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Speaking Up! ~ The BCCPAC Advocacy Project

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Speaking Up! ~ The BCCPAC Advocacy Project

Advocacy is about speaking or acting on behalf of oneself, or in support of another person or group. As a parent

- you are your child's natural advocate
- you can make sure your child's rights, needs, and opinions are respected
- you can ensure that decisions affecting your child are made fairly.

About the BCCPAC Advocacy Project

Students and parents who learn to advocate for themselves gain an understanding of their rights and responsibilities. They develop the courage to stand up for themselves and know how to approach problem-solving in an appropriate way.

*From Speaking Up! A
parent guide to advocating
for students in public
schools*

The BCCPAC Advocacy Project is a parent-driven movement to help parents and students be heard in our public education system and solve problems in a positive way. The Project began in the Qualicum School District in 1993, and went province-wide in late 1994 when BCCPAC received funding from the Ministry of Education.

The Project focuses on assisting local DPACs to create their own advocacy projects. Through provincial and local projects, BCCPAC has helped thousands of parents advocate for students, and has produced a wealth of information for PACs, DPACs, parent advocates, and individual parents acting on their own.

BCCPAC advocacy is about students. Everything done has the best interests of students at heart. The BCCPAC Advocacy Project has found that, through fair and effective practices that focus on students, parents and students can address their issues and be better understood

To find out if your DPAC is a member of the BCCPAC Advocacy Project, call the Project's toll free message line at **1-888-351-9834** or contact BCCPAC.

Vision of the BCCPAC Advocacy Project

Whatever the concern, whatever the problem, advocacy can help facilitate communication, remove barriers, and achieve resolution.

Advocacy is a tool to help people communicate.

PACs and DPACs can promote effective advocacy on behalf of students and parents.

*The Advocacy Project
Discussion Paper #2,
April 1995*

BCCPAC's vision of advocacy is threefold:

- to have all parents and students in public education respected, with parent and student needs and opinions reflected in school district and provincial decision-making
- to have parent advisory councils, district parent advisory councils, and BCCPAC working together effectively, in the best interests of BC's students and parents, with recognition and support from the Ministry of Education and school districts
- to have school districts provide the information and support parents and students need to resolve their issues effectively within school district processes.

As local DPACs work towards this vision, parent leaders are hoping to hear more parents and students telling them that

- they are coming into the schools to talk about their issues with school staff
- they feel welcomed by the PAC, and would consider the PAC a natural place to go to discuss issues or seek help
- they are receiving the information and support they need to work their issues through to resolution.

The BCCPAC Advocacy Project helps DPACs work toward this vision. DPACs are shown how to provide information and support to parents, and to promote fair, impartial, and consistent resolution of issues.

Goals of the BCCPAC Advocacy Project

The BCCPAC Advocacy Project has four **goal areas**. When a DPAC joins the Project, it is asked to commit to one or more of the Project's goal areas.

The goal of the advocacy process is to ensure that the issue at hand is addressed by helping the client [the parent and/or student] to be heard, to receive fair treatment on the basis of law, policy or normal procedure, and to understand the decision made.

*Code of Ethics for
advocates appointed
under the BCCPAC
Advocacy Project*

Goal Area #1

To assist parent leaders with information and support for their role as representatives of the parents at their school

This is called **systems advocacy**—*speaking or acting on behalf of a group*.

- A school PAC is a **systems** advocate when it represents its parent members to the school board, principal, or staff. This advocacy role is recognized in the School Act which gives parent advisory councils the right, through their elected executives, to advise the school board, principal, and staff on any matter relating to the school, other than matters assigned to the school planning council.
- The DPAC is a **systems** advocate for PACs—it represents the needs and interests of its member PACs at the district level. Under the School Act, DPACs may advise their school boards on any matter relating to education in the school district.
- BCCPAC is a **systems** advocate for its member PACs and DPACs throughout BC. It represents the parent voice to government and education partners.

Goal Area #2

To assist parent leaders with their role as mentors for individual parents striving to be effective natural advocates for their children

This is called **self-advocacy**—*speaking or acting on behalf of oneself*, and includes **natural advocacy**—*speaking or acting in support of another person with whom one is in a close relationship*.

Most of us would agree that problems are best solved by the parties directly involved. When people speak up for themselves,

they are acting as **self-advocates**. Self-advocates are often in the best position to influence others and solve problems.

Students in our public schools are often unable to speak up for themselves. They need others to understand, support, and speak for or with them. Parents are **natural advocates** for their children. A natural advocate is a person in a close relationship who would ordinarily stand up for another. In addition to parents, other family members, neighbours, and friends can be natural advocates for children.

PACs and DPACs have an important role in promoting natural advocacy. Through parent education, they can help parents understand advocacy and become better natural advocates for their children. They can also inform parents about children's rights, and give them information about their school and district that will help them advocate for students.

Goal Area #3

To assist parent leaders in DPACs who wish to promote ongoing and early resolution of parent issues through the appointment of individual advocates

Any information received by an advocate from a client or other party is confidential and must not be voluntarily disclosed to anyone who is not party to the advocacy process, except in prescribed circumstances.

*Code of Ethics for
advocates appointed
under the BCCPAC
Advocacy Project*

This is called **individual advocacy**—*speaking or acting in support of another person*.

Parents have the right and responsibility to ensure that

- their children are safe at school
- their children are respected and valued as individuals
- educational decisions are made in their children's best interests.

Parents are entitled to full and accurate information about their children's education. They have a right to know and understand the policies and procedures in their school district, and the educational options available to their children. They are entitled to ask questions, voice their concerns, and participate in the planning of their children's education.

Sometimes these rights and responsibilities can seem overwhelming. Especially in times of crisis, parents need individualized help. They need to know what information is

available and where to find it, whom to consult, what questions to ask, and what options will work for their child.

Many DPACs are choosing to support parents by providing **individual advocates**—volunteers with the skills, knowledge, and commitment to help others navigate their way through the system. Even in school districts where relationships between parents and education partners are good, appointed advocates can provide a valuable service and complement the positive work already being done in the district.

Natural advocacy is a form of individual advocacy. When a natural advocate—for example, a parent speaking for a child—speaks up, that person is doing individual advocacy.

Goal Area #4

To assist parent leaders to promote self-advocacy for students

This is called **student self-advocacy**.

Students, both individually and collectively, have important things to say about their education and their school. Unlike parents, however, students do not have an advisory right in our education system.

BCCPAC promotes and supports student self-advocacy. Parent leaders at the provincial, district, and school levels have an important role in encouraging our education system to recognize the right of young people to be heard.

Through PACs and DPACs, parents can work together to ensure that our schools place increased importance on receiving student input. School communities need appropriate and well-defined ways to encourage student self-advocacy.

Principles of Fair Schools

The basis for advocacy in public schools is found in the principles of the *Fair Schools Report* published by the BC Ombudsman in May 1995. These principles help us understand what we mean by “fairness”.

Investing in young people is investing in the future of British Columbia and Canada.

Children are indeed our most valuable resource.

Adults can no longer risk increasing youth alienation by shutting out young people from the decision-making process

This is a matter of rights, dignity, respect, and affection.

Fair Schools Report
Office of the Ombudsman
of British Columbia
May 1995

The principles of *Fair Schools* are

1. All children and youth have the right to be valued and treated with respect and dignity.
2. All children and youth have the right to a fair and equitable education.
3. All children and youth have the right to receive appropriate advocacy supports.
4. All children and youth have the right to participate in decisions that affect them, to express their views, and to have them carefully considered.
5. All children and youth have the right to the benefit of the fundamental human rights provided in the United Nations Convention on the Rights of the Child.
6. All children and youth have the right to a safe physical and emotional environment.
7. All children and youth have the right to receive appropriate programs from appropriately trained and properly motivated staff.
8. All children and youth should have the opportunity to access publicly funded services in their home communities or as close to their home as possible.



Website of the
BC Ombudsman

www.ombud.gov.bc.ca/

The *Fair Schools Report* is a reflection of the first two years (1993/94) of the Ombudsman’s work investigating complaints and inquiries about public school services. The report, even many years later, provides inspiration and information for parents and schools committed to resolving problems in our public education system.

The *Fair Schools Report* is available free of charge from the BC Ombudsman. Call **1-800-567-3247**. It is also available on the BC Ombudsman’s website at

✓ [www.ombud.gov.bc.ca/publications/reports/
Public_Reports/PR35_fair_schools/index.htm](http://www.ombud.gov.bc.ca/publications/reports/Public_Reports/PR35_fair_schools/index.htm)

Individual Advocacy Services

Advocates help people help themselves!

Advocates do not take over for others or make things worse!

To assist a caller who speaks a language other than English, the BCCPAC Advocacy Project makes every effort to find an advocate who speaks that language or an interpreter.

Advocates appointed under the BCCPAC Advocacy Project are **volunteers** committed to ensuring that parents and students in their school districts have a voice in decisions that affect them.

BCCPAC advocates

- help parents to be more effective natural advocates for their children
- support parents seeking to improve communication and resolve problems between home and school
- work within the problem-solving process already in place in their school district to help parents and students define their concerns, obtain information, and communicate with school and district staff
- work to ensure that parents are heard, receive fair treatment, and understand the decisions made with respect to their child.

What happens when you call the advocacy line?

When you call the provincial or your local advocacy message line, you will receive a return call from an advocate who will give you one-on-one assistance. You will receive information and help on what to do to resolve your concern. You will be provided with relevant resources, or helped to find resources yourself. The advocate will discuss with you effective ways to communicate with the people who can assist you in finding the information you need and resolving your concern.

For assistance, or to find out if there are volunteer advocates in your district, go to the BCCPAC website at

✓ www.bccpac.bc.ca

or call the BCCPAC Advocacy Project's toll free message line at **1-888-351-9834**.

On the next two pages, you will find the BCCPAC Advocacy Project's *Self-Help Guide to Solving Problems*.

To really have a voice, I need the opportunity to say it "my way" to someone who really listens and can do something about it.

Office of the Child, Youth & Family Advocate

A SELF HELP GUIDE TO SOLVING PROBLEMS

Note details such as:

What happened?

When did it happen?

What difficulties has this situation caused for me or my child?

What policies, laws, etc. apply to my situation?

What are my rights & responsibilities?

What are the system's rights & responsibilities?

Make sure your concerns are based on what you know to be true from your experience or your child's experience.

Issue/problem/concern

Note the events/incidents that have led to this concern

Possible information sources

- school or school board office (information on policies, procedures, etc.)
- your local Parent Advisory Council or District Parent Advisory Council
- BCCPAC Advocacy Project
- BCCPAC office
- Office of the Ombudsman
- local child and youth serving agencies
- community and school-based counseling services
- mental health agencies

Actions taken: *It is important to keep all of your information together for easy reference, including records of whom you have spoken to, what correspondence you have sent and received, etc.*

Note details such as:

Who you communicated with.

When you communicated with them.

How? Letter, telephone, fax, etc.

What was communicated?

What action they said they would take.

When and how they will let you know what action has been taken.

What action you said you would take.

Do you need to call them back?

| | | |
|--------------------|----------------------|-----------------------|
| Date: _____ | Action: _____ | Outcome: _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
| _____ | _____ | _____ |
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| Date: _____ | Action: _____ | Outcome: _____ |
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| _____ | _____ | _____ |

What is in my child's best interest?

How will I know agreements are upheld?

Who will be responsible?

When will the action plan be started?

Who should I talk to if I have further concerns?

Resolution: *List some of your ideas for solving the problem(s).*

1) _____

2) _____

3) _____

Other concerns/ideas:

BCCPAC Advocacy Project Resources

Where can I learn more?

There are many excellent resources available to parents and students.

Resources can be obtained from

- your parent advisory council
- your district parent advisory council
- BCCPAC
- your school district office
- your child's principal and teachers

If you can't find what you are looking for, call the BCCPAC Advocacy Project toll free message line for assistance.

1-888-351-9834

BCCPAC produces many resources for parents on advocacy and the BCCPAC Advocacy Project. Your PAC or DPAC may have copies of the following publications for borrowing.

These resources can be ordered through the BCCPAC website at www.bccpac.bc.ca or the BCCPAC office at **604-687-4433**.

✓ *Speaking Up! A parent guide to advocating for students in public schools*

A step-by-step guide to resolution-based advocacy for parents striving to be better natural advocates for their children. Explains how the school system works, outlines parents' and students' rights and responsibilities, provides strategies for advocating for children and supporting student self-advocacy. Available in three languages. 20 pages.

✓ *Speaking Up!*, an 18 minute video

✓ *Call it Safe*

Two parent guides for dealing with harassment and intimidation in secondary schools and bullying in elementary schools. Contain information and resources for parents and PACs on how to keep students safe in schools. Can be downloaded from the BCCPAC website in six languages. 20 pages

✓ *DPAC Advocacy: A Manual for District Parent Advisory Council Advocacy Projects, 2002*

A practical guide for DPAC leaders in setting up and monitoring a local advocacy project.

✓ *Advocate Resource: A Manual for Advocates appointed under the BCCPAC Advocacy Project, 2002*

A manual of information and resources to help DPAC-appointed advocates assist parents and students in their school district.

