

Handout 4

Action Steps for Parents of Children with Disabilities



Disproportionality in special education based on race or ethnicity is of obvious concern to anyone who cares about education. We are all stakeholders in what our children learn, how they are treated at school, and what they achieve now and in the future. Yet, far too often, children with disabilities experience different treatment in school and achieve disproportionately lower outcomes. This is especially for those from racial or ethnic minority groups.

What can stakeholders—especially minority parents of children with disabilities—do to help address, reduce, and (best case!) eliminate this decades-old problem? Here are numerous suggestions and possible action steps that stakeholders can take.

First Steps: What Parents of Children with Disabilities Can Do

If you are new to the world of special education, you first will need to learn about that world, its special vocabulary and processes, how it supports educating students with disabilities, and how it can support your own child's education.

- **Learn about special education.** It helps in all regards to be informed about the process used in your state (and school) to identify children as having a disability. Learn, too, how decisions are made about *where* students with disabilities will receive their special education and related services (called *placement*). What about how students with disabilities are disciplined at school? What does your state permit? What does federal law permit? *Not* permit?



Where can you learn this? The two best resources to consult are: (1) your state's Parent Center, funded expressly to support and inform parents of children with disabilities; and (2) your state's department of special education, where you can likely find guidelines for parents about state policies and practices for special education. Find your Parent Center at:

<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/find-your-center/>

- **Learn about IDEA, the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.** This federal law is often a critical ally for parents of children with disabilities. It lays out your rights as a parent. It spells out what schools must do when they identify, evaluate, place, educate, and discipline students with disabilities. It also includes what schools are *not* permitted to do.

Where can you learn this? The Parent Center serving your state or area is your best resource, now and throughout your child's education. You can also visit the website of the Center for Parent Information and Resources (CPIR), where you'll find easy-to-read descriptions in English and in Spanish of IDEA's requirements for IEPs, placements, and permissible discipline of students with disabilities. Start with this page at CPIR: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/idea/>

- **Be involved in your child’s special education.** Attend IEP meetings. Be an active participant there, asking questions, offering suggestions, informing the team about your child, especially his or her strengths and needs. You are an equal member of the IEP team, and you have invaluable insights to share about your son or daughter.

Where can you learn more about this? Your Parent Center, of course! It offers web-based and in-person training to parents on how to be an active participant in all things IEP. Also at CPIR, starting here: <http://www.parentcenterhub.org/iep/>

- **Learn about what’s needed to support your child’s education in the regular classroom.** Learn about the accommodations and modifications appropriate for students with your child’s disability. Advocate for these to be included in your child’s IEP and provided in the classroom. Know the law’s LRE provisions, which strongly support your child’s placement in the regular education classroom.

Where can you learn this? Your Parent Center is an excellent place to start. You’ll also want to visit the websites of disability organizations specializing in your child’s disability. And, for basic information, try these two resources at CPIR:

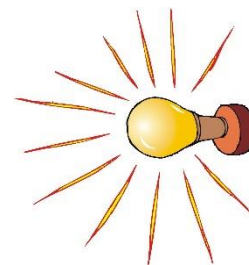
—Supports, Modifications, and Accommodations for Students
<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/accommodations/>

—Considering LRE in Placement Decisions
<http://www.parentcenterhub.org/placement-lre/>

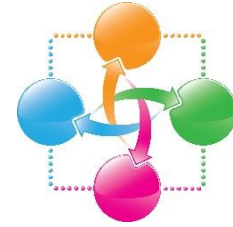
Step 2: Take Action about Disproportionality in Special Education

Now that you have the basics of special education process under your belt, you’re prepared to participate *meaningfully* in how your state, district, and school address disproportionality. Try the suggestions below as stepping stones to become involved in addressing disproportionality in your state.

- **Learn about disproportionality issues in your area.** Is disproportionality going on in your school, community, district, state? Find out what your school system’s policies and practices are for preventing, detecting, and addressing disproportionality. Does the school system monitor its data to identify disproportionality that involves students with disabilities from specific racial or ethnic minority groups? Has your school system or state ever been identified as having a significant amount of disproportionality in special education? These questions must be individually answered. It’s difficult to suggest resources of where to identify such specific information, save perhaps your state/local Parent Center or the reporting to the public that your state department of education is required to do.



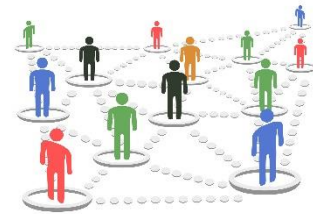
- **Become active in committees and advisory councils in special education.** There are many advisory groups and school committees with which parents, parent leadership groups, and community organizations can become involved, locally and in the state. Examples include the PTO or PTA (parent-teacher associations), PACs (Parent Advisory Committees), CACs (Citizens Advisory Councils), and disability-specific groups (such as local or state chapters of national-level organizations that specialize in a specific disability such as learning disabilities or autism).



The Parent Center serving your area is likely to have a list they can share with you. Attend school board meetings. Attend public meetings that deal with disproportionality, special education, or the interests of minority groups. Listen. Take notes. Jot down names of potential contacts. Speak up, too! And share what you've learned with the networks you're building with others.

- **Don't be shy about bringing up disproportionality to school leaders and administrators.** Meet with your school administrators or staff who may be able to answer your questions. Talk with them about the effects of disproportionality and ways to address the problem. Ask what you and others can do that would be helpful to the school or its staff. Take notes. Share what you learn with other stakeholders.

- **Offer to organize/host/be involved in school cultural events.** As communities, it's important for all of us to learn about and embrace different cultures, especially those within our immediate community and school environment. Whatever you can do in this regard is helpful.



- **Connect with advocacy groups.** Your Parent Center can help you identify local and state advocacy groups associated with disproportionality's key issues. Visit their websites. Sign up for their newsletters and announcements of upcoming meetings. Inform them of any relevant news you have to offer.
- **Contact, and meet with, local officials, state-level administrators, and state legislators.** Decisions about how your state and its school districts will address disproportionality are being made right now at the state and local levels. Meet with decision makers to discuss issues related to inequity in schools, disproportionality in special education, and the post-school consequences for our children with disabilities of not addressing these issues with vigor and determination.

Don't give up! Stand up and speak out!