

# Become an Empower

## Advocating for Students with ADHD

Marie S. Paxson interviews Mary Durham

**IT IS NO SECRET THAT MANY STATES ARE HAVING BUDGET PROBLEMS** and that many school districts are experiencing severe cutbacks in funding. How does this economic climate affect families in their efforts to get services for their children? I interviewed former CHADD president Mary Durham to learn more about the lay of the land and how this new training program can help.

CHADD's Parent Empowerment Program is being developed as an online training program on special education advocacy led by Mary Durham, an educational consultant with many credits to her name. A trained mediator, Section 504 hearing officer, and behavior strategist, she is active in numerous county and state interagency organizations. Former Texas Governor George Bush appointed Durham to the Texas Council for Developmental Disabilities; Governor Rick Perry reappointed her to the council in 2005.

The economic climate affecting special education today is more challenging than any in recent history. Reduced funding means that services are being cut, staff positions are being eliminated, and waiting lists are growing. This makes it even more crucial to know how to "play the game"—a phrase Durham dislikes but acknowledges is a fairly accurate description. Parents often don't know which services are available. They may not know how to negotiate with school districts to receive help for their child.

Durham explains the process this way. "Ask yourself these questions: What are the student's challenges and how severe are they? What is needed to improve the situation? What

can you live with?" In other words, dream of the perfect solution, but compromise on what can be realistically delivered. Due to budgetary constraints, many class sizes are now larger and many teachers have taken early retirement and not been replaced.

This means that being knowledgeable about your child's areas of weakness and the solutions that are needed is essential. Parents are their child's lifelong advocates; other specialists will come and go. So in addition to giving your child the best possible chance for academic success, for the sake of continuity over their many years as a student, it is important to have a clear understanding of what the child needs and to know how to ask for it.

The Children's Mental Health Consortium has a list that is compiled by several mental health agencies and highlights their most frequently served populations, broken down by diagnosis. ADHD appears in the list, often as a co-occurring condition, the largest percent of the time. That is one of the reasons that CHADD designed this one-day program. If this many students are affected, their families need to know how to successfully ask for academic supports.

Parents might not realize that the school is not required to maximize a child's potential, Durham points out, but that is what most parents envision. The best way to close this gap is to have a clear understanding of the law.

At 504 and IEP meetings, for example, schools may cite a special education law by saying something along the lines of, "The regulations state that we are only required to provide such-and-such." Unskilled parents may accept this as the only option. A trained parent might be able to take it a step further by saying, "Yes,

that's true, but another section of the regulation states such-and-such." Then the conversation can move forward to figure out how to help the child effectively.

You would not want to be considered a "scorched-earth parent," Durham warns. Such parents are so angry that they make unreasonable demands for accommodations, lay in wait for the school to make a mistake, threaten legal action for minor matters that could be handled diplomatically, and speak to staff in a disrespectful manner.

Interactions with school personnel can be very emotional. Losing one's temper can have repercussions for many years. Even more troubling is that once a situation between parent and school district reaches the point of hot tempers and legal action, the student's level of service is "stays put" until the conflict is resolved. Ironically, the parent's request for increased services is what started the ball rolling. So the child that needed increased assistance, or a different type of assistance, continues to receive the services the parents found problematic in the first place. The child suffers because of the impasse.

Durham acknowledges that there are indeed times when the services of a special education advocate or attorney are necessary. This should not be the first line of defense, however. If you require legal assistance to help your child, knowing whom to call and when to call them can save time and money. The training provides enough background and knowledge to handle basic special education advocacy on your own, plus the criteria to determine when you need the help of a professional.

Designed to empower and give parents confidence, this online training provides key



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# red Parent in Today's World

CHADD's new  
Parent Empowerment Program  
is coming to you online—  
on demand!

facts about federal law on special education. The curriculum includes an overview of Response to Intervention, which is often controversial and poorly understood. Durham's familiarity with 504 plans offers practical and realistic know-how that can be put to use quickly. Additional tools

and strategies will enable you to become more effective in working with schools to get appropriate services for your child.

If you want to help your student with ADHD in the most effective way possible, this training is for you! 🗣️



#### FOR MORE INFO

Visit [chadd.org](http://chadd.org)  
for more information  
or to register.

**Designed to empower and give parents confidence, this online training provides key facts about federal law on special education. Additional tools and strategies will enable you to become more effective in working with schools to get appropriate services for your child.**

