

## Special Needs Committee in your PTA

### What Is Special Education?

Special Education refers to services given to students with disabilities. Students in special education require modifications in their educational programs; they may need extensive remediation, smaller-group settings, adaptations to their workload, a slower-paced curriculum, or other adjustments to suit their abilities and limitations. Students in special education may be taught in a regular classroom with supports, a self-contained classroom, or a special school for students with similar disabilities.

### Does our PTA need a Special Needs committee?

Yes, if your school serves children with disabilities you may want to consider starting a special needs committee. Most schools have students with special needs.

### How do we make sure children with disabilities are included in our PTA events?

By having a parent of a child with disabilities serve on your board, you will be able to find out what is needed to include them. Consult with your principal and/or special education teacher.

### Our school doesn't have children who look disabled; does this mean our PTA won't need a Special Needs committee?

No. Can you identify which of these kids has a disability?



Many children with disabilities can be hard to identify. They look just like everyone else. Special Needs is an inclusive term with an array of diagnoses. Children with special needs have differing degrees of learning disabilities, mental retardation, terminal illnesses, developmental delays, physical and mental disabilities. Statistics say that one in ten children has a disability.

## Creating a Special Needs Committee (Unit level)

### Potential Mission

- **To provide information and support** to parents of children with special needs, so that they can help their children maximize their potential
- **To work as a team** with the school to assist staff in most effectively helping children with special needs
- **To provide information** to all parents and community members about children with special needs, so that they can understand and support all children
- **To help all children understand and appreciate challenges** faced by children with special needs
- **To work legislatively to secure and retain adequate laws** (and funding for them) for children with special needs

### ***Definition of Children with “Special Needs”***

- Learning or processing disabilities
- Physical challenges
- Speech and language difficulties
- Social/emotional/behavioral issues
- Mental retardation
- Autism and/or Autism Spectrum Disorders
- Gifted learners
- Other

### ***Special Needs Committee within a PTA***

- Special Needs activities and trainings
- Coordinates with other PTA committees, such as
  - Legislative advocacy
  - Parent and community education
  - Membership
  - Communications
  - Health & Safety

Provides support to school members as needed

### ***Establishing a PTA Special Needs Committee***

- Discuss idea with PTA president, executive board and principal
- If board decides to form committee, president should select a committee chairman who is knowledgeable about and sensitive to children with special needs
- Works in a constructive way with staff, parents
- Can keep personal issues separate from committee
- Is a PTA member
- Executive Board establishes the committee
- President appoints committee chairman; board ratifies

### ***Requirements for a Successful Committee***

- Sincere desire to help all children
- Collaboration among parents, school
- Special Needs Committee on par with other PTA committees
- While special education has inherent challenges, focus needs to be on constructive activities
- All committee members should be involved in developing programs
- All stakeholders represented on committee
- Any identified (legitimate) problems with schools passed to school or district for resolution
- Communication of programs, issues and resources
- Training of facilitators
- Use of expert speakers
- Strict vetting for research-based proven topics and methodology
- Commitment of time
- Ability to listen
- A healthy sense of humor and a thick skin

### ***Program Considerations***

- Make sure that speaker(s)
  - Uses research-based material
  - Balances school-district practices with newer methods
  - Communicates collaborative focus
- Include balance of programs for types of disabilities
- Learning disabilities, ADHD, anxiety, social issues draw largest audiences
- Offer programs for less prevalent disabilities (autism, mental retardation, etc.) in breakout sessions in a conference or subcommittee/support group

### **Potential Program Examples**

- Help - My Child Struggles in School Series
- Where do I start: Asking for help, student study teams and assessment
- Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans
- Placement Considerations
- Help Your Child Develop Friendship Skills
- Parenting the Anxious Child - Helping Children and Teens Cope with Fear, Worry and Shyness
- ADHD Medication Update
- Ways to Win the Homework Battle
- Special Education Back-to-School Night - how to work with your child's teachers/school
- Put Yourself in the Shoes of a Person with a Learning Disability (Simulation kit from the American Dyslexic Association)
- Helping Children Learn to Read - Diagnosing and Treating Dyslexia
- Diagnosing and Assessing Disabilities
- Child Development and How Parents and Teachers Can Affect Any Child's Potential
- Helping Children and Teens with ADHD Succeed at Home and at School
- Special Education Back-to-School Night - how to work with your child's teachers/school

### **Special Needs Committee Chair Job Description**

The Chair of the PTA Special Needs Committee (SNC) is the main contact person for SNC events and activities. Specifically, the Chair will:

- Lead monthly SNC meetings for interested individuals at the school
- Coordinate parent educational events, typically 5-6 per year
  - Create flyer for events
  - Create long and short blurbs for school newsletters, to be disseminated to parents
  - Write article for Council monthly newsletter
- Coordinate workshops with other schools
- Conference, on topics of interest to the special needs community
- Oversee Ability Awareness activities and outreach
- Help advertise events and activities of the district as necessary
- Maintain SNC web page (if created)
- Create and publish monthly "Special Needs News" newsletter to be distributed to parent
- Attend monthly PTA Meetings and report to activities to the general membership
- Engage in community-wide and cross-community efforts, such as the Best Practices Group Yahoo Group and meetings, and other ways to stay connected to the special needs community in the Bay Area/East Bay.