

**Part 1: Parents' concerns/questions about the Education system: What are we hearing?**

Just as the state service system can be confusing to families, so can local education. We often hear about the support that a family needs to navigate school services and to successfully collaborate with school personnel and support their child/youth. Almost every family that I speak to has questions about how best to navigate this system. The questions come from not only parents or caregivers who are new to the ins and outs of the educational system, but also from professionals who are looking for the best way to support the youth and families that they are working with. School for children with emotional, behavioral and mental health needs can be exceptionally challenging due to the fact that the disability or need is often "hidden"...not on the outside for all to see.

**Some common questions I hear regularly are:**

*"How do we explain our child/youth's disability to the school?"*

*"What are my rights within the school?"*

*"How can I best work with the school to meet my child's needs?"*

*"Can I find an Educational Advocate to help support me and my child within the system?"*

*"How do I find a specialized school that will meet my child's needs?"*

Parent's perceptions of school systems range from good and well-meaning: *"My child/youth's teacher is wonderful and really wants to understand our needs"*, to blaming *"They just don't get it, they think that my child/youth's behavior is due to lack of parenting"*, to misinforming *"If you file a CHINS (Child in Need of Services) on your child you will get assistance from the court"*, to downright mean *"We are going to do you a favor and not suspend your child/youth, but you will need to take them home with you for the rest of today...tomorrow...next week."*

Parents and caregivers are looking for understanding as well as education of the professionals that are working with them. In schools there are many exceptional teachers, aids, support staff and administrators that are truly trying to understand and meet many needs of these children/youth. There are also some that want to understand but do not have the knowledge of mental health needs or the access to get that knowledge. The scariest are those who are cynical and jaded, who have neither the knowledge nor the desire to learn, but nonetheless seem to make quick judgments against children with mental health needs.

**So, what do families and caregivers need to support the health and well being of their child/youth in the education setting?**

First, a system that is easy to navigate.

Second, training and education regarding children's mental health issues for the staff that works with their child/youth on a daily, weekly, or monthly basis.

Third, they need the state systems such as the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, Department of Mental Health, Department of Developmental Disabilities, Department of Youth Services, Department of Public Health and Mass Health to collaborate with each other on system changes to enable smooth communication as well as sharing of information that would benefit a family.

Fourth, early intervention programs for youth with emotional, behavioral or mental health needs. It has been shown time and time again the long term benefits and long term cost savings of early intervention programs.

**What gets in the way of accomplishing these goals?**

Attitudes on all sides. People tend to look at a problem only through their own experiential lens. This is true of teachers, professionals, and even the families themselves. There are too few opportunities, and even fewer incentives to encourage better communication. Funding of services from different sources, without the flexibility to share resources tends to create silos, which often foster self interest. A better system for sharing information, for providing direction and access to families is required. While there has been some change within the system and some programs that have been developed that can be very beneficial to families that are very positive, there are still additional changes that need to be worked toward.

**The message that state and human service leaders most need to hear from families** is that education and support of children with emotional, behavioral and mental health needs is a key piece in enabling children to move to adulthood with their potential maximized. It is also very important for families and other professionals to realize that education is an entitlement while support from other state agencies is not- this does create a difference of missions between each of the state agencies working together.