

The amount and kind of education a child receives is a predictor of life success. If a child's educational experiences are limited, his or her chances of financial wellbeing and living a satisfying, productive life decline. Also, the chances increase dramatically that as an adult he or she will not reach full potential and may even adopt a lifestyle that is deleterious not only to his or her self but to the public.

The Allegheny County Department of Human Services (DHS) is firmly committed to improving outcomes for children and families. Ensuring that all children, including those who have physical, behavioral and intellectual barriers, have access to the education they need is an important component of our mission.

The Education Specialist program operated through the DHS Office of Behavioral Health/Bureau of Child and Adolescent Mental Health Services is a concrete example of that commitment. As illustrated by the two stories told here, the specialists bridge the knowledge gap between families and what school districts are required by law to do for children to make sure they can access education, and therefore have a more productive, satisfying life.

**For more information about DHS's Education Specialists, call 412-350-4977.**



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# DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Education  
SPECIALISTS 



## Tricia & Emily

Tricia's daughter Emily suffered an injury to her left eye when she was 4, which compromised her sight. She cannot process light well, and her depth perception and ability to focus are limited. Her school district has had to adjust her learning environment by doing such things as seating her so that she can see the teacher out of her uncompromised eye, and making sure materials are available in print. Emily has what is known as a Gifted Individual Education Plan (GIEP), formulated with a team that includes teachers, administrators, Emily and her mother. The plan ensures that her school district provides her with the educational support she needs.

Two years ago, she developed another health challenge, requiring intensive physical therapy. Emily's doctor recommended temporary homebound instruction. The school district would have to provide a teacher at her house and access to all other materials she needed.

About the same time, the school district underwent personnel changes. Although Tricia is a savvy woman, she became unsure of how her daughter could continue to get what she needed.

She learned about the Department of Human Services' (DHS) Education Specialists free program. One of them took up Emily's case and guided her to appropriate legal and educational information so she could advocate for her daughter. "The Education Specialist empowered me," Tricia said. "She was just a godsend."

The DHS Education Specialist program has been in existence for about 15 years, starting with one staff member. Ten years ago, demand prompted DHS to add two more specialists. The team is based in the Office of Behavior Health (OBH) Bureau of Children & Adolescent Mental Health Services. The specialists consult and disseminate information about the state and national laws supporting special education, provide technical assistance, make referrals, attend meetings and do much more to ensure Allegheny County's children get the education they need.

Ruth Ann Koss, supervisor of the Education Specialists, part of the OBH Children's Team, said

## Amelia & Melanie

A DHS Education Specialist assisted Amelia in her quest to find a balanced educational placement for her third-grader, Melanie, who has mild intellectual disabilities and suspected attention deficit hyperactivity disorder.

Her home elementary school could not adequately accommodate her academically or socially. School administrators said she could be placed in a class for autistic children – the only place available at that building where they said they could meet the needs of children like Melanie – but Amelia said the placement crimps her daughter's social development.

To keep her on task, the school gave her an aide for learning support, but sometimes the girl's lessons are conducted in a hallway. Melanie has been distraught. "She tells me she doesn't want to go to school. I know she's not happy. It's just not working," Amelia said.

the specialists address concerns of children with special needs across all systems and link families to appropriate services. "Treatment impacts education," Ruth Ann said. "It's keeping that eye out globally for what kids may need."

The specialists yearly attend about 200 Individual Education Plan (IEP) team meetings, which include parents, teachers, administrators and anyone else whose input is needed to devise an IEP. They also answer nearly 1,000 inquiries by email or phone. School district personnel are among the callers, requesting a neutral party's assistance in breaking through obstacles that may be blocking progress.

Acknowledging that discussing a child can make people emotional, Education Specialists are trained to maintain composure, answering questions with respect and bringing a calming presence to sometimes tough conversations about hot-button issues.

Tricia praised her Education Specialist, saying that the biggest help was guiding her to information she could use herself. "She was big about, 'You are the best advocate for your child. You are the one who can take what I'm giving you and use it. It was kind of like 'Don't hand me the fish – teach me how to fish. She was teaching me how to fish,'" Tricia said.

She felt the specialist's personal commitment as well. "Each kid, each family she helps – it's an investment. It matters to her." —

Although Amelia pressed the district via her daughter's IEP, the Education Specialist's expertise additionally has helped in forging solutions. "I just felt I needed someone else at meetings to advocate for me and educate me on the options I have. It's nice to have someone clarify things for me and help me look at things all the way around."

The Education Specialist accompanied Amelia on a visit to a school that appears to be able to more adequately meet Melanie's educational and social needs – with a smaller teacher/student ratio in a structured classroom.

Besides educating and supporting families, Education Specialists also network with other groups, such as the Education Law Center and the Disability Rights Network, to stay abreast of information and share ideas.