



Episode #148:

**Advocating for School Success for
Kids with Special Needs, with Rich Weinfeld**

March 12, 2019

Debbie: Hello Rich, welcome to the podcast.

Rich: Thank you. Thank you for having me.

Debbie: Sure. This is such a great topic to talk about for our audience today. And I actually posted in the Tilt Parenting Facebook group that I was going to be speaking with you and asked parents if they had questions about advocating for their child in school and I got a whole bunch. So we're going to do our best to get through those. But before we get to that, just as a way of getting started, could you just introduce yourself, tell us about who you are and the work that you do and kind of your role in this conversation.

Rich: I'm glad to. My name again is Rich Weinfeld and I'm currently the executive director of Weinfeld Education Group. And we are a group of advocates or special education consultants that help families who have children with special needs help to make sure they have appropriate services and school placements. And, um, we do that by interfacing with the schools and attending meetings with parents and uh, you know, again, making sure kids are getting what they need. And, um, would you like me to go into my background a little bit or?

Debbie: Sure. Yeah.

Rich: Yeah, that's, I'm actually in my 44th year as an educator. Started off long ago as an elementary school teacher. Spent 30 years in Montgomery County public schools right outside of Washington D.C. in a variety of positions, mostly in special education, teaching, instructional specialist, some administrative work. Finished my career as the director of programming for twice exceptional students, which was a fabulous position, I got to work with really interesting students and their families.

And Montgomery County is one of the few public school districts in the country that has special programs for these students. So that, that was a great experience. Retired from career one, uh, now about 15 years ago and started doing advocacy work, uh, which has led to the development of this, this wonderful group Weinfeld Education Group. And also in the process of the past 15 years, I've co-authored six books that relate to special needs students to a lot of training talks, participation in conferences related to, uh, to those special needs topics. So that's kind of it in a nutshell.

Debbie: So fascinating. Yeah. I have heard so much about the Montgomery public school system, you know, back when we were living in the Seattle area, when Asher was in early elementary school and we were kind of looking like where could we go? And that seems to be this really special, unique circumstance that there's this public school system that actually supports and understands 2e kids. And, and even back then it was a term that was so it just wasn't as commonly known among educators and even among parents.

Rich: Yeah. Montgomery county actually the first programs for twice exceptional, it was called the GTLD, gifted with learning disabilities program started in the mid 1980s so quite a long time now. And the programs are still thriving on the elementary, middle and high school level. And then over the years there've been other programs specifically targeting other bright students who um, have, uh, what was called Aspergers and now high functioning autism. So, um, there are some, some special programs and then I think a better understanding within the Montgomery County school system than a lot of school systems about the special needs of the students, both on the strength and on the weakness side. So yeah. So there's a lot of good things happening.

Debbie: How can we get that model, duplicate it in other schools? I mean, is that part of the work that you're doing or does Montgomery public school system train or shared their methodologies with other public schools?

Rich: Um, you know, it is certainly, it is certainly a big part of what I'm doing. My, um, my first book was called *Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties*. And based on that book, I do a lot of training, including going to other school districts to talk to school staffs about what they can be doing, whether it's actually establishing a program, which, you know, frankly, it doesn't happen very often, it's expensive, it's a big undertaking. But at least what can they be doing for all the individual students that they have in their schools to better meet their needs. So that's a real passion of mine. And I do, I do a lot of consulting training, um, all over the United States around that topic.

Debbie: So as a special needs advocate, you know, even as you were describing the work that your company does, I'm just wondering how common even is that the services that you offer around the country? You know, again, our frame of reference or mine is in the Pacific northwest in the Seattle area. And you know, I had to kind of really search to find therapists or parent coaches who could support me in IEP meetings and show up, but that wasn't their primary thing. And so I'm just wondering if you could explain what a special needs advocate does and then is this something that's kind of unusual, um, the work that you're doing?

Rich: Yeah. Let me, maybe I'll start with that. I, you know, I think it's certainly uneven, in how many advocates there are in different places in the United States, certainly more in big cities. There's a wonderful group that I'm a member of called COPAA: Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates. And that's a good way to find advocates in different locations around the country. Wrightslaw has a website with a lot of great information and it also has a yellow pages for kids, which lists different advocates all over the country. And then many of us who do advocacy, including the advocates in my group, are available to do long distance advocacy in places where parents might not readily find an advocate or might not readily find an advocate with expertise in a particular type of student.

So, you know, there are options for parents even if there are not local advocates that they can tap into. But to go to your other question, what, you know, what do we do as advocates? Um, we are, first of all, we are experts in special education,

meaning experts both in what the law says, experts in what school options are, experts in what school IEP teams should be doing. And we really work towards collaboration with those teams. So we believe there's good people on the other side of the table. And you know, we are trying to get that team to focus on this one individual child and how we can make a difference for that child so that they're working towards realizing their potential. So to go on with our process, in order to become true experts about the individual child, we do a thorough record review.

We always observe the child in the classroom whenever possible. And the only caveat to that is if we're doing long distance advocacy and may not have a chance to go to that location, but we always like to observe the child. We speak with all professionals that are involved to get their different perspectives. And that includes both the professionals in the school, the teachers, the counselors, special educator, also professionals that parents may have involved with the child outside of the school; the therapist, the tutor, the ADHD coach. Whoever's involved, we want their perspective. And then finally we speak to the greatest expert about the child and that's the parent. So we sit down with the parent after we've gathered all that other information that I described and we ask additional questions of the parents. We share what we're seeing, what we're thinking is the best way forward.

And we come out of that meeting with a plan for what does the child need in terms of an individualized plan, whether it be a 504 or an IEP, are the services that they need available in their current school, can we tweak the current plan so it meets the child's needs? Do we need to be looking for a different public program or possibly a different private program? Either either one that the schools will fund or, or in some cases the parents will pay for privately. And I think the most important thing an advocate does, and this is uh, really the, the crux of our work, is coming to the meetings to make sure that the teams are working in the best interests of the child and are, um, putting the things in place in the plan that will really help the child to realize their potential.

Debbie: How do schools react or respond to your presence in those meetings? Like as you were describing the work that you do, I was thinking yeah you guys are like the A team, the heavies, you know, you bring that extra support and the, the experts. Do you ever find that there is resistance to hear your perspective or do you find that schools in general are really open to the expertise that you're bringing to a meeting?

Rich: It's a great question and it is, um, it's a mixed bag and it requires a lot of skill on the part of the advocate to be accepted by the school. And I can say from being on the other side of the table from being a special ed administrator, teacher, nobody really looks forward to an advocate coming into the meeting because there's fear that the advocate will be demanding, will be adversarial, will accuse the school staff of not doing what they need to do. Will you know, scrutinize what they're doing to an extent that it will be uncomfortable. So our job as advocates, at least in the Weinfeld Education Group, the way we approach it is we strive to be collaborative. We, we are going into those meetings, not to be adversarial, but to be a member, another member of the team who may have some expertise that

others on the team don't have in terms of what interventions may work, what the law says about what needs to be done for the child, what options may be out there.

And we're trying to really become one member of that collaborative team working in the best interest of the child and really get that meeting to be a problem solving meeting that focuses on the best possible plan for the child. So we want to work very hard, you know, to answer your question, very hard to remove that, that fear, to remove, you know, you used the word heavy. We don't want to be seen as the heavy, we want to be seen as a helpful individual who, who really is adding to the process. And I'd say by and large we're successful with that, certainly not always. And sometimes we do go up against, um, situations where it does become adversarial. But we, we absolutely do our best to avoid that.

Debbie: Well, I would imagine that, and tell me if this, if this is incorrect, but that a lot of people reach out to you when they're feeling like they're not getting the answers or the support that they need on their own. So I, is that correct? Or when is it that you find most people reach out to you in need of an advocate?

Rich: Yeah, I think, you know, I think we're contacted at every step along the way. Certainly our ideal client would be someone who contacts us early when they're just getting into the, the process. Just wondering whether or not their child may need something more or different, whether their child may be eligible for a 504 or IEP. But you're right, most often, all of us react when we're in crisis. And so often we get calls from parents when they're unhappy, when they feel like the schools aren't listening, when they want option A and the school is offering option B.

One of the things that we tell parents up front is when you work with us, you're, you're hiring an expert, as I said before, and that means we may have come to a conclusion about what's best for the child that's different than what the parent who's calling us initially is thinking is best for the child. And we always check with the parent, are you, are you okay working with someone who actually may give you a different opinion than you think is right for the child right now? And you know, 99.9% of parents say, oh, absolutely. What we want is what's best for our child. And of course, even though I'm thinking option A right now, if you, if you, if you come up with a different option, we want to be open to that and we, you know, we want to hear from your expertise what's best.

Debbie: So you talked about part of your role being aware of what the law requires. And I know that last year, I believe it was maybe 2017 in the US, the Supreme Court ruled, had a ruling *Endrew F. v Douglas County School District*, specifically about IEPs. Can you tell us a little bit about that decision and how that has impacted your work?

Rich: Yes, that's a great topic. We were, you know, as advocates for special needs students, we were, we were extremely happy with the decision which came down in March of 2017 and it was a unanimous decision, which was wonderful. And the way I think about the decision is in three major topics, one is progress,

one is the unique child and one is parental input. So I'll talk a little bit about each of those. The main thrust of the decision was about progress. Um, the court made it very clear that progress must be more than de minimis or you know, another way to say it is more than minimal progress. Up until that point there was debate and different decisions across the country about was it okay for a student to just barely passing classes or barely be passing a couple of classes? And the Supreme Court was very clear that, no, that is not enough, that we must expect greater progress than that.

And, and so that has been a major step forward for students with special needs. So now we, we as advocates, every step of the way of what we do, we are looking for measurable progress for these students. Related to that is Supreme Court emphasized the importance of looking at the unique child. So not making, you know, boilerplate plans that try to fit all or most students, but really looking at one child at a time. And part of that equation, and we're looking at their strengths, weaknesses, and I was very gratified and excited to see the word potential in the decision. So in order to know what a, what a child is capable of, we must understand what their potential is. So an appropriate goal, an appropriate level of services, an appropriate expectation of progress for one student is not the same as for another student because each, each child has, has different potential. That particularly is significant. It's significant for all kids, but it has a great sort of significance for the twice exceptional students that we were talking about before. So for these students, the progress that we would expect when they have appropriate programming would be very great because of their wonderful cognitive potential.

And then the last area that I mentioned is parental input. The Supreme Court was very clear that it's not just the school officials who are responsible for making these individual plans for students, it's the parents as part of the team and they must have meaningful input. And um, that is part of our role now as advocates as well is to make sure that parents are having that meaningful input. And the Supreme Court used the words cogent and responsive to talk about, when the school officials are telling parents what their decision is, that it can't be simplistic, it can't be, um, here's the decision kind of take it or leave it. It must be responsive, there must be an explanation, parents' questions must be answered. So that's another thing as advocates that we are, we are making sure that those kind of cogent, responsive, uh, explanations are forthcoming from the schools and school districts.

Debbie: Well, thank you for explaining that ruling and it's really helpful. You mentioned the word potential and I was just wondering with regards to gifted kids with disabilities, this is something that we experienced when we were in the school system and I hear from lots of parents how challenging it can be when a child is performing fine, but we know that they're not reaching their potential. But it can be hard to, to demonstrate that based on the metrics that a school might be using. So did this ruling impact, you know, the possibility to get twice exceptional kids more services or maybe qualify for IEPs when they maybe wouldn't have before? Or what are your thoughts on those special considerations?

Rich: I think that this ruling, Endrew F., will ultimately have a great impact on twice exceptional students. And we're already starting to see it. I, I've been involved in, uh, some due process hearings, you know, along with attorneys, where I serve as an expert witness. And in those hearings we've made the point about twice exceptional students that because of this student's great strengths, because of their cognitive ability, they are capable of greater progress than another student might be capable of, so we must set the bar higher for those students. And we've prevailed in in several cases where administrative law judges have paid attention to the fact that Endrew F. calls for us to look at the potential of the unique student, whereas at least in one of those cases, initially the administrative law judge had ruled otherwise. But then we revisited the case on the basis of Endrew F. So we're very, very hopeful and optimistic based on that. It also comes into play with eligibility. So whereas a, a child performing close to grade level might be seen as doing good enough if all we're looking at is the grade level, when we look at the unique student and the potential of the student, then we see for, for many students that that's where the gap is. And that's where the student is really not working anywhere near what they're capable of. So Endrew F. has given us some real clear ammunition to, to advocate for twice exceptional students.

Debbie: So, okay. I want to shift to the parent questions that I've gotten, or caregiver questions. And you're not prepared for any of these, I'm just going to throw them at you and we'll see you know, if there's some you're like, you know, that's not really in my area of expertise, that's totally fine. But, um I think -

Rich: I'll do my best, I'll do my best.

Debbie: And the first one I wanted to ask you is actually tied to what you were just talking about. One of the parents wants to know, how do you know when you're beyond parent or professional advocacy and need legal representation?

Rich: Yeah, that, uh, not a clear cut answer for that. You know, I certainly, um, some parents go to attorneys before they go to advocates because they feel like there's been an infraction of the law or you know, they want to bring in someone who they feel will be more threatening to the, to the school team. Um, in my practice I would say 80 to 90% of our cases do not involve attorneys and we're able to get what kids need in terms of their interventions, in terms of services, programming, by working in a collaborative way with the school team. And then in the 10 to 20% of the cases where we hit the wall, where we see that the school team is not responding and compromise is, is either not possible or it's not what the child needs then then we advise the parents to bring in an attorney because we've gone as far as we can as advocates.

So, you know, just just as a word of advice to parents, in most cases you're going to still be in that school after the IEP meeting and you want to maintain your relationships and you want to have as positive a relationship as you possibly can with with all the school staff. So whether it's an advocate or an attorney, you want that meeting to be as collaborative as possible. Even if you've had some problems or some things that you don't think have gone right, you want to try and mend those differences rather than exacerbate those differences. Just

something to think about as whether it's an attorney or an advocate, you want to make sure the approach is going to be as collaborative and as positive as possible.

Debbie: Yeah, absolutely. So, okay, the next question I just want to, before I ask it, also just note that whereas most of our listeners are in the U.S., we also have a lot of international listeners. And so obviously the systems are different and how they handle kids with different abilities varies. So this would be more of a best practices question. And this is one that came up several times in the Facebook posts. So how, do you have any best practices surrounding educating schools that behaviors, disruptive behaviors, are driven by a child's disabilities rather than the fact that they're just bad kids or they're not being parented well?

Rich: Well, I do think the way we approach behavior, you know, as, as advocates and you know, when I say advocates that's parents that hopefully is school staff as well. We've got to look beyond the surface behavior and, and talk about, you know, what is the function of the behavior? Where, you know, where does it come from? And almost in every case we can find that function. It's often related to academics. It's often related to the child struggling in some way with what's being presented during the school day. Um, so it often drives us to look at an intervention, uh, another reading intervention that we haven't tried, another writing intervention. It also may be driven by a differently wired child. So maybe the child's ADHD or autism that is really the precursor for the behavior.

So we need to look in every case, look beyond the behavior and say, you know, what is driving it and what can we do proactively to put things in place so that number one, the behavior won't happen. And then number two, what skills does the child need to be taught so that the behavior won't continue to happen? For example, a student with autism who in social situations is showing, uh, a behavior that's disruptive or negative to the environment. Often the answer there is to teach the child to improve their social skills, which is a hallmark of the disability and which, you know, the child may very well be lacking. So not to assume that the child has the skills but to look at where might there be a hole in the skills that is then leading to this, uh, inappropriate behavior.

Debbie: Any thoughts on how to even have that initial conversation? You know, if a teacher is getting feedback that's focused on just the behavior and the parent wants to convey yes, and this behavior is stemming from these underlying things that are going on with the way my child's wired. You know, I'm sure you come across teachers who don't, that it wouldn't be their first, you know, guess or that this is something that's rooted in a disability. So any, I don't know, just any thoughts on how to even have that initial -

Rich: Yeah, I think it goes back to collaboration. How, how can parents first of all approach the teachers as a partner? So yes, I'm upset as a parent about this behavior too, of course I don't want my child behaving like that. Let's, how can we work together to look at, you know, when does the behavior happen? What might be causing it? What can we do different in the environment that might help the child? What skills do they need to learn? Here's some things I've tried at home that, you know, seem to be working and you know, might that be

something you can try in the classroom? But, but again, approaching it as, as a partner rather than an adversary. And I know that's hard to do, especially if you're, you feel like you're being blamed as a parent or your child is being blamed for the behavior and they shouldn't be.

And that and that also is where an advocate can come in and be helpful. So to have a third person who is a professional, who is an expert, come into the situation do an observation and then be able to sit down with the teacher. And first of all acknowledge that, I can see how that behavior is very disruptive and how, you know, that would be very frustrating to you as a teacher to have that behavior going on. Now let's look at what are some ways that we can work to change that behavior and again, be proactive, teach skills that, that are going to change behavior. So I hope that's helpful.

Debbie: Yeah, and it's also, it's just, it's actually how we want to parent too, right? We want to connect and empathize and then we want to move on to collaborative problem solving. So I guess it's just a good way to collaborate with any human, right.

Rich: I agree. I agree.

Debbie: So this parent wants to know how to handle a group of educators at an IEP meeting who expect the parents to provide them with the plan for how to educate your child. I know I, for me as a parent, I was always like, but you're the one with the master's in education. I'm relying on you to tell me what to do. But a lot of us feel like we're expected to come up with the solutions.

Rich: Interesting. I would say that happens less with an advocate in the picture because I think the, that's a positive thing about bringing an advocate is the school will tend to put its best foot forward, rise to the occasion and, and know that they have to come in with, with a plan. And so maybe they'll be more likely to engage some of their school district experts to help support them. And that's, that's often a solution is that the expertise may not be in the local school, but maybe it's somewhere else in the school district, at the central office or in a special program that's located in another school.

You know, another way to think about the, your question is it's also an opportunity. So if the school is, is asking you for your expertise, that is a chance for you to make suggestions. And you know, if you feel at a loss to make those suggestions, which I think many parents would, you know, again, that's a chance to reach out to experts, whether it be an advocate or a therapist or behavioral coach, whether they be in your own community or, or you know, or at a distance. But, um, I would, I would jump into that opening and say, you know, I would love to make some suggestions and you know, here, here are some suggestions.

Debbie: What if, as part of that we want to encourage the school administration to get further professional development for their teachers and staff to better understand their neurodiverse students - how do we start that conversation? Like, is that something that we could just suggest, hey, in case you want to have a

learning opportunity for staff, here are some suggestions of people to bring in. Like, is that seen as an insult or is that something that we can try to facilitate?

Rich: I think it's a, it's a great thing to suggest. Again, going back to that, you know, collaborative conversation, it all depends on how you do it. You know, so I think some parents can do it in what's perceived as a heavy handed way, where it's, you know, I want you to bring this person in and they're the expert and they were assuming the schools don't have the expertise and that can be very off putting. But again, in working as a partner, I, you know, I know, I know what you're experiencing with my child is difficult. I'm having difficulty at home too. Is there someone in the school district who we could call in? Um, here's some people in the community that I know could be helpful. How can we work together to make this happen?

One thing that's not widely understood about the IEP process is part of that process is a consideration of what training needs to happen in the school to help this individual child. So that's something that can be written into an IEP plan, specific training that's needed by school staff to help them to work more effectively with the child. That's, that's a way I would use the process. But, but again, I really encourage it to be in a collaborative way.

Debbie: Right. Collaboration, building alliances, seems to be key here.

Rich: Yeah, definitely a theme. And I think you know, a very worthwhile thing.

Debbie: So one of the parents on my website was asking about paraprofessionals and I know that you support families who have autistic kids who might need more paraprofessional support, full time or part time aide in the classroom. I know that's something that at one point we were hoping to get written into an IEP but did not happen because I know that it's very expensive. Um, any suggestions on how to push for, request, or get a school to even consider the expense related to a paraprofessional?

Rich: It is a, it is a tough, a tough one because it is very expensive, but you know, the law requires us to strive to educate students in the least restrictive environment. And of course what's least restrictive for one student is not the same as what's least restrictive for another student. And so, you know, for some students we are talking about a special class within, within a neighborhood school. For some students, we're talking about a classroom placement in a different school or, or a special school throughout the day. But one argument for a paraprofessional is to keep the child in the least restrictive environment. So that that is something that, um, we want to consider, you know, is it, is it less restrictive to have the child stay in their current class and have a, an adult with them for part or all of the day? And in those kind of decisions it also may be more economical for the school district to provide that paraprofessional than to pay for a special school. So in the context of really looking at all options that might work for the child and really considering that least restrictive environment, um, that we're striving for with kids, I think that's where the discussion and the paraprofessional becomes, um, you know, more possible.

Debbie: Okay. Awesome. So, okay, I want to just be conscious of time. Are you doing okay to answer a few more or?

Rich: Sure, sure. I love it.

Debbie: Okay. One parent wanted to know if you're moving to a smaller school system that offers fewer services and options, is it appropriate to expect just as much from a small school system as a larger one?

Rich: So a couple things that question makes me think of. One is that there is a responsibility in the United States that if you're moving from one school district to another and the child already has an IEP, that IEP has to be implemented by the new school district to the best of their ability. Um, once they get to know the child better, they they would convene a meeting and you know, make changes or make recommendations to the parent for changes that they think are appropriate. But, but as a child moves in from another district, there is a responsibility to provide the services that the child needs. That and that often is commensurate services that were provided in the last school district. To dive in, dive in a little more to the question though, you know, is it reasonable to expect the same services from the district? It shouldn't be about the district. It should really be about the child. And it also shouldn't be about the services. It should really be about what the child needs, if you follow what I'm saying there.

So the goal, the goal shouldn't be to get x amount of services. The goal should be to help the child to access his education and make measurable progress and work towards realizing his potential. So that, that might look differently in different schools. Say, you know, in one school that might be 45 minutes of speech services and another school that might be an hour and a half of speech services. And in the school where it's 45 minutes, maybe the counselor is providing some other service that really meets the child's needs. And it does not necessarily have to be from a speech pathologist. So I, I would just encourage parents not to be rigid about thinking about the services, the amount of minutes of service, but more thinking about what's going to work for my child and that that can look differently in different schools.

Debbie: I love that answer. It's kind of like if you're dating somebody new, you know, it's about how you feel dating that person, not how they compare to the other person, right?

Rich: Good analogy.

Debbie: I don't know why that popped into my head but, there you go. So, okay. Um, this is kind of an interesting question. Just curious to hear your take on it. How do you get the school to take responsibility for the child's daily meltdowns after leaving school due to having no downtime? They wrote that school refuse an IEP due to straight A's and basically said that what happens outside the school is not their responsibility. Any thoughts on that?

Rich: So what I'm, what I'm understanding from that question, and maybe you can help me with it, what I'm understanding is the child does not have an IEP. They're having to work very hard to maintain their academic progress and good grades. And so that's leading to some behavioral problems in school. Is that, is that what?

Debbie: That's what I'm getting from it too, yeah.

Rich: Yeah. So I, you know, I, again, there's a few different things to possibly unpack in that question, um, why is the child working so, so hard outside of school? Is, you know, is straight A's really the right goal for that child? And you know, is there too much, is there too much pressure, is there too much stress about the grades? But, um, I'd also want to think about was the school correct to deny the IEP? So is, did the school just look at grades, which certainly is one criteria for looking at whether a child is, is needing an IEP or not, how are they doing grade wise? But we also want to look at many other factors as well. You know, we want to look at, um, you know, their experience of the school day, their own feelings of adequacy, depression and anxiety, um, their social skills, their behavior throughout the day and how it may relate to a disability.

So, um, you know, if I was the advocate in that case, I would really want to dig in and say, you know, what is the possible educational disability here? Um, you know, is it ADHD? Is it an emotional disability? Is it autism? And did the school miss that there really is an impact during the school day despite the fact that the child is having good grades? And the other, another piece that the law requires us to look at is how much support is the child getting outside of school in order to get those good grades? Many parents provide tutoring. Many students spend hours and hours outside of school working on, on their homework and are perfectionists and really drive themselves too hard. And so we want to look at the total picture before we decide, does the child possibly have an educational disability, which requires some type of special program during the day?

And, and again, the question seems to indicate the parent thinks the child should have some type of support during the day. Maybe it's one period a day where they have, uh, uh, what's commonly called a resource room where they can have some study time, get organized, work on some of the study skills and organizational skills that they may be lacking or, or have some time to deal with their anxiety or their obsessiveness about doing all their work and doing it to the nth degree. So as an advocate, I'd want to really dig deeper into, um, look at the assessments that have been done, look at what that disability might be and really, really look harder at how that might be impacting during the school day.

Debbie: Good answer. Good answer. Um, this is a very nuanced question. I think it's interesting because I think it's something that probably a lot of parents are dealing with or their kids are struggling with, but it's, I can see why she asked it because it's not clear cut what you'd even ask for. So she, I'm assuming it's a she, um, might be a he, um, was asking what to ask of schools in the area of rewards. For example, you know, a lot of schools have, well she described it as pointless tracking systems, but you know, you know, you get a star for reading x number of pages every day and there are a lot of students who won't do that because they

see it as being a pointless exercise. Or she also talked about, you know, there are awards for attendance and a lot of kids with IEPs might, that might be an impossibility for them to have perfect attendance because they're being pulled out for therapy or they have other things outside of school. So this parent is wanting to know how or what should we be asking for in school systems when there are kind of these reward systems that seem to penalize our students because of the way that they're wired or the, the extra supports that they need.

Rich: Yeah. So my mind goes in a couple directions with that question. You know, one is, is just, um, best practices of teaching and best practices of behavioral management in school. And you know, and having a dialogue with schools about how, you know, maybe this plan that works for a majority of the students doesn't work for some of the students and what could we do to, to modify that plan for this, for these students where they're not responding. The other place my mind goes is for students who are having any kind of behavioral challenges in school that is getting in their way then we want to develop an individualized behavior plan. Um, what's commonly called a behavior intervention plan for that student. And, and there we want to look at what is the behavior, what are the antecedents of the behavior, what are the functions of behavior, and then what things can we put in place that are going to lead to more positive behaviors. So, you know, if, if it's in fact a student who's really, um, having significant challenges with the current rewards, then um, it's clear that we have to have a specific individualized behavior plan for that student.

Debbie: Okay. Great. Okay, one last question and then we're going to talk about the conference that is coming up in April. I want to make sure that listeners are aware of that. So, um, this listener wants to know, what resources have you found best to educate school communities about twice exceptional kids?

Rich: I love that question. So, um, the, the field of twice exceptional education has, has really been blossoming and growing over the past I'd say 30 years. And, um, when I got the job as director of services for twice exceptional students in Montgomery County, the first thing I did is look for the experts. And I would say all roads point to Doctor Susan Baum, B-a-u-m, who was really the pioneer in this field. And she has some great books and articles and she's still very active, uh, working at Bridges Academy in Los Angeles, um, and consulting with the school when also leading graduate studies for professionals in the area twice exceptional. So I would, I would definitely, definitely look there. There is a wonderful national organization that I used to be on the board of called Aegus, a-e-g-u-s, which holds conferences, the members also publish great information, uh, books, articles about twice exceptional students.

I'll mention my book again, *Smart Kids With Learning Difficulties*, which is based on our work in Montgomery County schools and talks about the best practices for educating twice exceptional students, what we found to be true in working with these students in schools and also what the literature says about these kids. And I would say number one on that list of best practices is to pay attention to and really develop and nurture the strengths so that that's where, um, you know, in one sentence where I would really put my, um, my attention as someone who wants to learn how to work with twice exceptional.

Debbie: All right. Thank you for those resources. And uh, I will have them on the show notes pages and I just have to say I'm actually getting to visit Bridges next month and I'm going to meet Susan. I'm really excited to check out what they're doing.

Rich: Say Hello for me. She's wonderful.

Debbie: I will. I will. So, okay, so coming up in April is the Diamonds in the Rough Conference, which, humble brag, I am keynoting, I'm super excited about the event.

Rich: We're, we're very excited to have you.

Debbie: But can you tell us about the conference, who it's for and how listeners can learn more about attending?

Rich: Yes. So, uh, this is our annual conference Diamonds in the Rough and it focuses on teaching both professionals and parents, uh, strategies for working with special needs students. And it's also a wonderful networking opportunity come together with other parents, other professionals. There'll be a wonderful exhibit hall with special schools that serve these students with a variety of different kinds of special services for working with these students. The conference is two days in April, April 12th and 13th. On Friday, April the 12th, we will focus on professionals. Dr. David Black will be giving a continuing education talk aimed at professionals talking about successfully launching students at every stage. We hear a lot about failure to launch and um, actually both days of the conference are going to focus on how do we prepare students to become independent, to eventually leave us and live successfully beginning with the transition to kindergarten. And we uh, Dr. Black will talk about all of the different transitions and kind of the common themes that run through them. Then on Saturday we'll have you Debbie talking to parents about this topic. And then throughout the day we'll have a variety of different workshops that focus on different ages and stages, different disabilities and you know, how best to prepare our children to become successful independent adults.

Debbie: Yeah. So I'm really excited about the event and it takes place in Rockville, Maryland. So if people are in that part of the country, um, definitely see if this is something you can make. I would love to meet you there and I'll have a link to the conference website also on the show notes page and on the events page at Tilt Parenting and on our Facebook page. So definitely check that out and wow, we covered a lot today. I'm thank you for sticking with me and uh, allowing me to bombard you with all of these random questions, but it's so helpful and I think these are the kinds of things like we all are dealing with in our own homes and it's so nice to just hear this expert feedback and you have so much experience in this area. It's super helpful. So thank you so much for sharing today.

Rich: I loved being here and um, if I can just point out one other resource real quickly, if, if folks would like to visit our website, it's weinfeldeducationgroup.com and one of the things you'll see there is we've developed a graduate level course. It's an online course that people can take self paced that really hits on the topics that

we're talking about today, how to, how to be an effective advocate, how the IEP is developed, the 504 is developed, how to work collaboratively with teams. So I hope you'll, your listeners will consider that as well.

Debbie: Awesome. Well thank you. Thank you again for the time today and I look forward to seeing you in person next month.

Rich: I look forward to it too, and thanks again for having me today.

RESOURCES MENTIONED:

- [Weinfeld Education Group](#)
- [Diamonds in the Rough Conference](#)
- [Advocating for Students: The Special Education Process and Beyond](#) (online course)
- [From Assessment to Advocacy Workshop](#) (March 1 at Chesapeake College, Maryland)
- [School Success for Kids with High Functioning Autism](#) by Rich Weinfeld
- [Smart Kids with Learning Difficulties: Overcoming Obstacles and Realizing Potential](#) by Rich Weinfeld
- [Helping Boys Succeed in School](#) by Rich Weinfeld
- [School Success for Student's with Asperger's Syndrome](#) by Rich Weinfeld
- [Special Needs Advocacy Resource Book](#) by Rich Weinfeld
- [Andrew F. Case Decided: Supreme Court Rules on How Much Benefit IEPs Must Provide](#)(Understood)
- [Montgomery Public Schools](#)
- [COPAA \(Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates\)](#)
- [Wrightslaw Special Education and Advocacy](#)
- [Dr. Susan Baum](#)
- [Bridges Academy](#)