

# Help is at Hand

## The Special Education Ombudsman Program

By Tana Leasure

**N**avigating the special education process from referral and eligibility to the completion of the individualized education program (IEP) can be challenging for many families. Even parents who are active advocates for their students may feel overwhelmed and intimidated by the legal requirements, the amount of paperwork, the multiple meetings and the number of service providers and administrators that are involved. Often families experienced in the special education process are not aware of the range of supports and services available. In addition, the emotional investment parents have in ensuring appropriate services for their children can sometimes result in confusion and frustration.

That's why Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS) has created the Special Education Ombudsman Program. This effort provides assistance to families who need support as they learn about and work through the special education system. Now in its second year as a pilot program, the parent-to-parent network was designed to create opportunities for families to develop an understanding of the complexities of special education. It represents FCPS' commitment to assist parents in becoming stronger advocates and more active participants in their children's education by empowering them to build effective, collaborative partnerships with the school system.

### Parents Who've Been There

The eight ombudsmen, all parents of students who receive special education services, are part of a network that provides assistance to families that can benefit from the advice and knowledge of a more experienced and specially trained parent. Parent ombudsmen can provide informa-

tion about the special education process and services available through FCPS, as well as information about special education regulations, procedures and policies. They may collaborate with parents to assist them in solving problems in a positive way. They may also attend IEP or school-based meetings with the parents in order to help parents and staff members reach consensus regarding special education concerns.

The ombudsmen are based at designated schools but may assist parents of special education students from any school within their cluster. While they are employed part-time by the school system, their role calls for them to be objective and impartial as they work with parents and schools.

### Expanding Your Network

Through the creation of the ombudsman program, FCPS has expanded its support services for families of students with disabilities. Other avenues for support include the Parent Resource Center (PRC), the Office of Special Education website with its links to a wide variety of information, and the School Board's parent Advisory Committee for Students with Disabilities (ACSD).

To get the latest information about workshops, new books and materials, and events at the Parent Resource Center via e-mail, sign on to Keep in Touch. To sign on, visit the home page of Fairfax County Public Schools at [www.fcps.edu](http://www.fcps.edu). Click on the yellow box that says "Keep in Touch." Fill in the required information and check that you would like to receive information about "special education services." ■

*Tana Leasure is Parent Ombudsman for Cluster II, Fairfax County Public Schools.*



### Find Out More

*If you are the parent of a student in FCPS who would like more information or if you wish to request the services of a special education ombudsman, you may either call the special education office number for your cluster or contact the designated ombudsman directly.*

### 2003-2004 Ombudsmen

Cluster I: Donna Rich  
Herndon Elementary School  
703-204-3992 x7534

Cluster II: Tana Leasure  
Westbriar Elementary School  
703-204-3992 x7533

Cluster III: Jane Thatcher  
Olde Creek Elementary School  
703-246-8247

Cluster IV: Patti Reynolds  
Mount Vernon/Woodley Hills  
Elementary Schools  
703-329-2514

Cluster V: Tammy Beswick  
Crestwood Elementary School  
703-329-2534

Cluster VI: Phyllis Cook  
Kings Glen Elementary School  
703-246-7730

Cluster VII: Karen Maizel  
Willow Springs Elementary School  
703-246-8246

Cluster VIII: Dede Schrader  
Cub Run Elementary School  
703-246-7731

### Special Education Cluster Offices

Cluster I: 703-204-3826  
Cluster II: 703-204-3826  
Cluster III: 703-246-8121  
Cluster IV: 703-329-2530  
Cluster V: 703-329-2530  
Cluster VI: 703-246-7735  
Cluster VII: 703-246-8121  
Cluster VIII: 703-246-7735