

CASA PLAYS CRITICAL ROLE IN EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN IN FOSTER CARE



Part of the role of a Court-Appointed Special Advocate is to champion the educational needs of the children we serve, both in court and in the school system. The child's Advocate has the right and the responsibility to:

- Review a child's educational data,
- Communicate with the school staff,
- Attend educational meetings, and
- Include CASA's research in each court report.

In addition to caseworkers and caregivers, an Advocate needs to take a proactive role in a child's education by fostering a positive relationship with the child's school. The campus and district as a whole may not have experience with CASA or understand what our role is. CASA of Yellowstone County is here to support you and help with specific suggestions to advocate for the educational needs of the children you serve.

*See the two handouts at the bottom of this page – **Meet My Child** and **Letter to my Teacher**.

STEP 1: CONTACT THE REGISTRAR AND THE FOSTER CARE LIAISON

Start by sending an introductory email or phone call to the school secretary and the district foster care liaison to introduce yourself and explain your role in the child's education. Remember CASA's confidentiality policy in emails. Names should be shortened for confidentiality purposes (Jane or J. Doe). Case history or details must be

withheld. Only state that the child is in care and that you are the Court-Appointed Special Advocate assigned to the case.

Schedule an appointment to meet with the school secretary or principal in person to drop off your credentials so they will be on file in the registrar's office. Remember that confidential documents cannot be forwarded to the school via email. Inform them that you would like to attend important meetings and that you will be in regular contact with teachers, counselors, and any special education staff. Please copy the foster care liaison on this email.

STEP 2: VISIT THE SCHOOL

When you visit the school, provide the school secretary or principal with a copy of your credentials including:

- The Order of Appointment, which contains CASA's assignment to the child's CPS case
- What is CASA? handout
- A copy of your CASA badge and driver's license

All school staff will have access to this information once on file. Ask the registrar for a list of the names and email addresses of the child's teachers so you can contact them directly. Request that the registrar provide you with access to the child's online parent portal so you can stay on top of the child's performance, absences, and discipline reports throughout the year.

STEP 3: CONTACT TEACHERS, COUNSELOR, AND SPECIAL EDUCATION STAFF (IF APPLICABLE)

Once you have the student's schedule, send a group email to introduce yourself to the child's teachers, counselor, and special education staff, if applicable. State your role and let them know your credentials are on file in the registrar's office. Let them know that you would like to attend important meetings and that you will be in regular contact with them. The communication channel is now open for you to know about upcoming events, schedule meetings, and progress reports! You will have access to report cards and all other information that is in the student's file.

Use the two handouts to help teachers understand special needs of their students – **Meet My Child** and **Letter to my Teacher**.

STEP 4: MAINTAIN CONTACT/MAINTAIN CONFIDENTIALITY

In email communication, be cognizant of any confidential information that must be protected. CASA does not provide details of the child's history and case information to others. We also do not forward documents that have been received from other sources. Reference the child in an abbreviated format per CASA policy to protect their identity (Jane or J. Doe).

Be mindful of how the child feels about your interaction with the school as far as lunch visits or special event attendance are concerned. Some students may welcome your attendance at special events while others may be uncomfortable with the number of school visitors that they have compared to other students in their peer group. Ask the child for their preference.

STEP 5: ANY CONCERNS

If you need to discuss specific questions or concerns, it is best to know the most helpful person to contact at the school. Principals and assistant principals are available for campus or district concerns you cannot resolve through other staff. In general, other staff can help with most concerns.

Teachers: Know the daily schedules, progress, and contacts for other information for the child. They will text or email you, generally within 48 hours.

Counselors: Know how to access school/community resources for the family, give special support to students who need it, handle academic scheduling, help students determine graduation paths and career options.

Speech Pathologists: See students who need speech and language services and special needs students two to three times per week, know their needs and progress. Often help assess students for special needs services and have information about testing for speech and language services.

Psychologists: Test students for and coordinate special education services, report at meetings and may add additional resources for the child.

Foster Care Liaison: Facilitate the enrollment and transfer of records for foster children when enrolling in or changing schools. Assist with any other concerns that are not being resolved by other district personnel. CASA of Yellowstone County can help you locate the name of the district's foster care liaison.

STEP 6: LOG YOUR EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY EFFORTS

Log all your completed and attempted Educational Advocacy efforts. This includes phone calls, texts, emails, teacher meetings, staff meetings, special education and 504

meetings, school record reviews, and so on. Choose “Educational Advocacy” for the activity type.

EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY FOR CHILDREN UNDER FIVE

When it comes to Educational Advocacy and children who are younger than school-age, think outside the box. Is the child in daycare? Many daycares provide summaries of a child’s progress each month. If the child is cared for at home, the Advocate can take a list of developmental milestones to the monthly visit and record which skills the child has developed or is working on. Is the child developmentally on target? How many colors, shapes, words, and numbers does the child know? Monitor their progress every month you visit.

WHY IS EDUCATIONAL ADVOCACY IMPORTANT?

In addition to caseworkers and caregivers, Advocates are essential members of a child’s advocacy team. The caregivers may be kinship grandparents who haven’t been involved in the school system for years. Young foster parents may have never dealt with a child in the school system. A caregiver may be intimidated by the school system in general and need your support and guidance. Entering care can disrupt a child’s education and create new educational needs or concerns. CASA ensures that all the child’s needs are being met while in care, and education is essential to a child’s well-being.

FINALLY

Montana schools have many requirements, both federal and local, by which they must abide. This makes working with the school districts consistent in some ways and different in others. We cannot change the rules they must follow, and we must learn how to successfully navigate the differences. In order to serve the best interest of our child, our role should be one of advocacy and our attitude must be one of support and cooperation rather than antagonism.

In order to put our best foot forward to work with our foster children’s educators, we must show the same level of professionalism, respect, and positivity we expect from them. Our dress, our positive manner, and our concern for confidentiality will show our desire to work as a partner for the child’s best interest.