mediation or due process. Most of the experience of Parents' Place staff with these is that the prior deadlock repeats itself, since the same IEP team members who couldn't agree earlier are back at the table. But they did report that resolution sessions could be effective if a new party with a new perspective is present.

The series also included discussions of "Transition Planning" and "Components of a Successful IEP." For folks like me who couldn't attend every date, Abilities Network staff said they hoped to host this series again in the future. Watch for that, but meanwhile check out the on-going schedule of Parents' Place trainings in the Baltimore area at [www.ppmd.org/workshops/central.asp](http://www.ppmd.org/workshops/central.asp). You'll be glad you did.

