

## LP SCHOOL ISSUES

*Contributed by Vita Gagne*

Keeping things simple is the very best way to make your LP child's school life easier. Keep in mind that the less special equipment that surrounds your child, the more that child will be perceived as a "regular kid" by the other students.

When discussing your child with any school official, most of all, remember this is "just dwarfism" and you already have a very capable child. How the school officials treat your child's case can occasionally depend on how you present your child. You are your child's best advocate.

Nine months before your LP child will start kindergarden, contact your local superintendent to discuss how to proceed. Some school districts will want the parent to contact the school that the child will attend. Each school district runs things a bit differently, so there is no one formula that can be passed on here, but start with the superintendent's office anyway. A meeting will be set up to establish a 504/IEP, but before that happens, the parents should tour the local school with their child in tow to see if the school's setup can work for their child and what changes might be reasonable. A one-level school or one with an elevator or ramps is better than a school with many stairs.

Accommodations that are cheap and simple for the school to accomplish will provide the LP student with the needed services and give less hassle to the parents. Come prepared to the very first meeting (even if it's with the superintendent's office) with a list of ideas for adaptations that you feel your child needs -- tell them that these adaptations have been suggested by Little People of America, using the reference above, if necessary.

Be very reasonable about what you put your child's list. No school is going to change the architecture of their auditorium, for instance, so if you find a problem area, think up ideas on your own about how the school can reasonably accommodate your child in this particular area of the school. A few examples of problem issues are listed below and some ideas of how to overcome these issues. Providing the school with a bullet list, instead of long, wordy statements, gives a clearer understanding as to what the environmental adaptations needs are. Suggestions are listed below.

Include your child's necessary adaptations in the child's 504/IEP. A 504 Plan covers only environmental accommodations, and while most LP children have no educational issues, in some states, things like double books, door-to-door bus, possibly a laptop or classroom computer in high school, and adapted PE also require an IEP (Individualized Education Plan). All 504 items can be included in an IEP. A meeting for this should take place each time a child enters a new school. The parent can call additional meetings whenever changes need to be made to the 504/IEP, but yearly 504/IEPs are often not necessary in some school systems. Your school system can tell you their preference -- some automatically do yearly 504/IEPs, whereas other school systems mainly do them only upon starting in a new school, still with the parent being able to call a meeting in between for any changes. The beauty of environmental adaptations are that once done, they can be used for the entire time an LP child remains in that school.

Each year the LP child's parent should meet with the child's teacher ahead of time. This allows the parent to clear up any questions the teacher might have, but also allows open communication between the teacher and parent. Encouraging the teacher to call the parent if there are any further questions is always a good idea.

The ideas below have been used by many LP students over the years, some of them quite disabled, and many of them now successful college graduates. If this gang can get through school easily, so can your child!

There is not one formula that fits all. Some LP children will need more adaptations and some will need less. The list below is meant only as a starting point for working up ideas for your own LP child.

1. Door-to-door busing is the norm. Sometimes an aide or a trusted student can give help getting onto the bus for those with more mobility problems, but a lift is preferable for those LP students. This lift can be placed on the regular neighborhood school bus to avoid added expense to the school system over time. Contact your school district's transportation department long before school starts to see if they are amenable to doing this. If a lift is in place, your child will be picked up first and dropped off last.
2. Each LP student can use a portable seatbelt on the school bus, which goes around the child and the entire seat. This seatbelt is kept on the child's bus specifically for his/her use. Keeping a homemade portable seatbelt in the child's backpack (belt webbing and D-rings) avoids a problem on field trips and/or when the regular bus breaks down. With either one of these seatbelts, the LP student is more secure on the seat and a friend can still sit with him/her.
3. To avoid heavy carrying, a double set of books can be issued to the LP student -- one set is kept at home and the other is kept at school. In middle school and high school when the students change classes, the teacher can keep a copy of their class book in the classroom for the LP to use. The school can send the books home with the student one at a time, or the parent can arrange to pick them all up at one time.
4. A footrest/stepstool to avoid leg dangling can be placed in each classroom, at whatever desk the LP child uses. Often store-bought ones work just fine, so check that out first. The school can get these stepstools made, as long as the parents request it and give the school the appropriate dimensions. Some parents make their own footrests/stepstools because of safety concerns and because sometimes a half-inch can make a difference.
5. Separate desks and chairs are usually more comfortable for LPs than the integral desk/chair types. Every desk the LP uses should be used with appropriately sized footrest/stepstool to avoid leg dangling. It is often the case that LP children are more comfortable with a somewhat higher desk than usually fits the chair height, but this is an individual preference. Most LP children do not want a smaller desk or chair than the other students use, so ask your older child what his/her preference is.
6. If needed, a cushion can be made (at home) to fill in the blank space between the LP child's back and the chair's back. Special chairs are usually only for those LP children with painful back problems. Most LPs with serious spinal issues will be in a back brace and only the cushion will be helpful -- but only if the child finds it helpful, otherwise discontinue

its use. Forget the lunchroom for special chairs, cushions, etc. Keep in mind that just because a school offers to buy a special chair, that doesn't mean that your child needs one. While there are office-type chairs sized for LPs, any "baby" looking chair should be avoided at all costs.

7. Using the Health Room or the principal or teachers' bathroom for self-toileting is always the easiest. If the school does not have a staffed Health Room, the school must make adaptations, similar to those that would be done in a Health Room, to a central bathroom that the LP child can use. The stall door lock can be lowered on one stall in a centrally located bathroom, and an additional low handle to open the stall door can be installed.

Health Rooms usually have a regular doorknob, which always works better for any LP than a high handle, and in a Health Room, there is usually adult help if it is needed. A regular door knob can be replaced with a lever handle and extended further by a fat shoestring-and-bead loop for smaller LPs. If necessary, a set of toilet arm rails (NOT ones on the wall) can be placed at whichever toilet the LP will use (cost to the school is about \$50). A handicapped toilet (usually 20 inches high) is NOT appropriate, but a regular sized toilet can be used with an appropriately-sized accompanying stepstool and the arm rails. Platform type stepstools are most useful because the LP child can deal with his/her clothes on the platform -- often one of those store-bought "aerobic steps" works well.

The student can either bring along his/her own dressing stick and bottom-wiper in their backpack or keep these items in the Health Room. For younger or smaller LPs, a stepstool similar to the one they use at home should be kept in the school bathroom. Small bottles of hand sanitizer can be used instead of fiddling with the school sink.

8. Young kindergarden and elementary school LP children can have a helper assigned to them each day to walk at their speed in the halls, help with heavy doors, and in the lunchroom, etc. To avoid arguments among the other students, the teacher should help with this assignment until the LP child feels comfortable using only a few of his/her own trusted friends.
9. Depending on how the LP's age and how mobile the LP is, some arrangements must be made for fire emergencies. More mobile LP children probably wouldn't need any help in leaving the building in an emergency, but others with more mobility problems are more likely to require assistance, especially in a multi-level school. For a one-level school, this assistance might not be necessary for most LP students.
10. If the school is a multi-level one and has an elevator, the LP student needs an elevator key, possibly with an extension lever, and perhaps a reacher to use on the inside buttons (pencils often work fine for this).
11. The parents should list on the Health Form any health issues, orthopedic hardware, breathing problems, etc. so that any emergency rescue team will have that information available. Contact numbers for parents are essential and those of doctors are also helpful.
12. If the LP student has trouble with writing long in-class assignments or tests, the school can provide a computer/word processor either in the classroom or elsewhere in the school for the student to use. Extra time can be given on tests such as math where a computer isn't helpful.

13. In junior high and high school, lockers are usually used by the students. A locker can have the lock disengaged and a hasp added lower down (and used with a regular combination lock), if need be. Any shelves and coat hooks in the locker can be moved to a lower down position. Usually once this is done, the LP student uses that locker for the entire time they are at that particular school.
14. Lab courses usually require a taller, perhaps multi-step, stepstool for the LP student to reach the lab tables. A lab partner will most likely be assigned anyway and if there is any problem with hand manipulation by the LP student, that can be dealt with by the teacher. Lab tests will require the teacher's assistance if the LP student is required to work independently.
15. Art classes are another consideration for size. Forget high stools for art class. Instead, have a suitably sized desk/table and chair provided for your child. The LP student can help with clean-up NOT by trying to wash brushes in a too-tall sink, but rather do other clean-up jobs determined by the teacher. The LP can and should participate in such chores.
16. LPs are often exempt from any required physical education courses in the upper grades, but it should be left up to the student and the parents if and how he/she will participate in PE. If exempt, during the PE times, the LP student can work in the school office or just take another class. Elementary school children usually get some adapted PE to suit their abilities.
17. Each semester, a "fact sheet" can be placed in the pertinent teachers' mailboxes which will list these things and anything else the family wishes the teachers to know. This keeps the school abreast of any changing needs and avoids having to redo the 504/IEP each year. As mentioned above, before entering a new school, the parents and student should meet with the principal to allow the school to become familiar with their needs and write a new 504/IEP for that school.

### ***Examples of Problem Areas in Schools:***

If a school is filled with stairs and has no elevator or ramps, arrange to send your child to another, preferably one-level, school close to your home school area. The school system will probably suggest this, even if you don't. Usually the parents get to pick the school, in such cases, and maybe you'll find an even better academic program for your child. Your child gets a bus, no matter which school is involved. In any case, make the other-school arrangement long before your child starts in any new school.

For those LPs who can't do steps, a high school auditorium with steps might have to be accessed through the orchestra pit and/or have chairs provided at the back of the auditorium for your LP and his/her friends. The same goes for any viewing platforms for sporting events.

Forget heavy doors. Most LPs do not weigh enough to open heavy school doors until they are in middle school or beyond. The only door your child has to be able to open is the bathroom stall door. Automatic doors are never a necessity, just an added convenience.

Forget water fountains if a stepstool near the fountain does not work. Instead have your child keep a cup in his/her backpack so a friend can fetch the water.

(Reference: Gagne, V., "Parental Matters: LP School Issues," *LPA Today*, Vol 38, No. 5, pp 12-13, 2002.)

Forget bathroom sinks. Small bottles of hand sanitizer or individual packets of cleansing cloths are better anyway -- there are germs in there, you know! :o)

Forget any suggestions of personal in-school PT or OT. These things are better left to after school hours, by someone who knows LPs.

*Special note:* School districts often assign an OT specialist from the Special Education Department whose purpose is to make sure the requested adaptations get done and to suggest others that might be helpful. Parents need to work very closely with this OT person since the parent is the real "pro" at what their LP child needs.

As a parent, you are your child's advocate. On first reading, the information above might sound like a lot of stuff and quite a hassle, but it really isn't. As mentioned before, once you discover what adaptations work best for your child and they get installed in a particular school, they are good for the entire time your child attends that school -- and these same adaptations can be made at the next school your child attends. Best of luck to all!