

Schools

Firm bridges gap between schools, special-needs students

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** Powell resident Lisa Perez helps and supports parents as they work with school districts in educating disabled children.*

By GARTH BISHOP

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Some parents find their local schools well-equipped to handle their children's special needs. For others, getting their special-needs child the help he or she requires is an enormously trying and emotional experience.

That's where Lisa Perez comes in.

Perez, a Powell resident, is head of Ohio Parent Advocacy and Consulting.

Her business is helping families of children with disabilities wade through the process of getting from their schools the accommodations their children need.

"I help them navigate the special-education system in their public school," said Perez.

Not only does Perez advise families on what to do when they believe their children's needs are not being met and direct them to useful resources in their community, she also will go with them to meet with school officials if necessary.

She typically finds herself dealing with one of three problems: The family believes the child has a disability but does not know what to do about it; the child's disability has been identified but the family is not sure he or she has a sufficient individualized education program; or the child has an IEP but the family feels it is not working properly.

If the schools and the family disagree on the circumstances, it typically means a lot of meetings and a lot of frustration, Perez said.

"My role in that regard is to help be a support for the parent and try to help bridge the gap," she said.

Many meetings between school officials and parents of special-needs children are tense, emotional affairs, Perez said.

The parents may not hear what they need to hear, or may not think things through as much as they should. They also may feel intimidated if they are significantly outnumbered by school officials.

"That's where people need that extra boost," Perez said.

Perez will work with parents prior to the meeting to set goals, then accompany them to make sure those goals are met, she said.

For example, in one recent case, Perez worked with the family of an 18-year-old woman with mental health issues. The woman's school district had not prepared for her a plan to make the transition from school to the community, Perez said, but after some 10 hours of meetings, Perez was able to help get the student a transition plan and the support she needed to pass the Ohio Graduation Test.

"Her grandmother said to me ... that she now feels her granddaughter has a future," said Perez.



SNP photo by Garth Bishop
Lisa Perez of Powell is head of Ohio Parent Advocacy and Consulting, which partners with parents of special-needs children.

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Though Perez officially started Ohio Parent Advocacy and Consulting in September, she has a decade of experience in the field, she said. She spent three of those 10 years working with beleaguered parents as part of the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities.

"I've worked with just about every school district in Delaware and Franklin counties in some capacity," she said.

Though she lives in Powell, Perez is willing to take on new clients from anywhere, she said.

In addition to her advocacy and consulting work, Perez also periodically gives presentations to professional groups, as not many people do specifically what she does, she said.

She charges a \$300 retainer and \$60 per hour after five hours.

Perez is in the process of setting up a Web site at ohioparentadvocacy.com, though the site is still under construction. Those interested in contacting her can do so by phone at 614-781-7851.

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