

# Advocating While Black:

Black Parents' Experiences with  
Special Education in Virginia

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## Black Parents' Experiences with Special Education in Virginia

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## About the Research Partnership

This study was conducted as part of a research partnership between Advocating4Kids Inc. and faculty in Howard University's School of Education Leadership and Policy Studies Department, with the goal of reducing barriers and improving experiences for Black parents and students receiving special education and related services. This project is the second in a partnership established between the study P.I., Dr. Kathryn Wiley, and Advocating4Kids Inc. Director, Mrs. Cheryl Poe, whose organization focuses on serving children with disabilities in the state of Virginia with a specific focus on Black parents and families. This collaboration resulted in an initial report on statewide discipline data in 2023 (Wiley, 2023).



## Acknowledgements

This research has truly been a collective community effort. First, we extend our heartfelt gratitude to the nearly two dozen Black parents who generously shared their experiences. May this report serve as an advocacy tool for Black parents and children and help strengthen special education systems. Your stories bear witness to the inequities and emotional toll of advocating within an unjust system, while also illuminating strategies and hope that inspires others. We would like to thank the organizations who provided financial and/or other resources including the Arc of Virginia, Dignity in Schools, and National Center for Youth Law. We would also like to thank the experts who provided early input into data collection processes, including Mrs. Resha Conroy, Dr. Maria Davis-Pierre, Dr. Shanter H. Alexander, and Mrs. Tania Sotomayor. Finally, we extend our gratitude to Dr. Charles Bell, Dan Losen, Dr. Janice James-Mitchell, and Dr. Tunette Powell for review and feedback on earlier versions of this report.

# Summary of Findings

Interviews conducted with 21 parents who identified as Black or African American who sought special education or related services for their child revealed the following themes;

- 1. Negative and frustrating school experiences:** Overall, the majority of parents interviewed had negative and frustrating experiences interacting with school staff and district officials regarding special education staff.
- 2. School-based challenges included spanned IEP implementation to parent treatment and school discipline:** Black parents experienced the following school-based challenges: (1) Lack of services and inadequate implementation of IEPs (2) Feeling unheard during IEP meetings (3) Frequent adverse disciplinary experiences for their children stemming from IEP or disability related circumstances (4) Schools' failure to comply with parental requests or IEP requirements (5) Racial discrimination and hostility from school staff (6) a lack of school communication.
- 3. Adverse financial, mental, and physical impacts:** From these dynamics, Black parents experienced the following impacts: (1) Work interruptions and employment challenges (2) Costs related to securing outside interventions and services due to challenges accessing services in schools (3) Relocating to find better school options (4) Mental and physical health impacts including anxiety, sleep disruption, and weight gain.
- 4. Black parents employed multiple, tiered advocacy strategies to protect child well being:** To advocate on behalf of their children, Black parents used the following strategies: (1) Seeking information to inform parental decision-making (2) Pursuing non-school based professional evaluations and assessments (3) Requesting specific school based interventions and services (4) Countering school decisions that felt at odds with their child's wellbeing (5) Holding school and district leaders accountable for providing special education services (6) Hiring professional special education advocates (7) Pursuing legal means of redress through state and federal civil rights agencies (8) Disenrolling students from schools. sleep disruption, and weight gain.
- 5. Advice for other parents: keep fighting:** Parents frequently shared advice and support for other parents navigating similar experiences. This guidance centered on resilience and the need to keep fighting for their children's rights and accommodations. Parents emphasized the importance of "knowing your rights" and seeking out information and encouraged other parents to know they are not alone in facing challenges with special education services.
- 6. Parents recommended the following changes:** The need for teachers to be better equipped to understand both autism and racial bias; the hiring of cultural liaisons, preferably from Black communities, to facilitate communication, mediate conflicts, and ensure that school practices are inclusive of diverse cultural norms; improving IEP implementation, participation structures and explanations used during meetings, district policies that require schools to show how parent concerns are integrated into IEP goals and documented in meeting summaries; trauma-informed school climates, improved staff retention, and consistent therapeutic relationships that allow students to build trust and routine.

# Introduction

This study examines the topic of special education in public K-12 schools and reports findings from interviews conducted with 21 Black parents regarding their experiences advocating on behalf of their children for special education and related services in Virginia. “Special education” refers to a system of individualized instruction and services designed to support students with disabilities under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).

Under IDEA, students can qualify within several disability categories, including learning disabilities, language or speech impairments, intellectual disabilities, emotional or behavioral disorders, autism spectrum disorder, or health-related conditions like ADHD. Depending on the student, supports can include targeted academic instruction, therapies (such as speech language, occupational, or physical), counseling, or assistive technology. These services can occur within the general education classroom with supplemental aids or in specialized settings when warranted by the student’s educational profile.

Under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), eligible students are entitled to a free appropriate public education delivered in the least restrictive environment and tailored to their unique needs. The U.S. Supreme Court has emphasized that this obligation requires more than mere access to the general curriculum. In *Endrew F. v. Douglas County School District* (580 U.S. 2017), the Court clarified that to meet its substantive obligation under IDEA, a school must offer an IEP “reasonably calculated to enable a child to make progress appropriate in light of the child’s circumstances,” rejecting minimal progress standards and underscoring that meaningful, appropriately ambitious progress is required. IDEA’s statutory mandate for free appropriate public education further reinforces schools’ legal obligation to help students with disabilities advance academically, prepare for further education and independent living, and benefit from their educational program

Entry into special education typically begins with a referral—initiated by a teacher, parent, or other school professional—when a disability is suspected to be affecting academic or social development. The school then conducts a comprehensive evaluation to determine eligibility for services. When a student qualifies, a team of educators, specialists, and the student’s family are required to create a plan detailing goals, supports, and instructional approaches. This plan is called an Individualized Education Program (IEP) and the team is often referred to as an “IEP Team.”

According to IDEA, schools are responsible for ensuring that an IEP team includes: (1) the parents of the child, (2) at least one regular education teacher of the child, (3) at least one special education teacher, (4) a representative of the school with authority in special education and knowledge of curriculum and resources, (5) a data specialist, (6) other individuals at the discretion of the parent or school with knowledge or expertise (such as a professional advocate), and finally, (7) the child (IDEA, Sec. 300.321).

The IEP must be reviewed at least once each year to monitor progress and revise services as needed. Throughout this process, schools are obligated to adhere to procedural safeguards that uphold the rights of students and their families. An IEP is a legally binding document under IDEA. Virginia’s legal code requires schools to involve parents in the IEP process (such as creating goals and discussions of services and interventions) and in placement decisions, among other rights.

Under IDEA, parents and students have the right to (1) request an evaluation if they suspect their child has a disability affecting learning (2) the right to participate in IEP meetings and must be involved in every decision (3) the right to written notice meaning schools must provide written notice before changing or refusing to change the child’s identification, placement, or services (4) the right to dispute resolution; if parents disagree with the school’s decisions they can request mediation, file a complaint, or pursue a due process hearing, and (5) the right to confidentiality, meaning the child’s records must be kept private and only shared with authorized individuals.

The Virginia Commonwealth, where this study occurred, has nearly 1.3 million students enrolled in 2,132 public schools in 132 districts (NCES, 2024). Virginia has the 12th largest public school enrollment among all 50 states, Washington D.C., and Puerto Rico. Demographics of student enrollment are 45% white, 21.6% Black, 18.7% Latino, 16%, 7% Asian, and 6.7 % Multiracial. Approximately half (54%) of all students are eligible for free-and-reduced price lunch. Students with disabilities constitute 14% of enrollment, or 180,000 students<sup>1</sup>

In 2018, the Virginia Joint Legislative Audit and Review Commission (JLARC), requested a review of K-12 education services and examined district’s processes of enrolling students in special education, services provided, and effectiveness of the state department of education. The investigation resulted in several findings (JLARC, 2020). First, school districts differed in the proportion of students receiving special education services, differences attributed not to district size or demographics but rather to insufficient guidance and vague terms in the state’s eligibility criteria, likely resulting in under and over identification.

Second, the study found that 50% of IEPs reviewed lacked academic or functional goals, 33% did not contain a description of the student’s academic or functional needs and 25% did not describe the effect of the disability on the student’s educational performance. These insufficiencies were attributed to inconsistent knowledge among key school staff including special education teachers, classroom teachers and building administrators. In Virginia, state law does not require general education teachers and administrators to be knowledgeable of IEPs.

Third, the investigation found that when the state department of education receives a complaint about a school district, the state does not adequately follow-up to ensure non-compliance is corrected or negative effects from the non-compliance on individual students are remedied.

Finally, the investigation found that oversight of special education across the state is infrequent, with roughly 4 of 132 districts reviewed. Where districts were reviewed, there was a heavy reliance on self-reported data which could limit the accuracy of information.

In addition, the JLARC investigation identified parent concerns in special education. First, 74% of parents felt like IEP teams were receptive to their input and 67% of parents believed their child was being taught alongside non-special education peers to the greatest extent possible. While these findings reflect positively, substantial concerns were identified. Nearly 50% of parents felt hindered from fully participating in IEP meetings most often due to work schedules (41%), feeling uncomfortable or frustrated with how staff treated them or their child (26%), and not being given enough time to review IEP plans or changes prior to meetings (31%).

Communication was also an issue, with a quarter of parents saying schools not responding to their questions was a barrier. And 35% of parents believed their child’s IEP was not sufficiently or not at all appropriate for their child. Parents also felt that complaints against districts were not handled fairly by the state. While providing important insight into parent experiences, the JLARC survey consisted of responses from 1,573 parents and was not a random sample nor were responses disaggregated by race, leaving questions about variation in parent experiences generally and specifically differences by race.

## Racial Disproportionality Among Black Students in Special Education

Special education has long been an important civil rights issue in public schools. Research consistently shows that Black students experience disproportionate representation in specific special education categories relative to their share of overall student enrollment. As of 2020, 18% of school-aged students with disabilities in the United States were Black or African-American, a number that has been consistent for the past decade, despite being 14% of the population (OSEP, 2020).

Black and African-American students are more likely to be identified with intellectual disabilities and emotional disturbance and slightly less likely to be identified with speech or language impairments or autism than all students with disabilities (OSEP, 2020), categories which arguably reflect a pattern of historically rooted anti-Black biases in special education classification processes (Darby & Rury, 2018; Hilliard, 1992; Sullivan, 2017).

Special education civil rights concerns include the risks of misidentifying students either too frequently or not frequently enough and placement in inappropriate settings or providing incorrect, unnecessary, and/or ineffective interventions for Black students (Sullivan, 2017). Patterns of disproportionality is evident across states and districts and persists even when socioeconomic factors are taken into account (Grindal et al., 2019; Murphy et al., 2025).

Moreover, Black students with disabilities are more likely to be educated in highly restrictive settings, a practice that further entrenches exclusion and marginalization within schooling environments (Murphy et al., 2025; Pottiger, 2022). Research pertaining to the disproportionality of Black students receiving special education and related services highlights bias as a leading factor (Losen & Orfield, 2002; Sullivan, 2017).

Specifically, regarding autism spectrum disorder (ASD), which was the most reported diagnosis among parents in this study, approximately 30% of children diagnosed with ASD are Black or African American, compared to approximately 24% of white children (Maenner et al., 2023). This pattern represents a shift from prior years in which Black children typically represented a smaller proportion of ASC children compared to white children, though researchers caution against interpreting this change as meaningfully representing a 'closed gap' ASC identification (Fannin et al., 2024).

Black children with autism are more likely to rely on school-based services than white children, experience restrictive educational environments, and regularly encounter delays in accessing services (see Fannin et al., 2024 for a review). Issues of disproportionality and adverse impacts on Black students receiving special education services raises doubts about the fidelity and objectivity of special education processes for researchers and families alike (Garner & Lipskey, 1998; Jordan, 2005; Rynders, 2018; Wiley et al., 2025).



Nationally, the disproportionate punishment of Black students with disabilities remains prevalent. Black students with disabilities experience disciplinary removals at a rate approximately 2.5 times higher than white students with disabilities (65 versus 26 removal events per 100 students (OSEP, 2020). One of the pressing issues in Virginia, and one that parents speak to later in this report, is the use of exclusionary discipline with Black students and students with disabilities. According to the Legal Aid Justice Center, Black students and students with disabilities continue to be disproportionately impacted by exclusionary discipline (Bostwick, 2024).

Black students with disabilities have the highest overrepresentation in the state (Huerta, 2022). Whereas Black students are 27.5% of total students with disabilities in Virginia, they are 52% of those students with disabilities who are suspended (Huerta, 2022). And, of students with disabilities suspended multiple times, 58% were Black students. Together these statistics show the heavy and disproportionate use of suspension of Black students with disabilities in Virginia indicative of the school-to-prison pipeline (Huerta, 2022).

Additional concerns include graduation rates for students with disabilities, which are worse for students with disabilities and even lower for Black students with disabilities. Whereas the graduation rate for students without disabilities is 91%, it is 61% for students with disabilities, and 52% for Black students with disabilities (JLARC, 2020). This, too, mirrors national data, where the graduation rate for Black students with disabilities is 66% compared to all students with disabilities 73%.

## Black Parents and Special Education

Federal policy requires local educational agencies to involve parents in the special education process and for the provision of resources including assistance centers to support parents of children with disabilities in navigating the special education system (Burke et al., 2017; Cooc et al, 2017). Studies have shown that parent involvement has a positive correlation with children's academic achievement and learning outcomes in school (Jeynes, 2005, 2010, 2024). Similarly, schools that encourage heavy parent engagement can positively influence students' academic achievement and socialization (Barger et al., 2019, Wilder, 2023).

Yet, while involving parents is required in special education, and simultaneously Black students are often disproportionately represented in special education, the experiences of Black parents, with few exceptions, has been overlooked (Drame et al., 2020; Harry et al., 2002; Sanderson & Sarti, 2025). At the same time, more broadly, research has shown that Black parents provide crucial supports for the success of Black students in K-12 and higher education (Gaitlin & Wilson, 2016; Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Scott et al., 2021), however specific attention to the supports and advocacy efforts of Black parents with disabilities on behalf of their children in academics and school discipline is less commonly addressed in the literature.

Previous studies of the experiences of parents with disabilities have focused on the intersection of disability and students' access to STEM activities and physical education, transition from special education services, and perceptions of the IEP process, however these studies have primarily focused on white parents of children with disabilities and have not attended to the of experiences Black parents (Burke et al., 2018; Dyson, 1996; Fisher et al., 2022; Grigal et al., 2023; Wadyawan et al., 2020).

Prior research, then, suggests that Black parents may utilize specific forms of support and advocacy in education, including locating programs and organizations geared toward Black students and parents, and utilizing social interactions specific to friends, parents, and the internet to support educational outcomes for their children (Latunde & Clark-Louque, 2016; Scott et al., 2021). However, in the process, Black parents of children with disabilities may face specific obstacles including incidents rooted in systemic and structural racism and ableism that in turn prompt a set of responsive strategies including increased family engagement, building knowledge of legal rights, and other emergent strategies to promote self-determination to support Black children (Scott et al., 2021).

In special education, Black parents of children with disabilities are likely to encounter the added obstacle of discrimination vis-a-vis exclusionary school discipline (Bell & Craig, 2023; Mowen, 2017). Stemming from the

well-documented use of harsh discipline against children of color with disabilities (Brobbey, 2018, U.S. Department of Education, 2016), Black parents of children with disabilities may incur additional impacts including bearing a heavy burden of navigating the discipline processes while advocating for children with disabilities.

In a study by Bell and Craig (2023), parents of children with disabilities (both Black and white) reported that disciplinary incidents involving their children were so traumatic that these incidents not only negatively impacted their children but also contributed to the deterioration of the parents' own mental and physical health. It is thus important to conduct research that identifies the contributions of Black parents of children with disabilities to advocacy and the education of Black children and to identify the obstacles that Black parents encounter with attention to the unique intersections of academics and disciplinary experiences.

This study addresses the experiences and advocacy of Black parents of children with disabilities in public K-12 schools. Inequities in special education are significant in Virginia including a lack of implementing IEPs with fidelity, insufficient services, high discipline rates, low graduation rates, and unresolved parent complaints about local school districts. And while parent surveys in Virginia indicate numerous areas of concern, a failure to administer existing surveys by race has prevented an opportunity to understand the experiences of Black parents, motivating this study's design and focus.

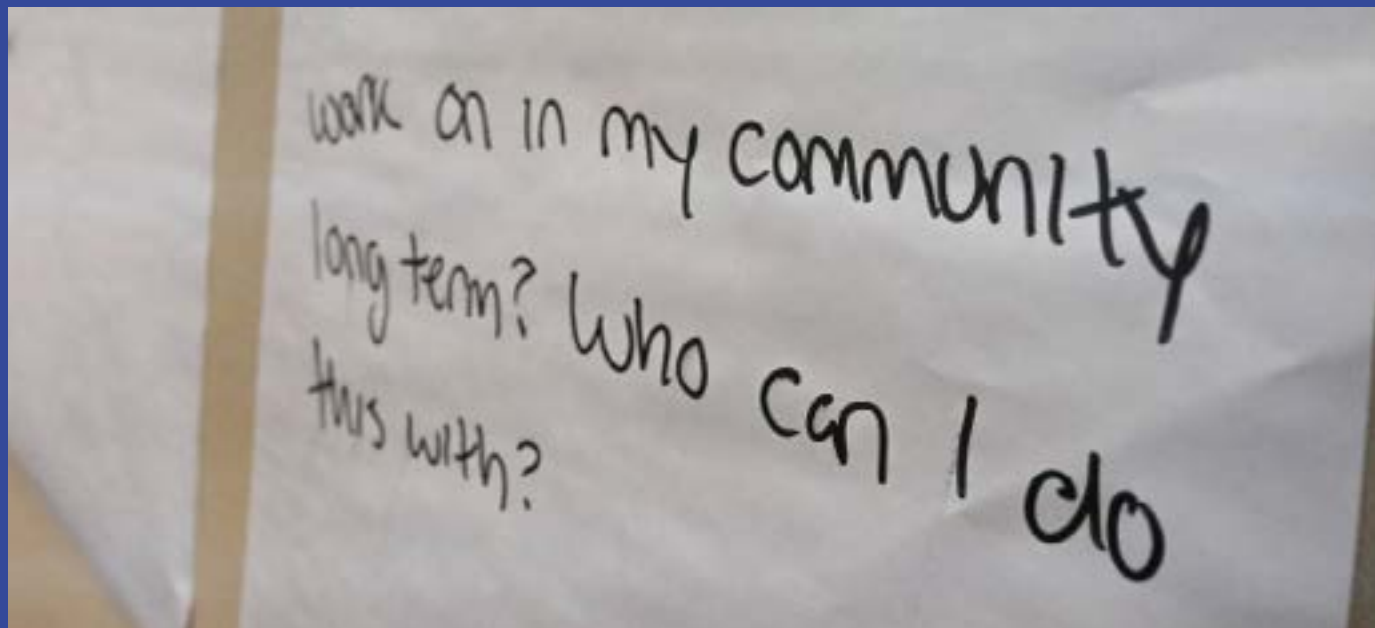


## Research Methods

This study was designed as a qualitative action research project conducted in partnership between the first author, an HBCU faculty member and the research partner, founder and director of a special education advocacy organization whose efforts have focused on special education advocacy training for Black parents (Tisdell et al., 2025). This partnership started in 2022 with an analysis of Virginia discipline data and presentations to raise awareness about unjust school discipline occurring for Black students and Black students in special education. In 2023, the partnership began designing the present study. The team consisted of the lead university researcher (faculty member), three university students, an independent researcher and the director of the special education organization.

The research team sought to recruit parents who identified as Black or African American throughout Virginia by sharing (1) flyers on social media and (2) word of mouth through the networks of the research team and research partner. Recruitment and data collection began in 2024 and continued through 2025. Once parents indicated their interest in participating, each parent was interviewed by the first and/or second author using a semi-structured interview protocol. The interview protocol (including both the interview questions and the interview process) was developed with input from the research partner and several additional experts focused on special education with a focus on Black families. The interview protocol asked about parental experiences in special education systems, parental advocacy strategies, impacts of these systems on parents, advice for other parents, and recommended changes.

Interviews lasted approximately 60-90 minutes. Participants were provided a \$25 gift card. Audio files were de-identified and analyzed using a combination of deductive and inductive coding in Dedoose software, reaching an interrater reliability agreement of .70 (Saldaña, 2025). Written narratives were developed to summarize quotes from major code categories. Recruitment efforts resulted in a participant group in which most participants were Black women whose children (primarily sons) had autism and/or ADHD diagnoses. Participants clustered into three of the state's eight public school regions including Region 1: Central Virginia, Region 2: Tidewater and Region 4: Northern Virginia.<sup>2</sup> To protect the privacy of participants, all names in the report are pseudonyms (self-selected by participants) and no information about participant's school districts is provided.



**Table 1.** Participant Overview

<b>Participant</b> Parent-selected pseudonyms	<b>Child's Disability</b> As described by parent	<b>Child's Age</b> At the time of seeking or receiving services	<b>Child's Gender</b> As described by parent
Alice Winters	ADHD, Speech Delay	11	Son
Ami Cubbs	Autism, ADHD	7	Son
Angela Dixon	Autism	12	Son
Christina Good	Autism, ADHD, Anxiety, Depression	9	Daughter
Deborah Oakes	Autism, ADHD	11	Daughter
Elijah Morgan & Zakiya Allen	ADHD, Depression, Anxiety, Mood Disorder	17	Son
John Potter	Dypraxia, ADHD	17	Son
Journey Richards	Autism	7	Daughter
Loren Sanders	Autism	9	Son
Maya Angel	Emotional Disability, Adjustment Disorder, Selective Mutism	8	**
Rhodesia Allen	Autism	18	Son
Robert Saldana	Learning Disability	14	Son
Rosmery Bold	Special Education	10	Daughter
Sherrilyn Moran	Autism, Defiant Disorder	10	Son
Tammy Moton	Autism, Developmental Delay, Seizures	7	Daughter
Tara Edwin	Emotional Disability	6	Son
Taylor Dalton	Autism	13	Son
Thomas Gold	Dyslexia	6	Daughter
Tiffany Bright	Autism	11	Son
Kay Williams	Autism	4	Son

# Findings

The next section describes common themes that emerged in response to the interview questions. For brevity, a limited number of examples are provided. Findings describe (1) overall experiences (2) school-based challenges (3) impacts of special education on parents (4) parental advocacy strategies (5) advice for other parents and (6) recommended changes.

## Overall Experiences

### Negative Experiences

Across interviews, Black parents described overwhelmingly negative experiences with schools that left them feeling frustrated, overwhelmed, and powerless. While many entered IEP processes hoping for collaboration, they often encountered non-responsive school staff who dismissed their concerns. Parents repeatedly used words such as ignored, unheard, and overlooked to capture how little weight their perspectives carried in shaping their children's educational paths. For example, when asked, "what three words describe your feelings about IEP meetings?" one parent, Mrs. Cubbs, responded "unheard, underwhelmed, and frustrated." Mrs. Cubbs' response was an example of many reiterating a frustrating experience with schools.

Parental frustration was often rooted in the lack of services and the inadequate implementation of IEPs. Even when schools developed IEPs, parents explained that the accommodations promised were inconsistently or half-heartedly carried out. This disregard created cycles of disappointment as families came to realize that schools were not fulfilling legal or ethical obligations.

As shown through Mrs. Moran's description of how her IEP meetings typically went, she explained "They come in, they introduce their self, they tell you what goals they have for him, I tell them what I think his goals are, they listen, but they don't really hear me and they still don't put my suggestions in the IEP." Her comments were an example of many from parents indicating that requests for specific supports were brushed aside or denied outright, deepening parents' sense that "no one is listening." Parents also explained that inadequate communication compounded these challenges.

As Mrs. Good said, "That is the biggest problem, that there is no communication between teachers and parents." Parents explained that schools often failed to notify them about disciplinary actions, progress updates, or plans of support until after critical decisions had already been made. This lack of follow-up left families blindsided and excluded from processes that were supposed to center parent-school partnerships.

Racial discrimination also shaped parents' experiences in both overt and subtle ways, often appearing in how staff operated with race-based assumptions about Black families. These interactions not only reinforced Black parents' feelings of alienation but also highlighted discrepancies in treatment compared to white parents, who were often given the benefit of the doubt.

Differential parental treatment was mentioned by several parents, for example, Mrs. Dixon shared "I honestly think that if they had a new student from a Norfolk school system that was white, and they found out that he was on a third grade reading level, that they would have offered their parents some assistance." She felt this was not the case for Black students.

**"[I feel] unheard, underwhelmed, and frustrated."**

Parent describing IEP meetings.

**"They don't really hear me and they still don't put my suggestions in the IEP."**

Parent describing IEP meetings.

## Overall Experiences

### Negative Experiences

Black parents felt racially isolated and insignificant during what were often IEP meetings with all-white staff, as described by Mrs. Winters who noted feeling like a 'peon,' as she explained: "we look like peons sitting around the table of all these Caucasian people, and it's like, you know....I just felt.... I felt really weird in the meetings." In addition, when Black parents advocated on behalf of their children, staff frequently interpreted this as aggressiveness or "difficulty," and parents described being spoken to in dismissive tones, having concerns minimized, or being treated with hostility when they pressed for their children's rights to be honored.

Less commonly, several parents noted feeling anti-Black sentiments in predominantly Black-led districts or by Black staff. Mrs. Moton described fighting anti-Black stereotypes "even with the whole school board being African American, they still degrade other African Americans as if they're not important, as if this is a one parent household, like they're single and this mom or this dad don't know what they're talking about." She described having to fight those stereotypes, saying "we're married, we is a two-parent household, we make sure our kids go to school, we check with schoolteachers every day to make sure everything is fine."

In making sense of why Black staff would exhibit anti-Black stereotypes against Black parents, another participant, Mrs. Alon noted this reflected how 'deeply rooted' white supremacy is in Virginia's racial history: "the district is mostly Afro-American, but it does not matter, it's so deeply rooted, and African Americans have been so manipulated." The fact that both Black and white staff contributed to these racial patterns underscored that racism was not simply an individual problem but a systemic one embedded within school staff culture. Taken together, these accounts highlight the emotional and structural barriers Black parents faced in advocating for their children. The combination of being unheard, denied, racially discriminated against, and inadequately informed fueled both frustration and overwhelm, leaving many parents feeling they had little recourse within the systems supposedly designed to support them.



**"I honestly think that if they had a new student that was white, and they found out that he was on a third grade reading level, that they would have offered their parents some assistance."**

Parent

**"Even with the whole school board being African American they still degrade other African Americans as if they're not important, as if this is a one parent household, like they're single, and this mom or this dad don't know what they're talking about."**

Parent

### Positive Experiences

Although many parents emphasized negative encounters with schools, some also described more constructive experiences. These moments were not necessarily transformative but offered glimpses into better school communication and collaboration. Parents framed these as "good" experiences but in tentative terms such as those who said "it's, it's been going well so far" and "now it's a bit better now," highlighting the uncertainty of their situations.

Parents pointed out moments when schools kept them more informed, provided timely updates, explained steps clearly, or reached out before problems escalated. For instance, Mr. Gold ranked his school's communication an 8 out of 10, explaining the high rating as due to communication: "I usually get calls from the teachers, and I also get text messages." While these examples were not the norm, they showed how improved communication could result in parents feeling more positive.

When asked about the quality of special education services at her school, Mrs. Bold said, "so far, it's been going well, I love the care that they show in the school, you know, trying to show compassion and care for the child in a special way." Overall, "positive" experiences among parents were modest and often framed as exceptions to broader patterns of minimization and discrimination. Still, they demonstrated that when schools effectively communicated or honored family requests, parents noticed the difference.

**"So far, it's been going well, I love the care that they show in the school!"**

Parent

### Individualized Educational Plans

#### The Battle for IEP Implementation

When it came to IEPs, parents often felt unclear or doubted their confidence in understanding their child's IEP and accommodations. Parents such as Mrs. Bright reported that even after spending time reviewing her child's IEP, she still didn't feel confident doing it without the help of the special education advocate that she had hired to help her navigate the process. She recalled her advocate reminding the IEP team that if "mom doesn't understand [what the IEP is saying]...it means we need to write it in a way that a regular person could read."

Other parents felt more confident, such as Mr. Potter who rated his comfort level reading an IEP a "nine" (with 10 being very comfortable). While Mr. Potter felt confident reviewing his son's IEP, he said he was "never comfortable" during IEP meetings. Similarly, Mrs. Cubbs felt confident with reviewing her child's IEP, but when it came time for the meeting, she felt that she was "not heard" in meetings and "a little bit frustrated" with its content. The feeling of not being heard was repeated by multiple participants. Mrs. Moran described these meetings as being held in a "robotic way."

**"They come in, they introduce themselves, they tell you what goals [my sons] goals are. I tell them what I think his goals are. They listen, but they don't really hear me. They still don't put my suggestions into the IEP."**

- Mrs. Moran

Other parents used words including “horrible,” “stressful,” and “traumatic” to describe IEP meetings. Getting an IEP was part of the battle. For example, Mrs. Good’s experience left her feeling like the school was reluctant to issue IEPs, saying that, “They [school] don’t want people to get IEPs, and there seems to be a reason, I don’t know if it’s a lack of staff, a lack of funding, if the teachers are complaining or are bombarded, but it seems to be about the money and not having enough people who are qualified for special education.”

Mrs. Allen, who had spent years advocating on behalf of her teenage son, found the district reluctant to avoid addressing parent concerns and getting children support. As she described, “what the district does is, they create a lot of noise... they create situations where you always have to respond and they never have to address the real concerns; we’ll never have the discussion around placement... We’ll never have the discussion around putting appropriate supports in his IEP” The district, in her view, regularly stalled and was essentially buying time until her son aged out.

Once secured, a lack of IEP implementation was the next frequent issue. Mrs. Dixon expressed her frustration with the inconsistent implementation of her child’s IEP across different schools. She recalled a confusing and traumatic time where her child was almost expelled which she felt was a result of the school failing to implement the IEP with fidelity. Similarly, Mr. Potter felt that implementation of his son’s IEP was the hardest part of the IEP process, noting getting the accommodations “was the fight.”

Some expressed safety concerns for their child stemming from a lack of IEP implementation. Mr. Morgan reflected on an incident in which he was contacted by the school when his son was found wandering the halls alone, despite having an accommodation in his IEP for an adult to escort from classrooms and during transitions. As the father explained: “We had just gotten accommodations in his IEP for him to be escorted practically everywhere and the intent was to ensure that he was monitored at all times...” During the unescorted transition his son was jumped by several other boys, a traumatic incident that showed the consequences of the unimplemented IEP accommodation.



**“It’s always ‘let’s talk about all these things,’ and stall and again he’s supposed to graduate this year, right? So it’s been three years and we’ve been at this and they’re just like, ‘we can just hold on a little longer’ and they keep stalling and stalling and stalling until the age is out.”**

- Mrs. Allen

## Requests Dismissed and Rejected

Black parents had their requests for specific services and accommodations minimized or outright rejected by school officials. For example, Mrs. Oakes advocated with the school to get her elementary-aged daughter “all the services,” once she found out her daughter needed a reading intervention. She described feeling comforted by the school’s principal, who led Mrs. Oakes to believe several services would be provided.

However, when it came to getting services, Mrs. Oakes was dismissed by school staff “at every turn.” As she described, “the [school] didn’t want to give her the reading support and, my daughter was anxious, but they didn’t offer her any, at every turn it was ‘oh, she’ll be fine, let’s wait another two or three years.’” Hearing this frustrated Mrs. Oakes, who questioned, “my daughter was below level in reading, why didn’t they want to give her reading services?”

The constant dismissing of her concerns and school staff’s suggestions to “wait another two or three years” left Mrs. Oakes frustrated. Of this she said, “I just felt like I hit a brick wall with those people, in a way that broke my heart.” She said that despite the principal’s promises that the school would provide services, “that’s not what happened at all.” She spoke of how this dynamic sets a child up for failure and reflects a lack of care for children who are struggling:

**“I feel like if you’re waiting two or three years to give a child services, you’re absolutely doing them and their families a disservice, and you’re setting the child up for failure for the rest of their life because they go through a period of two to three years of anxiety and needing help and not getting it and the poor little babies.”**

In response to the school’s refusal, Mrs. Oakes decided to put her daughter into non- school based services paying out of her own pocket, saying, “So I put her into all of the services, all of the therapy, the OT (occupational therapy), the PT (physical therapy), the speech she did, ABA (applied behavioral analysis)” because I knew my daughter was in there somewhere.” Her experience illustrates how a lack of support from a school and promises broken can leave parents feeling stymied and force parents to turn to private options.

Like Mrs. Oakes, other parent requests were denied. For Mrs. Moran, everything she asked for was met with “no.” As she explained, her requests for one-on-one adult support for her child were rejected, as were her attempts to secure changes in classroom and school placement:

**“I’ve asked for him to have a one-on-one teacher and that wasn’t met. I asked him to be placed in the classroom with fewer kids, that wasn’t met. I asked to see if he can be referred to a school that specializes in autism, or at least recommend one, and that wasn’t met. I mean, everything that I asked for it’s been a ‘no, no, no, no.’”**

## Requests Dismissed and Rejected

In the case of Mr. Saldana, whose son had a learning disability, he asked the teacher if his son could sit near the front of the class and if a simpler syllabus could be created to accommodate his child's understanding. In response, the school employee argued with him about, as he shared "I was telling them that maybe my kid should be at the front [of class] and the syllabus could be broken down a bit but they argued that they shouldn't have to change it because of just one child."

In response, the school employee convinced Mr. Saldana that it was his responsibility as a parent to "do extra stuff," as Mr. Saldana described, "so they made me understand that I need to just do extra care, they can't make it the syllabus simpler just because of my son so I began to understand that I just needed to just accept and do extra." Mr. Saldana accepted this argument, which illustrated an instance in which school staff rejected a parent's attempt to advocate for their child by placing the responsibility back onto the parent.

Mrs. Williams experienced a teacher's rejection of an accommodation in her child's behavioral intervention plan. As Mrs. Williams stated, "The teacher tried to decline following my child's Behavioral Intervention Plan and I kept advocating, like, we need to get this." In the face of a classroom teacher's resistance to honoring the plan, Mrs. Williams, like Mr. Saldana, advocated to ensure it would be followed, pointing both to the power that individual teachers may try to exert in rejecting services and defying legal obligations, and also the power and necessity of parental advocacy to push back.

While these instances illustrated how schools rejected parental requests and accommodations, sometimes parents were also in the position of having to advocate against school accommodations and placement decisions to protect the well-being of their children. When the school tried to change the disability category of her daughter, Mrs. Moton felt the change was inappropriate and advocated against what she saw as a premature change being done without her being fully informed. As she described:

**"They were forcing us into trying to change her category with me not knowing everything, but we knew what our child could and could not do." - Mrs. Moton**

Similarly, Mrs. Williams advocated against what she saw as the school's attempt to transfer her son to an alternative school. She had learned that the school was requesting observations of her son by staff from the alternative school, which led her to suspect they were preparing to try and transfer him. This school was one that Mrs. Williams had recently heard was under investigation for the death of a child, and she vehemently disagreed with what was happening, telling her school "absolutely not, he will absolutely never go there, if you followed his IEP, this wouldn't be happening."

Yet, according to Mrs. Williams, the school continued to try and bring in staff from the alternative school to observe her child. In response, she reached out to "people I know in the community that are special education teachers and I said, 'basically they're having people come evaluate him to recommend a change in placement, this is what this means right?'"

Once she felt clearer on the implications, Mrs. Williams advocated to the school administrator, as she described, "I immediately wrote an email letting them know that my family and I disagreed and we did not authorize or consent to these observations." Such a situation reflected circumstances in which schools' efforts to line up placement changes without informing parents left parents frustrated and searching for answers to make sense of and fight what was happening.

Another theme that emerged was related to school principals, to whom parents advocated for services directly, often running into administrators who provided little information and, like other school staff, failed to respond to Black parents' requests or IEP implementation. This was the situation with Mrs. Oakes, whose previous story reflected the unfulfilled promises of her daughter's reading interventions.

Similarly, Mr. Morgan recounted his experience with an assistant principal, saying, "he didn't give us any resources, they kind of made him the messenger and the middle man, and so I'm calling him again and again and he was like trying to justify it like "they're [the principal] are telling me to do this and telling me do that" and being like, "I can't confirm this or that."

In other words, the assistant principal, though the point of contact, did not provide definitive information and used excuses that Mr. Allen felt were insufficient. Nonetheless Mr. Morgan felt for the man, saying that he "didn't like what they did to [the assistant principal] putting him into an impossible situation." After years of battling the district, Mr. Morgan was skeptical of school officials and saw them as withholding information, saying, "they catch themselves telling you something and they can't really say it -- it's like that with all the interactions with school officials, they're 'hush hush.'"

**"They were forcing us into trying to change her category with me not knowing everything, but we knew what our child could and could not do." - Mr. Morgan**

In another example of hitting an administrative wall, Mrs. Williams went to her school's principal to request more classroom support for her child's classroom teacher, whom Mrs. Williams felt was struggling with to meet IEP obligations for her son and other students. Mrs. Williams described:

**"So I go to administration saying, "hey, these kids are not getting a free and proper education based on what the teacher told me and she needs some support in the class can you get the behavioral specialist in here to assist her?" - Mrs. Williams**

In response, Mrs. Williams shared that the principal did not get extra support in the classroom, and instead shared Mrs. Williams's comments with the teacher, a situation Mrs. Williams attributed to a negative shift in the teacher's attitude toward her. As Mrs. Williams described, "So then, the teacher starts ignoring me and dismissing me." After taking her concerns to the school's principal, Mrs. Williams faced what she perceived as retaliatory behavior on the part of her son's teacher. Both Mr. Allen and Mrs. Williams' experiences illustrated how instead of alleviating parents' concerns about their children, administrators put up communicative walls, declined requests, and shared information with others in ways that harmed parent-staff relationships.

Like Mrs. Williams, other Black parents experienced hostility from school staff after advocating for their children. When asked if she had faced retaliation for her advocacy, Mrs. Oakes replied, "yes, absolutely -- the gym teacher, you know, allowed the children to beat up on [my daughter] and the art teacher put her in a corner with her biggest bully, but those could've be coincidences, but everybody knew that I really wanted her to get services...Everybody knew that, you know?" While acknowledging it could have been coincidental, Mrs. Oakes perceived that teachers she had directly advocated with on behalf of her daughter had subsequently mistreated her in class.

In another example, while advocating for her daughter a sense of retaliation drove Mrs. Moton to consider changing schools, "We knew that it was so much retaliation inside of the school system that if we don't pull her out, it's not going to work." She went on to describe that "we had so much backlash, so much hostility that was thrown our way." Following the situation, Mrs. Moton and her family switched to another district. In their efforts to advocate for their children, Black parents incurred hostility from school staff leading to further adverse incidents involving their children and even backlash against the entire family.

## Some Requests Honored

While most parents had felt their requests unheeded and resisted by schools, several parents offered positive examples of schools complying with requests. Mrs. Good was successful in getting more time for math and emotional support in her daughter's IEP, saying: "We had one IEP meeting and I said she needed more time for math, so they did increase her time for math and her emotional support." Similarly, Mrs. Moton, who despite a negative experience challenging the district's placement decision, through her advocacy, she was able to get the school to 'correct' the accommodation issue. She shared,

**"We would have to call and tell them 'she needs assistance, she can't walk to the cafeteria alone, she can't walk to her room alone, to her classroom alone, she does need assistance and they corrected it -- it took a couple of times for us to mention that before they corrected it, but they corrected it.'" - Mrs. Moton**

For Mrs. Moton, she was able to get the school to comply with her daughter's IEP and 'correct it.' For Mrs. Cubbs and Mrs. Dalton, who defied the pattern of largely negative experiences observed among most parents in the study, separately responded that their child's school had not engaged in activity with which they disagreed. Mrs. Cubbs responded, "no, not that I can think of" but then elaborated that it was because of her own advocacy, saying, "because whenever I see that they are not fulfilling things, I'm calling them and I'm pushing, you know? And so, they stopped that pattern and they changed."

In her statements, Mrs. Cubbs offered an example of how she used her advocacy to 'stop the pattern' with the school, causing them to 'change.' Her response further illustrated that she had in fact dealt with the same issue of unimplemented accommodations and her advocacy, like that of other parents, operated as a protective factor.

**"Whenever I see that they are not fulfilling things, I'm calling them and I'm pushing, you know? And so, they stopped that pattern and they changed."**

-Parent

Like Mrs. Cubbs, Mrs. Dalton similarly relayed that she hadn't had any issues with her son's present school (though she had at his previous school), but then also explained that she felt this was not due to a lack of issues, but rather because of her own advocacy. When asked if she had made any requests of the school and the outcomes, Mrs. Dalton said "I'd say for the most part, yes, I haven't had any issues but I think maybe the reason is that I stepped up a bit in advocating for him". Both Mrs. Cubbs and Mrs. Dalton felt they had experienced fewer issues with their schools yet revealed their advocacy explained it.

Some parents also expressed positive experiences with teachers, such as Mrs. Williams, who described her son's teacher as "wonderful" and as a strong advocate for "this group of children" saying "they put a wonderful teacher in place for the last half of the year, she's a retired Special Ed administrator and she did a lot of advocating for this group of children." Her son's learning grew under this teacher, as Mrs. Williams described, "under her watch, he started to even do math right and read certain words, which was just amazing, it's the best we've ever seen." Such an example, when contrasted with harmful instances earlier, shows how teachers had the potential make or break a parent and child's experience.

Mrs. Dalton also had a positive experience with a teacher. For her, an exemplary teacher functioned as a role model from which she could learn how to advocate for her son. Mrs. Dalton described the shift in her own advocacy, which had occurred over time: "As he's gotten older, I feel like [the school] is beginning to be more helpful...because I understand more too...I'm not as leery to state how I feel and advocate for him more....I think in the beginning, it was more of them telling me what they think, versus me saying, this is what he needs, this is how he thrives. This is not going to work for him." Mrs. Dalton attributed her change in efficacy to seeing her son's teacher model advocacy, as she described "when he was in elementary school, his advocate was actually his teacher, and she was amazing" she went onto say her own advocacy had improved:

**"Because I was able to see her and what she was pressing for and how she would communicate -- sometimes other members of the IEP team would want certain things and she would say 'no he doesn't need that in my class he does well in that subject, he should be in general education for that subject' So I think that helped a lot, she was great." - Mrs. Dalton**

Mrs. Dalton's experience illustrated the influence a teacher could have on positively shaping parents' abilities to advocate for their children. When compared to the many negative experiences parents shared, Mrs. Williams's and Mrs. Dalton's unique experiences showcased how teachers could act in support of parents and their children while navigating special education services, as opposed to defying legal obligations and rejecting or minimizing Black parents' requests.



## Adverse Experiences with School Discipline

### Frequent Suspensions

The topic of school discipline was frequently discussed in interviews. At least seven parents had children who were suspended in school, some multiple times. These parents included Ms. Dixon, whose son had been suspended "a few times," Ms. Bold, whose son had been suspended "about five times," Mr. Potter, whose son was suspended "every now and again," Ms. Edwin, whose son was suspended "again and again," Ms. Angel, whose young daughter was "getting a lot of suspensions," Ms. Cubbs, who described her son's 18-day suspension, and Mr. Morgan who said at one point her son was being "suspended at least once a month." The frequency of suspension was described by Mr. Morgan's wife, Mrs. Allen, who, when asked if her son had been suspended replied:

**"[Suspended] throughout his school career? I.D.K. [I don't know]. I can't keep track, but I can probably say he was getting suspended at least once a month almost, then COVID hit, that was a relief, because he was back home. But while he was there, he probably got suspended more than five times. Probably put an estimate on, I mean, maybe I don't know, six, seven times he was getting suspended. Whether it was in-school suspension or out-of-school suspension, it was always suspension." - Mrs. Allen**

Mrs. Allen's comments showed the frequency of suspension, and the reality that having her son at home during COVID brought 'relief' from the mounting suspensions. In addition to the adverse impacts of the suspensions, Mrs. Allen felt the district was essentially inciting suspensions through their failure to provide proper placement and adequate IEP accommodations, as she said, "all they're going to do is constantly create more situations, more suspensions, more of these things."

Even among parents whose children had not been suspended, the threat of punishment loomed. Said Mrs. Moran, "my child has never been suspended or had to go to the principal's office, knock-on-wood, nothing like that." Ms. Good, whose child had also not been suspended, similarly said "knock on wood, my kids don't really have any disciplinary problems." The possibility of one's child incurring disciplinary action was at times described in terms of racialized vulnerability. This was the case for Ms. Dalton, who said that while her 13-year-old son with autism had not been suspended, it is something she was concerned about:

**"[He's] not yet [been suspended], but that's something that I worry about, and that's something that I talk to my son about, because I have tell him and remind him that he is a young Black boy, and unfortunately, you know we have to put up certain barriers and let him know that, 'because this is who you are, you have to, you have to behave!'" - Ms. Dalton**

Ms. Dalton said her concerns were linked to what she had seen in high-profile news incidents where Black boys and men with autism had been harmed:

**"I remember seeing different things in the news where you know things have happened, when Black males have been autistic and they were misunderstood, and things have happened to them, so that was scary for me." - Ms. Dalton**

For some Black parents whose children had not been suspended, it wasn't simply that their child had not been singled out for punishment, but rather the parent had successfully fought the suspension. This was the case of Ms. Williams, who said that her son had not been suspended because "I have been able to successfully intervene." In Ms. Williams's case, the school principal wanted to suspend her four year-old son following an incident with the classroom teaching assistant.

When Ms. Williams challenged the principal's decision and requested information about the circumstances and whether the IEP had been followed properly, the principal backed down, and as a result "this time the principal agreed not to suspend him." Overall, of Black parents interviewed, half had children who had been suspended one if not multiple times, while for several other parents the very reason their child had not been suspended was due to challenging or otherwise fighting back against the school's efforts to do so.

In addition to the frequency of formal suspensions, several parents also encountered 'informal' or off-the-record suspensions. Ms. Edwin described this, saying, "they would call me and say 'Ms. Edwin, we need you to come pick up your son before we have to suspend him again, just keep him home for a couple of days.'" Reflecting on this, she said, "what I didn't know [then] was that it was illegal for them to do that if it's not in writing or recorded." Similarly, Ms. Angel shared there were times where 'they didn't really call it a suspension.' She said: "It was more a 'can you come pick her up early'" but it wasn't necessarily being called a suspension."

### Manifestation Hearings

Manifestation hearings were a topic related to discipline that came up in discussions of suspension. Under the Individuals with Disabilities Act, parents of children who have an IEP or 504 have the right to a manifestation hearing when a school moves to suspend or expel their child for more than 10 consecutive school days or a series of removals that form a pattern. A manifestation hearing must be held to determine if the behavior of a child results from the child's disability. If the behavioral incident is determined to be a manifestation of the disability, the child cannot be expelled or subjected to a long-term suspension and instead the school must adjust supports. If the behavioral incident is not considered a manifestation of the disability, the child can be suspended or expelled, though access to educational services must be provided. Several parents spoke to the concerns about manifestation hearings.

Ms. Edwin, whose six-year-old son was classified with an emotional disability, described what happened to her and her son. The school "just kept suspending him for bad behavior and nobody could give me answers." She asked the school staff, "are you following the IEP, or not?" saying, "it was like they were trying to kick him out of school, but they could not explain themselves." After a five-day suspension during the second week of school, the school then tried to suspend her son for 10 days, which spurred a manifestation hearing.

**"They sent out a summary and basically admitted they didn't follow the IEP they said, 'we failed him,' they even put it in writing." -- Parent**

At the hearing, the school determined that the inciting behavioral incident stemmed from the school's failure to properly follow her son's IEP. Said Ms. Edwin, "they sent out a summary and basically admitted they didn't follow the IEP they said, 'we failed him,' they even put it in writing." Of this, she described, "it was so disappointing to put your trust in people who are supposed to take care of your kids Monday through Friday but they're not doing it." In total, Ms. Edwin estimated that her son, who was in first grade, had been suspended 10-12 times.

Ms. Cubbs' second grade son had been suspended multiple times and did not know about the right to a manifestation hearing until the private advocate she hired mentioned it to her. When Ms. Cubbs called for a manifestation hearing, the school team, which included the school psychologist, determined the inciting incident was in fact a manifestation of her son's autism and ADHD. Despite successfully challenging the long term suspension, the damage had already been done: Ms. Cubbs reported that the meeting was held after her son had already been removed from school for more than 10 days, and that her son was "due not only the instructional hours back, but also the therapeutic hours he had been denied by being put out of school."

While not specifically described as a manifestation hearing, Ms. Angel shared that during the time in which her daughter was frequently being suspended, Ms. Angel invited a friend of hers, a school administrator, to accompany her to a meeting with the school, where the friend explained to the staff that Ms. Angel's daughter was exhibiting typical child behavior. In response, the private school put Ms. Angel's daughter on 'probation' with the possibility of not renewing her enrollment the following year.

Mrs. Williams discussed an experience with her son, in which she challenged the school's attempt to suspend him by requesting a manifestation hearing, as she described, "You know, I had to advocate for [my son] and find out what they did wrong, etc. and I was like, 'Well, you know, if you try to suspend him, I'm requesting a manifestation determination.'" In response, the school staff told Mrs. Williams she would have to wait for the manifestation hearing due to the employee's upcoming vacation, which Mrs. Williams felt was insensitive and did not reflect of the seriousness of the matter.

## Racial Discrimination and School Discipline

When it came to discipline, parents observed issues of racism, discipline, and special education converging, both for their own child and for other Black children in special education. For example, Mrs. Winters, who had an elementary-aged son with ADHD and a speech delay, shared that when she talked to white parents "they're not talking about suspensions," but in her conversation with other Black parents it was "suspension, suspension, suspension, they just suspend them like it's nothing."

When the school tried to suspend her son in the last four weeks of school, she challenged it and, made a broader observation about disproportionate suspension of Black male students with disabilities in the school, saying, "that's the thing with kids in special education, definitely the Black males, they want to find something on them to suspend them." Following her successful challenge of her son's suspension, she said she was concerned with retaliation and sent an email to staff explicitly saying "please do not retaliate against him," explaining that she did so because she wanted to, "let them know that I'm aware of what they could do." In this way, Mrs. Winters not only challenged the suspension of her son, but also felt compelled to get ahead of potential retaliation against him.

Ms. Angel had experienced criminalizing language that was racially related used by school employees in discussions about her six-year-old daughter. During a school meeting, she explained "[the IEP team] said she was angry, she was defiant, she was combative....I had to explain to them, 'be careful how you're characterizing this little six-year-old Black girl like that'" She went onto say, "I think the assistant principal was trying to create the narrative that my daughter is disobedient, disrespectful, combative, angry, and I just can't allow that to happen." During her interview, she discussed the connections between these characteristics and the ways young Black girls are criminalized and adultified. In this way, Ms. Angel both faced the dual burden of advocating for services for child while also having to defend against racist stereotypes.

**"The assistant principal was trying to create the narrative that my daughter is disobedient, disrespectful, combative, angry, and I just can't allow that to happen." -- Parent**

At times, discipline incidents involved cross-racial conflict between Black and white students, the fallout from raised parents' concerns that white children's harmful actions went unpunished. Ms. Edwin shared that her son had been spit on by a white child in class, and to her knowledge nothing was done about the incident. She said, "The teacher admitted the [child] spit on [my son]. I didn't get an apology, nothing." This was at times complicated by school employees invoking student privacy to prohibit information sharing about whether or not the other child had been disciplined following the incident, scenarios which left Black parents speculating as to whether or not treatment had been fair, such as happened to Ms. Edwin, who elaborated further on the incident with her son, saying "I don't know what happened to the white kid, they don't really tell you" leaving her to speculate "but it was like, he's not getting suspended for spitting on my son? They pick and choose, then they reprimand."

In conclusion, issues of suspension and discipline were common topics across parent interviews. Half of parents had children in special education that had been suspended one or more times, and of parents who had not, many had successfully challenged suspensions. Very few (three) parents had not encountered suspension in some way. In addition, some parents also spoke to the issue of informal suspensions, being asked by school officials to come "pick up" their child lest they be suspended officially.

Manifestation hearings were sometimes successful in preventing suspensions but required parents to know about this option and to challenge the authority of the school leaving them vulnerable to retaliation. Black parents faced racial stereotyping of their children by school employees and were also left sometimes without information about how schools responded to the other children involved in, or inciting, disciplinary incidents, resulting in doubt and mistrust.

## Impacts on Parents

One of the key questions we asked parents was to describe any impacts of the special education system and processes on their lives holistically. A primary impact parents described was the steady drain on time that became a real constraint in daily life. Supporting their children meant writing emails, compiling documentation, attending meetings, making mid-day pickups, and filing appeals, almost always during the workday. These demands forced parents to rearrange schedules, use leave time at work, miss professional opportunities, and forego family events.

Mrs. Allen described the extensive impact, starting with her job, "I literally almost got fired, I am not well, I think people probably label me as having conduct disorder or rage issues, but at the end of the day, this boils down to one thing, morally, ethically, we all know it ain't right, the system is set up to do exactly what it is doing, and you're asking me, how this affects me?" Mrs. Allen went on to say:

**We are not middle class, we are already financially struggling, and [the school] is calling me every day to leave work.**  
-- Parent

Mrs. Sanders described trying to find ways to make money that would also allow her scheduling flexibility to engage with the school during the daytime, saying she was thinking of "driving kids to and from school to bring in some money," and shared that, "I was interviewed a couple of weeks ago for a job and I told them listen, 'the earlier shifts the better this is what I need for my son, I need to be available if the school calls, I'm a mom first.'"

Mrs. Winters described similar pressures, saying, “you gotta work and you don’t want no problems. I’m gonna lose my job.” She further explained this results in her and other parents simply agreeing to what the school suggests because work commitments prevent deeper engagement, as she said:

**“You gotta pay the bills.. I can’t leave work. I can’t keep leaving. I’m gonna lose my job...I just say, ‘yeah, go ahead and do that, yep,’ I agree to do it because I’m thinking about work.”**

Many said advocacy felt like a second job that displaced other priorities and overshadowed everyday life. Mrs. Winters captured the nonstop vigilance, saying, “I’m his only advocate, you know, I have to speak for my son.” Parents described both direct and indirect costs that accumulated over time from paying for private advocates and evaluations, to losing wages due to frequent meetings, pickups, and crisis calls.

Mrs. Sanders summarized the tradeoffs bluntly said, “I’ve spent thousands [of dollars] last year alone having an advocate on my son’s case, just last year, cost me \$2,500 to maintain his case for 10 months... it’s cost me thousands [of dollars] with the tutoring, I was spending like almost \$500 a month.” Together, these accounts show how precarious work situations and expenses resulted in financial stress and costs for Black parents.

A subset of families incurred additional financial expenses by relocating within and across district lines in search of more appropriate placements or more responsive schools. Mrs. Williams underscored the financial hit: “financially, we’re having them pick up and move, and this is not like, you know, it’s going to cost like thousands.” Even when moves led to better services, parents emphasized the upheaval involved in packing, transferring records, and helping siblings adapt to new schools, highlighting how trying to find the best care for their children in the face of unsupportive public schools forced major disruptions beyond the school day and into family life.

Whereas most of what parents described spoke to the financial costs to themselves, Mrs. Allen pointed out that, conversely, there are those who financially or otherwise benefited from the toll extracted on Black families, particularly Black low-income families, saying:

**“You have a district with Black, wealthy, educated people who want to further their aspirations at the expense of their own people, you have white people who sit idle and benefit from this mess and act like they don’t know what’s going on because this mess ensures their kids benefit from it, you have lawyers capitalizing off it, and law enforcement, and judges, and advocacy agencies -- there’s a whole system of people benefiting from this.”**

## Mental and Physical Health

Parents consistently reported many mental health impacts including anxiety and sleep disruption as part of their special education experiences. Mrs. Williams described the dread attached to constant calls from school: “it’s a lot of anxiety every time the phone rings” and felt “constant situation nervousness, you’re up all night responding to these people” She also added, “It’s a nightmare, it’s awful, awful not feel secure dropping off or allowing your child to go to school.” This sense of unease was echoed across accounts. Mr. Potter captured the day-to-day strain:

**“it’s been horrific, actually, I mean, it’s, it’s been just stressful, traumatic, I would say it’s been very traumatic because I’ve had sleepless night, you know? It’s been difficult, difficult working, going to work, you know?”**

Other parents sought outside support to manage the mental toll. Mrs. Angel explained: “there are times when I am exhausted, I also started therapy because I just wanted to make sure that I’m not blaming myself for what’s going on and understanding that I am trying to do the best that I can for my daughter.” Finally, Mrs. Allen connected years of contentious IEP meetings and not being heard to heightened anxiety, saying “my nerves are heightened, and my anxiety.” She explained further, “It just seems like, over the years, with all of the IEP meetings and not really being heard it feels like I developed anxiety, because of my experiences it was nothing short of traumatic for [my son] and I both.”

Parents connected prolonged stress from difficult school systems to tangible physical symptoms, most often fluctuating weight, exhaustion, and disrupted sleep. Mrs. Williams described the physiological spillover: “So just knowing that I had my son in a situation like that, it’s sick. I’ve gained weight. Angry, you know. Its sick, you know, you can’t sleep. You know, I ended up gaining, like, 50 pounds during this time, it was, it’s horrible.” Others highlighted the physical toll of constant caregiving. Mrs. Oakes explained, “Home School is, it’s a labor of love. It is taxing physically and mentally, because you are on the go from the minute those little feet hit the ground and even, you know, Alana has night terrors and nightmares sometimes.”

The exhaustion was echoed by Mrs. Angel, who reflected, “I am trying to do the best that I can for my daughter. And then there are times where I’m just exhausted.” Together, these accounts show how advocacy stress extended into parents’ bodies, producing weight changes, fatigue, and chronic strain that compounded the mental and emotional toll. Ongoing contentious situations with the school produced psychological strain, heightened anxiety, sleeplessness, exhaustion, and trauma that extended beyond the school day into parents’ professional and personal lives.

## Parental Advocacy Strategies

Across interviews, parents reflected a strong advocacy ethos. Mrs. Cubbs emphasized the importance of advocating and using all her available resources, saying, “I’ll use whatever resources I have for my boys, whether it’s advocating for them, pushing for them, you know, or learning more to be able to support them.” Mr. Potter had been “advocating, advocating, advocating” with the school to ensure services for his nine-year old son with dyspraxia and ADHD.

**“they’re going to protect their jobs, and that’s cool, but I’m going to always protect my cub, so and we can collaborate and build something beautiful.” -- Parent**

For parents, advocating reflected an ethos of protection, expressed by Mrs. Sanders, mother of a 9-year old son with autism, who said “I’m going to always protect my cub” and who further elaborated a sense that school officials were going to look out for themselves, and it was her duty to protect her child: “they’re going to protect their jobs, and that’s cool, but I’m going to always protect my cub, so and we can collaborate and build something beautiful.” Her words reflected the perception of different and competing interests between school employees and parents and the invitation to work together despite these differences for the shared success of her child.

The following strategies emerged as common ways that Black parents advocated on behalf of their children: (1) seeking information to inform parental decision-making (2) pursuing non-school based professional evaluations and assessments (3) requesting specific school based interventions and services (4) countering school decisions that felt at odds with their child's wellbeing (5) holding school and district leaders accountable to providing special education services, (6) and, often as last resort, hiring professional special education advocates, pursuing legal means of redress through governmental civil rights agencies, and disenrolling from schools.

## Seeking Information

One of the foundational ways parents advocated on behalf of their children was seeking out new information. For many, information did not come from schools or professionals, but instead from a combination of internet searches and friends, and family networks. For example, upon learning of his son's dyspraxia diagnosis, Mr. Potter started conducting his own research for information, as he shared, "I had to do the research, I had to do it on my own, and when I did the research, I was like 'OK, so this is what this is.'" For Mr. Potter, seeking information on dyspraxia provided a way to make sense of what it was. In this way, seeking information provided an avenue for parents to make sense of diagnoses that may or may not be well explained by providers.

**"I had to do the research, I had to do it on my own, and when I did the research, I was like 'OK, so this is what this is.'" -- Parent**

Some parents specifically mentioned the internet as their first and most consistent source of information. Deborah, whose daughter had both autism and ADHD, described how she followed her advocate online to stay updated on school policy changes. "She posts on her Facebook page, you know, changes in legislation and things of that nature." While not every post applied directly to her, she still valued the access to information: "They're good things to know." For other parents, internet research was the beginning of a deeper transformation.

One mother, whose son was repeatedly denied services, described how she started researching everything she could: "I started researching myself," she explained, "because every time I asked the school for something, they told me no." Eventually, she became a Registered Behavior Technician, a career change that she credited entirely to the journey with her son. "I learned all this because of my son," she said. "They made me become the expert." Mr. Potter pointed out that parents usually do not have the bandwidth to read and digest all the information resources given to them. He elaborated:

**"You really don't have time to digest it, to read it even, and then really digest it, and then to understand, and go beyond, you know, the average person, average parent, and you know, especially our parents of color, who may not have met a certain level of education."**

Even parents with college and graduate degrees had difficulty navigating the information aspects of special education. Mr. Potter expressed that even with a college education, he still struggles with understanding his child's rights. He stressed that in order to advocate, you must have knowledge. And some expressed that navigating the special education system required essentially obtaining a new degree, such as Mr. Morgan who joked during his interview that the experience required getting a law degree.

In addition to online resources, many parents relied on friends and informal peer networks, especially other Black parents with children in special education. Deborah described an informal group of mothers she met during school drop-offs: "It was four of us, all of us had kids with an IEP and it was the same story, you know? We were all trying to get help, and nobody was listening." Their conversations served as emotional support but also became exchanges of practical advice about accommodations, what questions to ask, and how to advocate. Informal sources of information -- including internet, friends and family, were critical to helping parents understand their rights, seek services, and make educational decisions for their children.

For most parents, these sources of information, online platforms, peer support, and personal networks were not optional supplements but rather critical tools of survival in a system that often failed to inform, support, or include them. As one mother put it, "You learn because you have to, you learn because no one is going to do it for your kid but you." Often put in defensive positions, parents learned to "document everything," as expressed by Mrs. Sanders who said, "I've learned to always document everything -- I've learned sometimes you have to create a paper trail on people."

Parents also expressed putting the information they learned to work by directly educating teachers and school staff about their child's disability and accommodations. As Mr. Potter described:

**"Once I became aware and educated on dyspraxia, when I went to IEP meetings, I would explain it to the people and to the school, I would tell them, 'here, give them this handout, this is the protocol.'"**

Mr. Potter utilized handouts and information to advocate for his child by educating the adults in the school. Similarly, Mrs. Angel also spoke to "educating" school staff, saying, "I had to educate the teacher, you know?" She further elaborated the challenge this created for her, "It was a challenge having to go in and advocate for [my daughter] with every single teacher about her disability and the supports that she needed." Similarly, Mrs. Moton described having to challenge potential assumptions school staff might make of her daughter based on the way her daughter's autism presented, saying that she had to call them regularly and say, "hey, we understand [daughter] may not look like she has autism or a developmental delay, but she needs [those supports]".

The level of informational expertise parents had to acquire was characterized by several as feeling on par with earning a college degree. This was expressed by Mr. and Mrs. Allen, who shared during their interview that "We like to say, 'we're working on our bachelors [degree]'. Mrs. Allen's expertise was remarked upon by her friend, who suggested she become a paid advocate, as Mrs. Allen shared: "Someone said that I should be getting paid to advocate -- I'll do it for free, but if I get paid too, that's great."

Despite this expertise, schools overlooked parents' assets. Mrs. Sanders, whose 9-year old son with autism had inspired her to become a Behavioral Analyst, had been invited to speak at area organizations, but had not been invited to collaborate with her son's school, despite her efforts to "drop little trinkets of information" among her son's schoolteachers and staff. She felt that her sharing with school staff "sometimes was not well received" in part, she said, "because I don't have the degrees that they have." Mrs. Sanders's comments showcase how, even in a context in which parent engagement has become increasingly encouraged as best practice, knowledgeable Black parents are overlooked.

**"Once I became aware and educated on dyspraxia, when I went to IEP meetings, I would explain it to the people and to the school, I would tell them, 'here, give them this handout, this is the protocol.'"**



## Requesting Accommodations and Classroom Supports

Across interviews, one of the most common forms of advocacy was requesting specific accommodations and services. These advocacy actions often arose when parents perceived developmental concerns, unmet needs, or inappropriate school decisions. Parents frequently advocated for early academic or developmental intervention. The previously described story of Mrs. Oakes, who sought “all the services” promised by her daughter’s school, including reading interventions and counseling, after noticing developmental and academic concerns, represented an example of early parent advocacy. Despite repeated requests, she described being dismissed and went outside of the school to obtain these services. Her actions represented a clear pattern of advocacy through requesting timely intervention and, when rebuffed, seeking external services to meet unmet needs.

As illustrated early in this report, other parents also made requests for accommodations and services: Mrs. Moran requested a one-on-one support person, placement in a smaller class, and recommendations for autism-specialized schools; Mr. Saldana advocated for preferential seating and a simplified syllabus to support his son’s learning disability; Mrs. Williams repeatedly advocated for teachers to follow her child’s Behavior Intervention Plan, and numerous other examples of requests large and small. Common across these cases were parents’ engagement in direct advocacy for legally required accommodations or early interventions that they believed would support their children’s academic and behavioral needs. In some cases, parental persistence resulted in changes but in many cases, these requests were inconsistently implemented or denied.

## Contacting School and Districts Leaders for Resolutions

Another form of advocacy was directly petitioning school leaders for changes. At times, parents went to district leaders to seek relief from the lack of services and issues related to their child’s special education experience in the schools. For example, Mrs. Williams contacted the district’s superintendent and “anybody who would listen,” after a negative incident with her child.

Similarly, Mrs. Cubbs went “up the district chain of command” after her seven-year-old daughter had a significant medical incident from what Mrs. Cubbs believed was the result of school staff using an unapproved medical device. Mrs. Cubbs relayed the event: “[the object] was not cleared by me, was not cleared by O.T. in the school, and [my daughter] developed a seizure and face-planted on the floor.” Following this incident, Mrs. Cubbs went from the principal to the superintendent, school board, city council, and even the governor for help:

**“We went through all the proper steps. We went up through the chain of command, from the principal to the superintendent, the Chief of Academics, the Chief Superintendent but they refused to give us a meeting, we even took it the school board and I sent letters to the mayor, the city council, and the governor but no one would help us, no one.”**

In seeking recognition and redress for what happened to her young daughter with autism, Mrs. Cubbs advocated fiercely, moving up the district’s chain of command and then beyond by contacting city officials and even the governor. Despite this, “no one would help.” Mrs. Cubbs, Mr. Allen, and Mrs. Williams’s stories showcased the seemingly impenetrable administrative wall that Black parents confronted with schools and district systems while advocating for their children. Rather than welcome, engage, and collaborate to find solutions, parents experienced administrators who rejected, dismissed, and ignored their pleas for help.

Given these experiences, some parents turned to legal routes including filing state and federal civil rights complaints and exploring private legal options. Mrs. Oakes was one of several parents who filed a complaint with the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights. Her complaint did not result in any action, which left her feeling like the issues were regarded as 'not worthy' of investigation: "I did speak to the U.S. Department of Education's attorneys a few times, but again, you know, these issues are not worthy of a courtroom... they just kind of happen to the kids, and the kids have to pick up the pieces for themselves." She spoke further to the systemic issues more broadly, and pointed out how in the absence of federal intervention, or intervention of any kind, families are left to deal with the financial effects of discrimination:

**"Families just have to deal with it, and whether or not you're able to afford therapy for the child, or able to afford to homeschool or whatever, the families are left to deal with their child, not just being discriminated against, but also being targeted."**

Similarly, Mrs. Moton filed a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights, and like Mrs. Oakes, was "denied." As she described: "I went through them and they denied our claim, they said that they didn't see no wrongdoing." Mrs. Moton noted the irony that as a Black mother, if she had done to her daughter what the school staff had they would have likely called Child Protective Services on her. Yet, here, the school's failures were being dismissed without investigation. As Mrs. Moton described:

**"I'm like, 'what do you guys mean? Because if anything would have happened to my child at home, you would have did the same thing and ultimately, they would have found something wrong, or, even if it wasn't nothing wrong, they would have found a way to say that something went wrong at home.'"**

Her insights exposed the hypocrisy of social systems that targeted Black parents under the guise of child welfare yet when school employees perpetuated harmful behavior, these breaches were dismissed. Mrs. Moton also sought a private attorney but hit yet another wall. "We even tried private -- so we tried private attorneys in the state and even out of the state that would practice in Virginia, and no one would help us.... It was like they were scared to go against the school system...no one would go up against it, no one at all." Demonstrating a steadfast determination to advocate for her daughter, Mrs. Moton sought help from multiple levels including the school, the federal Office for Civil Rights, and private lawyers, but hit wall after wall.

Mrs. Sanders had a slightly different experience when she took her complaint to the state education department. Unlike other parents, she actually received an apology from the school's principal. She stated, "I don't know where [the complaint] went after that, but I know that the principal called me and apologized." Despite the principal's apology, her experience echoed that of Mrs. Moton and Mrs. Oakes, whose complaints with government agencies brought no resolution.

Mrs. Allen and her husband also sought legal representation after their experiences with the district; they felt that the law was "the only thing that works." They felt the district preyed upon families, saying, "one of their tactics is they know most people don't have resources, and information is not democratized, the resource is lawyers who know special education law -- those are your most valuable weapons."

Mrs. Allen felt that documentation and court systems were the answer, saying "because now the documentation can be used in a court and a lawyer can rip it to shreds and use it to his or her advantage, that is the only thing that works." At the same time, her efforts had gone unrewarded. Mrs. Allen had reached out to a public law center for help several times on behalf of her son. Despite this, she made little progress, not because of the law center she perceived, but because of the district's apathy:

**"I had been through Legal Aid three times before, and they were giving me advice strategies, and I'm like, 'look, it's not working, you guys don't understand what we're dealing with, they do not care what the parents want, they do not care.'"**

## Moving Districts and Non-Public Schooling Options

Finally, faced with these difficult situations and being challenged, dismissed, and ignored by school administrators, some Black parents found themselves looking into other schooling options. For Mr. Potter, fighting schools for services led him to seek other options for his son. Mr. Potter described several moves, which included unsuccessfully "fighting and fighting and fighting" with one district to obtain accommodations, prompting his family's move to another district and several other schools, which he described as "just a back and forth with the school systems."

Faced with numerous negative experiences, another parent, Mrs. Williams explored other schooling options for her son. She noted the contradiction of the state's supposedly good school system yet her experiences with it and seeing the exclusion of Black children and children with disabilities, saying "these schools are supposed to be the best schools, right? Yet they are not, and they don't welcome our children, disabled or black, they just don't." The adverse experiences with public schools led some Black parents to explore private options, such as Mrs. Cubbs, who started "doing some digging" and went to her public school's administrators and said she would consider it as a potential option:

**"So, I then started doing some digging myself, and found a school in a neighboring city, a private day school. I went back to the school administration, and I said I would go and take a look at this school and consider this school as an option for my son."**

Like Mrs. Cubbs, Mrs. Allen also explored private schools. For Mrs. Allen, the financial cost and her son's disciplinary record, which she felt the school had created itself through negligence of his IEP, made private school unfeasible, leading her to feel like no one in the system cared about what was happening to her son. As she explained:

**"I mean, we've tried to get in private schools, and they're like, 'we can only give you this amount of financial aid, so if you can't pay, you can't come' or they say, 'he's not fit for this school because of the [disciplinary] history that they created,' it's as if nobody in this world cares about this little Black boy. Like, 'please pause.' We've applied for other schools. He can't get into the other schools because of his history"**

Faced with hostile schools, other Black parents opted to homeschool. Mr. Potter decided to homeschool his son during part of the COVID pandemic despite its financial cost, as he described, "Once we found out [about my son's diagnoses] we advocated and advocated and advocated, even to the point where we pulled him out of school for homeschooling during COVID which was a significant financial cost of \$2,000 a month." Similarly, Mrs. Oakes ultimately decided to homeschool her daughter, where she now serves as her daughter's primary teacher. She explained how originally she thought by having her daughter in public school she would receive services for her daughter's autism and ADHD, "that was really the only reason why I put her into public schools, because I had been assured they had services but that's not what happened, not at all." In response to the lack of support, Mrs. Oakes chose homeschooling.

## Hiring Professional Advocates

### Putting Power Back in Parents' Hands

As a form of advocacy, parents also turned to hiring a professional special education advocate to assist them in navigating the special education process. Professional advocates provided a number of supports including information about school and state policies, accommodations, service providers, and directly participated in IEP meetings with parents. Parents discussed the "wins" that followed from hiring an advocate. For example, Mrs. Good, shared that hiring an advocate resulted in obtaining an accommodation for her daughter:

**"If I didn't have an advocate, I would be where I was six months ago. [My daughter] would not have the accommodation to be able to type on her Chromebook to do her work, which apparently, they told me that since [they implemented the accommodation] she's flourished and they've got more work than they've ever gotten from her... It's a simple [as] just letting her write in her Chromebook..."**

Some parents, like Mrs. Moran, noted that schools resisted incorporating their feedback until an advocate intervened. She explained that "when they started implementing different things, it was because she's now my advocate." Similarly, Mrs. Oakes reflected that the presence of an advocate shifted meetings from one-sided to more collaborative: "I feel like the conversation was different because it was now a two-way conversation. It wasn't just me sitting there pleading for services." She added that her advocate could make concrete recommendations, such as inviting the area's Special Education Coordinator to attend meetings.

Other parents recognized an advocate's ability to counter misinformation and prevent coercion. Mrs. Edwin recounted how a school coordinator attempted to mislead her about eligibility determinations, but the advocate intervened, clarifying legal parameters and cautioning her not to respond. Mrs. Sanders shared how listening to her advocate helped her gain familiarity with the technical aspects of special education processes "I went to a couple of [my advocate's] sessions like, just trying to get familiar with the lingo... I started learning, like, you know, the time frames, like they might have 45 days for this, 30 days for that."

Mrs. Good reflected that she learned the importance of speaking up from her advocate, "I realized, you know, I need to speak up and say, hey, what does that mean? And I learned this from my current advocate... I hadn't been doing that, but I also felt like I wasn't in an environment to even ask." Other parents described the advocate's influence as transformative. Mrs. Winters explained that her advocate "awakened" her by showing the legal power parents hold and said she had learned that "without your signature, they can't do nothing. You just gotta really get educated in a situation because if not... it's a lot."

Parents described advocates' emphasis on written documentation and procedural tracking. Mrs. Winters recalled her advocate's meticulous practice of sending and monitoring emails, noting, "everything she taught me [was] black and white only, everything was email." Winter emphasized how this level of formality not only provided a paper trail but also revealed inconsistencies and potential violations in school practices.

The advocate's insistence on written records eventually led to a successful private placement for Winter's child, paid for by the district. The protective aspect of enforcement also surfaced. Winter shared that "having [my advocate] got a lot of things in order," but simultaneously revealed how the process left her distrustful of schools, having witnessed "scary" levels of negligence and mistreatment.

Mrs. Sanders highlighted the difference: "when I had an advocate, whatever we requested, they would give it to me." In her view, having a professional advocate knowledgeable about special education rights transformed the level of respect shown and the responsiveness of school staff. Other parents had similar experiences. Mrs. Dixon recalled school staff anticipating the advocate's presence, noting that a staff member once asked if the advocate would be attending. She described this as "strange," yet indicative of the authority advocates commanded. Likewise, Mrs. Winters observed that the tone of meetings changed once an advocate was present:

**"When [the advocate] was there nobody wanted to talk, everybody was agreeing to everything [my advocate] was saying, even the special education coordinator was pretty cool, I'm not going to lie."**

Parents consistently described how the presence of their advocate changed the tone of interactions with school personnel and redirected outcomes that otherwise would have been harmful for their children. Participants emphasized the advocate's credibility and expertise as a protective force. Tiffany explained that her advocate's reputation and skill created a ripple effect of respect among school employees that extended to parents:

**"She's so good at her craft, and she knows so much, they [school] have no choice but to respect her, and with them respecting her, they respect me. Because you know, if you do anything wrong to my child I'm going to go to [my advocate], and that has actually happened, and next thing you know, I have the principal's boss."**

Advocates acted as a role model whose authority not only validated parents but also altered the power dynamics between families and schools. Mrs. Dixon explained how a single intervention through email with the advocate altered the course of her son's case: "It was just kind of crazy how [the school] switched up really quick with that one email, because, I mean, if it wasn't for that, I believe they would have expelled him, and then he would have been in an alternative schools still not getting the resources he needs." Her reflection underscored the advocate's capacity to prevent exclusionary outcomes that parents felt powerless to stop on their own.

The difference in respect, communication, and service implementation was consistently greater than they had experienced previously. Importantly, even parents who did not formally hire an advocate reported that simply referencing a connection to one could alter outcomes. As Mrs. Dixon explained, "Me bringing [an advocate] name up... it rang a bell, basically, and they got their things together." Parents who hired professional advocates consistently emphasized the difference in how they were treated.

**"I realized, you know, I need to speak up and say, hey, what does that mean? And I learned this from my current advocate... I hadn't been doing that, but I also felt like I wasn't in an environment to even ask."**

Parent

For some, even indirect exposure to an advocate's work was meaningful. Mrs. Rhodessa noted that although she had no direct advocate assigned, following an advocate's online platform over several years had given her valuable tools: "She's not my advocate but I've been following her for a few years now, and I'm learning as I go and her platform has been giving me tools that have been so helpful." In this way, publicly shared information extended the advocates reach beyond individual cases, shaping a broader community of learning. Through modeling, advocates empowered parents to claim space and voice in meetings where they once felt silenced.

At the same time, some expressed the hope of being taken seriously without needing outside support. Mrs. Moton, for example, spoke to the power of having an advocate while underscoring her desire to advocate effectively for her daughter on her own. She described this as "the ultimate goal." While she values the advocate's presence and wanting them there "without hesitation"; she ultimately explained that the goal is:

**"to continue to advocate, but to be able to strongly do it on our own, where the schools continue to take us seriously without us having to have an advocate come in and assist us in the meetings."**

### Cultural Relevance and Protection

Professional advocates not only helped parents secure services but, when paired with an advocate from the same racial and cultural background, also felt supported in navigating the racial and cultural dynamics Black parents faced in schools. Parents repeatedly pointed to race as a factor in how their children were treated and how they themselves were received in schools. Having someone who understood both special education and the racial realities of being a Black family in a predominantly white system made a difference.

Mrs. Bright shared how isolating it felt to advocate in her district, a place she described as "the most whitest of the whitest cities." She noted that her child's school had very few Black students and no sense of cultural familiarity: "We don't have that familiarity, you know, no, we don't have it, absolutely not...and they really don't try." This lack of representation shaped her overall distrust of the system: "I don't trust anyone at [the district], I don't feel as if they have the best interest of any Black child in mind, let alone a special needs Black child."

Parents found that advocates could break through those barriers. Mrs. Winters described her advocate, a Black woman, as a powerful presence in meetings that exuded a sense of "I don't care who you are, but you're not going to be able to win over me... I know it better than you." Mrs. Moton added that from the very beginning, her advocate was "strong and didn't take no mess, and she could correct them without getting out of character." She explained this confidence helped her feel more confident in the meetings.

Some parents explicitly mentioned the positive impact of having a Black special education advocate, something that parents felt offered both expertise and cultural awareness, giving them a sense of being represented, respected, and protected. Parents frequently emphasized the stark contrast in how they were treated before and after involving an advocate. Miss Oakes described her pre-advocacy experience:

**"Before getting an advocate, I felt like I was sitting in a room and talking to a wall. I was sitting in a room, and I was in a room full of people that didn't seem to care to hear anything I had to say. That changed and was the main difference that I noticed from having someone else in the room to speak on your behalf."**

However, this dynamic shifted once advocates were hired. Parents also discussed how cultural sensitivity on the part of Black advocates led to sensitivity about the ways in which Black children with disabilities might be racially stereotyped by school staff. Mrs. Angel explained that her young Daughter was often mislabeled as "aggressive" or "defiant" when she was being assertive or shutting down out of fear. She shared that her advocate, a Black woman, understood these differences: "She would be able to understand that some of these behaviors are not criminal behaviors... my daughter shouldn't be criminalized because she has a strong personality." For Mrs. Angel, having a Black advocate meant her daughter's actions were seen in context instead of through stereotypes. Overall, these stories showed that role of an advocate, and specifically Black advocates, extended beyond addressing accommodations. They also disrupted harmful racial narratives, countered disrespect, and created space for parents and their children to be taken seriously. For many families, advocates, particularly Black advocates, made the difference between feeling silenced and being heard.

Across accounts, advocates emerged as a role model who embodied knowledge, courage, and credibility. Parents learned to navigate processes, assert themselves, and claim their legal rights by observing and following an advocate's example. Advocates who shared racial and cultural backgrounds of Black parents brought a level of insight and support to navigating racism and institutions in important ways. Beyond individual empowerment, the advocate's presence reshaped how schools interacted with families, demonstrating the transformative potential of advocacy as both mentorship and systemic leverage. In sum, the presence of professional advocates reshaped the dynamics between parents and schools, shifting interactions from dismissive and one-sided to more respectful and collaborative. Parents' testimonies highlight that advocates not only ensured their concerns were heard but also compelled schools to act on requests that had previously been ignored.

### Advice for Other Parents

#### "Don't Stop Fighting"

During interviews, parents frequently shared advice and support for other parents navigating similar experiences. This guidance focused on resilience and the need to keep fighting for their children's rights and accommodations. Parents, like Mrs. Moran said, 'Don't stop fighting', Mr. Gold encouraged parents to "stay put" while advocating for their child in moments of adversity, and Mrs. Angel, stressed "don't give up." Mrs. Moton explained in detail the importance of continuing the fight, stating:

**"I definitely let parents know 'don't stop fighting for your kids, continue to fight, don't ever feel as though your voice is not important, because when your kids don't have a voice, you're their voice.'"**

Mrs. Moton elaborated in detail the importance of not giving up and the importance of being your child's voice when they cannot advocate for themselves. She encouraged parents, even in the absence of knowledge to lean on someone who can help them continue to fight. Mrs. Angel also contended that not giving up on her child was vital; she asserted that education is 'critically important' for her child's future. She shared during her interview: "Don't give up because these years for your children are extremely important and they can't advocate for themselves." Mrs. Angel further asserted:

**When it comes to our children, we have to get this right because there's no redos on their childhoods and there's no redos on their education. And education is so critically important you can't give up -- and do not feel like you're alone in this -- it's important to find other people to connect to."**

Mrs. Moran also advised parents to connect with other parents to aid in perseverance. During her interview, she said:

**"Never stop fighting for your kid. Always go with you're gut feeling, if you're overwhelmed, take some time to decompress, but get back in it. Don't stop. Don't quit. Keep going, even though you feel like you're running in circles, just keep on going, try to talk to other parents, try to talk to other people, to get more information."**

### Knowledge is Power

As this suggested related to perseverance was the message to other parents that "knowledge is power." For example, Mr. Potter stated parents should be "educated about their rights." Similarly, Mrs. Edwin instructed other parents to 'ask questions' to obtain knowledge, while Mrs. Bright, a described 'pushing information' that she had learned to her own clients. During Mrs. Bright's interview, she shared:

**"I always ask [my clients], like, 'do you understand these IEP meetings?' And usually, they don't. So I give them this information all the time, I give my clients useful information, I try to push it as much as possible."**

In the face of information overwhelm, Mrs. Edwin encouraged parents to continue to ask questions even if 'you don't know what is going on'. During her interview she explained:

**"My advice is, you have a voice, you have rights, and it's okay to speak up for your child, even when you're not sure about what's going on. It's okay to ask questions if you're not sure. Don't feel ashamed. No question is a dumb question, if you don't advocate for your child, who will?"**

Mr. Gold urged parents to gain knowledge about their child, exploring what they like and dislike, and to make their child feel loved. He shared during his interview:

**"I would advise them to, you know, learn more about their child like asking them certain questions, spending proper time with them, learning about your child's likes and dislikes, is a good process to go through with a child with disability, making them feel loved."**

The voices of parents encouraged others to seek knowledge first and foremost and to use it to effectively advocacy for their children. Whether through urging parents to understand their rights, encouraging them to ask questions, or advising them to learn about their child in depth, these testimonies highlight the central role of knowledge in advocacy.



# Desired Changes

During interviews, parents were also asked about the changes they would like to see in schools and across the broader education system about special education. Responses converged around several themes:

## **1. Increased Understanding and Bias Reduction for School Staff:**

Black parents emphasized the need for teachers to be better equipped to understand both autism and racial bias. Across interviews, parents described situations in which their children's behaviors were interpreted through a deficit lens. These experiences were not only frustrating but emotionally damaging, especially for young Black boys and girls who were treated as disciplinary threats rather than neurodivergent learners.

## **2. Improve School Cultural Awareness, Representation, and Advocacy:**

Beyond the individual experiences with teachers and IEP teams, parents expressed frustration with how their advocacy was interpreted through a racialized lens. Families consistently recommended hiring cultural liaisons, preferably from Black communities, to facilitate communication, mediate conflicts, and ensure that school practices are inclusive of diverse cultural norms.

## **3. Improve IEP Implementation and Meeting Experiences:**

The Individualized Education Program (IEP) process is federally mandated as a collaborative planning mechanism for students with disabilities. Yet many Black parents shared that IEP meetings function more as procedural formalities than authentic opportunities to shape their child's learning trajectory. Parents expressed concern that decisions were made without them and that their voices were often disregarded. Parents advocated for increased transparency and accountability in IEP development. Recommendations included district policies that require schools to show how parent concerns are integrated into IEP goals and documented in meeting summaries.

## **4. School Environments and Emotional Safety:**

Parents called for trauma-informed school climates, improved staff retention, and consistent therapeutic relationships that allow students receiving special education and related services to build trust and routine.

# Conclusion

This study sought to identify how Black parents in Virginia experience special education systems in local public schools, the specific advocacy strategies they use, and the impacts and desired changes parents would like to see within these systems. Across 21 interviews, parents described persistent patterns of minimization, disregard, and discrimination that shaped their interactions with educators, IEP teams, and administrators.

Despite federal and state laws guaranteeing access to appropriate services, families encountered inconsistent IEP implementation, inadequate communication, racial bias, and punitive discipline practices that often stemmed directly from disability-related needs. These school-based shortcomings were not isolated events but occurred across grade levels, disability categories, and districts signaling system-wide failures that disproportionately burden Black families.

The consequences of these failures extended well beyond the school building. Parents reported significant disruptions to their work lives, major financial strain when forced to seek private evaluations or therapeutic services, and measurable impacts on mental and physical health. Yet amid these challenges, Black parents demonstrated remarkable persistence and strategic insight. Their advocacy efforts—ranging from information gathering and pursuing independent evaluations to filing civil rights complaints and hiring professional advocates—illustrate both the depth of systemic barriers and the strength Black parents must mobilize simply to secure their children’s educational rights.

Their strategies highlighted a reality this report makes clear: Black parents are not passive recipients of school decisions; they are active protectors of their children’s well-being navigating schools that too often fail to meet legal and ethical obligations. Finally, parents’ recommendations for change offer a roadmap for improving special education systems. They call for culturally competent staff, transparent and collaborative IEP processes, reduced reliance on punitive discipline, and environments that honor children’s emotional and physical safety. They also urge other parents to “keep fighting,” reflecting the resilience that has sustained them in the absence of institutional support.

In the broader content, this study offers important insights into the experiences of Black parents in the state of Virginia. Such experiences have been overlooked by parent surveys and investigations that failed to collect or report findings by race. On the one hand, this study corroborates themes from Virginia’s JLARC report. Like the JLARC study (2020), parents here reported that IEPs were not implemented properly, felt uncomfortable and frustrated at IEP meetings due to school employee’s treatment of parents and/or the child, and faced obstacles participating in IEP meetings due to work. Similarly, parents here experienced a lack of communication and felt complaints were unfairly handled and unresolved. Unlike JLARC, this study used a race-conscious approach and found specifically that Black parents experienced these issues.

While this study reflects only a small subset of Black parents’ perspectives in the state, additional studies should be conducted across the state to corroborate and extend these findings. Specifically, a representative statewide survey should be conducted to ascertain how parents by race experience the special education system. Because of limited research more generally focused on Black parents and special education specifically, this study, while limited in number of interviews, helps expand available findings about the experiences of Black parents and specifically those whose children have received an autism diagnosis. As this partnership between Advocating4Kids and Howard University continues, the findings of this study should serve as both an indictment of current practices and a catalyst for building more equitable, responsive, and humanizing systems for Black children with disabilities and their families.

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