

CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS ADHD PRACTICE

A Framework for Educators Serving Black and Brown Students

For classroom teachers, school administrators, counselors, psychologists, social workers, and all school-based staff

WHY THIS MATTERS FOR EVERY EDUCATOR

ADHD is one of the most common neurodevelopmental conditions in children. It affects attention regulation, impulse control, emotional regulation, and executive functioning. It does not affect intelligence. It is not a behavior problem, a parenting failure, or a product of community circumstances. It is a brain-based condition with a strong genetic component, documented across every racial, ethnic, and socioeconomic group.

Yet what happens to a child with ADHD in school depends enormously on race. Black and brown students with undiagnosed ADHD are significantly more likely to be disciplined than supported, more likely to be referred to the office than to the school psychologist, and more likely to accumulate suspensions than accommodations.

Educator bias, conscious and unconscious, shapes how the same behaviors are interpreted across racial lines. (Owens, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 2023; Owens, *American Sociological Review*, 2022)

38.8% of students suspended nationally are Black, while Black students represent only 15.1% of K-12 enrollment. (Civil Rights Data Collection, 2017-18, cited by ScienceDirect, 2023)

3x more likely Students with ADHD are suspended or expelled at significantly higher rates than peers without disabilities; those with ADHD and emotional disturbance are most at risk. (American Academy of Pediatrics, Pediatrics, 2024)

Least likely Black females were the demographic least likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis in a study of 849,281 ADHD patients, while being among the most likely to receive disciplinary referrals. (Shalaby et al., *Scientific Reports*, 2024; GAO, 2024)

The core question every educator should ask: Before writing a discipline referral for a Black or brown student, ask: Could what I am seeing be ADHD? Could this behavior be a neurological response rather than a willful choice? That question is the beginning of effective response.

WHAT ADHD LOOKS LIKE IN THE CLASSROOM

ADHD is not one presentation. Its three types, inattentive, hyperactive-impulsive, and combined, produce different classroom profiles. In Black and brown students, the inattentive presentation is most frequently missed because it does not disrupt the classroom.

The Inattentive Presentation

- **Characteristic behaviors:** Appears to be listening but cannot recall what was said. Starts tasks and trails off. Loses materials routinely. Makes careless errors on work they understand. Stares into space during instruction.
- **What is actually happening:** Working memory deficits make it neurologically difficult to hold and use information while completing tasks. Task initiation impairment makes it genuinely hard to start even when the student understands the content. (Barkley, 2015; DuPaul and Stoner, *ADHD in the Schools*, 2014)
- **Who is most missed:** Black girls. The GAO 2024 report documented that Black girls receive disproportionate discipline referrals while simultaneously being the demographic least likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis. (GAO, 2024; Shalaby et al., *Scientific Reports*, 2024)

The Hyperactive-Impulsive Presentation

- **Characteristic behaviors:** Difficulty remaining seated, calling out answers, touching objects or people impulsively, difficulty with transitions, acting before thinking.

What is actually happening: Inhibitory control deficits mean the neurological brake between impulse and action fires too slowly. The student is not choosing to act impulsively. The executive system that would insert a pause is not functioning typically. (Barkley, 2015)

The research on misattribution: Identical behaviors are perceived as more blameworthy in Black and Latino boys than in white boys by teachers, even in controlled experimental conditions with 1,053 U.S. teachers. (Owens, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 2023)

Emotional Dysregulation

ADHD impairs the brain's ability to regulate emotional intensity and recovery. A student with ADHD may react to frustration, perceived criticism, or peer conflict with intensity that appears grossly disproportionate. This is a neurological feature of ADHD.

Research on Black girls specifically documents that emotional expressiveness in Black female students is evaluated more harshly than identical expressiveness in white female students, and is more likely to result in disciplinary referral than a support conversation. (Morris and Perry, *Sociology of Education*, 2017; Legette et al., 2026)

EDUCATOR BIAS: WHAT THE RESEARCH SHOWS

Educator bias in the perception of student behavior is a documented, measurable psychological phenomenon with significant educational consequences. A controlled study using video experiments with 1,053 teachers found that Black and Latino boys were perceived as significantly more blameworthy for the same classroom misbehaviors as white peers, even when all variables were held constant. (Owens, *American Sociological Review*, 2022; *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 2023)

- **Racial bias in discipline referrals:** Research from North Carolina found that Black students were less likely to be subject to exclusionary discipline when they had Black teachers rather than white teachers in the same school, for the same behaviors. The effect was strongest for "willful defiance," a subjectively defined infraction. (Lindsay and Hart, 2017, cited by Brookings Institution, 2022)
- **Racial bias in diagnosis referrals:** Educator over-reliance on subjective views and cultural stereotypes contributes to bias in ADHD referrals. Diagnostic disparities stem in part from gaps in cultural awareness produced by disproportionate student-teacher racial demographics. (MedCentral, 2022; Donna Ford, PhD, The Ohio State University)

A 2024 RSF Journal study found that an ADHD diagnosis in Black children in early elementary school was associated with worse teacher-rated school behaviors over time, consistent with the notion that diagnosis triggers racialized patterns of stigma rather than support. (Owens and Cao, *RSF Journal of the Social Sciences*, 2024)

What this means in practice: Bias interruption is about accuracy. An educator whose perception of behavior is shaped by implicit racial assumptions is not seeing the student clearly. Culturally conscious practice is more accurate practice, and accurate practice produces better outcomes.

THE RECOGNIZE, RESPOND, REFER, ADVOCATE FRAMEWORK

Recognize

- **Know both presentations:** Disruption and compliance are not reliable indicators of whether ADHD is present. A quiet, withdrawn student who does not complete work and loses everything may have ADHD just as much as a student who cannot sit still. (DuPaul and Stoner, *ADHD in the Schools*, 2014)
- **Document patterns, not incidents:** ADHD produces consistent, cross-setting patterns. Document what you observe across time, across subjects, and across contexts. A persistent pattern across months and settings is clinically significant.
- **Notice who you are not noticing:** Black girls with inattentive ADHD are the students most likely to slip through without referral. If your referral list is disproportionately Black boys and few or no Black girls, that is information worth examining.

Respond

Lead with support, not sanction. The evidence is clear that exclusionary discipline does not change behavior and produces worse outcomes for students with disabilities. Students with ADHD are among the highest-risk groups for repeated suspension and expulsion. (American Academy of Pediatrics, *Pediatrics*, 2024)

- **Implement classroom supports proactively:** Preferential seating, chunked assignments, written directions alongside verbal, movement breaks, and frequent low-stakes check-ins benefit students with ADHD and many other students simultaneously. (DuPaul and Stoner, *ADHD in the Schools*, 2014; Pfiffner and DuPaul, 2015)

- **Regulate your own emotional response:** Escalated educator responses escalate student behavior. De-escalation, calm redirection, and brief removal from stimulation are more effective. (*Fabiano et al., 2015*)

Refer

- **Know your legal obligation:** Under IDEA, any student suspected of having a disability that affects educational performance has the right to a free, comprehensive evaluation. Any educator who suspects ADHD may refer a student for evaluation. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414; U.S. Department of Education*)
- **Do not require diagnosis before referring:** A referral for evaluation is not a referral for diagnosis. It is a request for the school to determine whether a disability is present and affecting educational performance.
- **Document before you refer:** A referral supported by documented patterns across time, settings, and subjects is significantly more likely to result in timely evaluation than an undocumented verbal concern.

Advocate

- **Know what students are entitled to:** Students with ADHD are entitled to either a 504 Plan under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act or an IEP under IDEA, depending on the level of support needed. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.; Section 504, 29 U.S.C. 794*)
- **Implement plans as written:** Research found that teachers used only 62% of agreed ADHD accommodations. An accommodation plan that exists on paper but is inconsistently implemented is not a support. (*Pfiffner and DuPaul, 2015*)
- **Speak up when plans are not working:** If a student's IEP or 504 Plan is not producing results, educators are in the best position to notice and to request a meeting to review and adjust.

CULTURALLY CONSCIOUS CLASSROOM PRACTICES

Consistently and explicitly distinguish between a behavior that needs to change and the character, intelligence, or future of the student displaying it. For Black and brown students who have often received the message that their behavior reflects something fundamentally wrong with them, this distinction is both pedagogically and relationally powerful. (*Ford, Recruiting and Retaining Culturally Different Students in Gifted Education, 2013*)

Research consistently finds that positive teacher-student relationships reduce the frequency and intensity of ADHD-related classroom behaviors and increase the likelihood of student engagement. Invest relational time before behavioral challenges occur. (*ScienceDirect, Culturally Responsive Teaching and Black Youth, 2025*)

Deficit-based language about ADHD shapes how students understand themselves. Strengths-based language about the same characteristics creates a different cognitive and emotional landscape for the student. (*DuPaul and Stoner, ADHD in the Schools, 2014*)

Black students, particularly Black girls, often expend enormous energy suppressing ADHD-related behaviors to meet classroom behavioral expectations. A student who appears compliant but is exhausted, anxious, and falling behind academically may be a highly skilled masker. (*Morris and Perry, Sociology of Education, 2017; Livingston et al., Autism, 2019*)

PARTNER WITH THE SOCIETY FOR ADHD AND CO-OCCURRING CONDITIONS

The Society for ADHD and Co-Occurring Conditions is the only ADHD organization in the United States with a dedicated focus on faith-based and marginalized communities. We serve as a bridge between schools, families, and the resources communities need to support students with ADHD equitably.

- **Professional development and training:** The Society provides ADHD education and training for school teams and professional development sessions on culturally conscious ADHD practice.
- **Family connection:** Referring a Black or brown family to The Society connects them with culturally grounded ADHD education and community support. Our Resource Library at www.societyforadhd.org/resource-library is free and publicly accessible.
- **Educator resources:** The Society's ADHD Educator Toolkit for Black and Brown Students provides concise, practical guidance at every level, from classroom recognition to IEP advocacy.

For training, professional development, family referrals, or partnership:

info@societyforadhd.org | www.societyforadhd.org

Key sources: Civil Rights Data Collection 2017-18; Owens, American Sociological Review (2022) and Social Psychology Quarterly (2023); Shalaby et al., Scientific Reports (2024); American Academy of Pediatrics, Pediatrics (2024); GAO (2024); Morris and Perry, Sociology of Education (2017); Legette et al. (2026); Lindsay and Hart (2017); Pliffner and DuPaul (2015); Brookings Institution (2022); MedCentral/Donna Ford, PhD (2022); Owens and Cao, RSF Journal (2024); Barkley (2015); DuPaul and Stoner (2014); IDEA 20 U.S.C. 1400; Section 504, 29 U.S.C. 794; Fabiano et al. (2015); ScienceDirect, Culturally Responsive Teaching (2025); Livingston et al., Autism (2019).



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EDUCATOR BRIEF 01

WHAT ADHD LOOKS LIKE

In Black and Brown Students: A Recognition Guide

WHY RECOGNITION IS THE FIRST STEP

You cannot support what you do not see. For Black and brown students, the gap between ADHD presence and ADHD recognition is larger than for any other demographic group. This brief gives educators the specific, pattern-based recognition tools they need to identify ADHD in the students most likely to be missed.

THE THREE PRESENTATIONS

Inattentive Type (Most Often Missed in Black and Brown Students)

- **Characteristic behaviors:** Appears to be listening but cannot recall what was said. Starts tasks and trails off. Loses materials routinely. Makes careless errors on work they understand. (DuPaul and Stoner, *ADHD in the Schools*, 2014)
- **What gets misattributed:** "She just doesn't care." "He's not trying." These attributions are inaccurate and harmful. Inattentive ADHD is a neurological processing difference, not a motivation problem. (Barkley, 2015)
- **Who is most missed:** Black girls. The GAO 2024 report documented that Black girls receive disproportionate discipline referrals while simultaneously being the demographic least likely to receive an ADHD diagnosis. (GAO, 2024; Shalaby et al., *Scientific Reports*, 2024)

Hyperactive-Impulsive Type (Most Often Misread in Black Boys)

- **Characteristic behaviors:** Difficulty remaining seated, calling out answers without waiting, touching objects or people impulsively, acting before thinking. (DuPaul and Stoner, 2014; Barkley, 2015)

What is actually happening: Inhibitory control deficits mean the neurological brake between impulse and action fires too slowly. The student is not choosing to act impulsively. (Barkley, 2015)

The research on misattribution: Identical behaviors are perceived as more blameworthy in Black and Latino boys than in white boys by teachers, even in controlled experimental conditions with 1,053 U.S. teachers. (Owens, *Social Psychology Quarterly*, 2023)

Combined Type and Emotional Dysregulation

- **Characteristic behaviors:** Elements of both above, plus heightened emotional intensity: reacting strongly to perceived criticism, difficulty recovering from frustration, mood shifts that seem out of proportion.

What is actually happening: Emotional regulation is a core executive function governed by the same prefrontal systems impaired in ADHD. The emotional response is neurologically amplified and the recovery system is neurologically slower. (Barkley, 2015; Shaw et al., 2014)

Emotional expressiveness in Black female students is evaluated more harshly than identical expressiveness in white female students and is more likely to result in disciplinary referral. (Morris and Perry, *Sociology of Education*, 2017)

PATTERN RECOGNITION: WHAT TO DOCUMENT

- **Duration:** ADHD symptoms must be persistent, typically present for at least 6 months. A student having a hard week is not ADHD. A student who has struggled consistently since kindergarten warrants inquiry. (APA, *DSM-5-TR*, 2022)
- **Settings:** ADHD manifests across multiple settings. Document what you observe in your classroom and ask colleagues what they observe in theirs. Pervasive difficulty is more indicative than setting-specific difficulty. (APA, *DSM-5-TR*, 2022)
- **Discrepancy:** A student who excels when highly interested and struggles significantly when not is showing a classic ADHD pattern. Interest-based attention is a feature of ADHD neurology.
- **The gap between ability and output:** If a student clearly understands content in verbal discussion but cannot produce it in written work, the gap between what they know and what they can demonstrate is clinically significant.

QUICK REFERENCE: FLAGS THAT WARRANT A REFERRAL CONVERSATION

- Consistent incomplete work across multiple subjects over months, not attributable to language or cognitive barriers
- Chronic disorganization across all classes: lost materials, missed assignments, messy workspace
- Repeated behavioral incidents that follow a pattern at transition times, unstructured periods, or low-interest tasks
- Emotional outbursts that are disproportionate, frequent, and followed by visible remorse
- A student who spaces out consistently during instruction but responds when called on after a delay
- Any Black or brown girl who is quiet, not completing work, and not causing disruption. She is the student most at risk of being unseen.

Remember: High grades do not rule out ADHD. A student maintaining academic performance through extraordinary effort or strong compensatory strategies may still have ADHD with significant functional impairment. Grades are not the standard. Functional impairment is. (Barkley, 2015; Quinn and Madhoo, Primary Care Companion for CNS Disorders, 2014)



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EDUCATOR BRIEF 02

FROM DISCIPLINE TO SUPPORT

Responding to ADHD-Related Behavior Equitably

THE PROBLEM WITH DISCIPLINE AS A DEFAULT RESPONSE

The research on exclusionary school discipline is unambiguous: suspension and expulsion do not change student behavior, do not make schools safer, and produce measurable harm to academic outcomes, graduation rates, and long-term economic mobility. There is little evidence that exclusionary discipline deters future misbehavior. (*American Academy of Pediatrics, Pediatrics, 2024*)

Students with ADHD are among the highest-risk groups for repeated suspension and expulsion. For Black and brown students with undiagnosed ADHD, exclusionary discipline moves them out of the educational system and toward the juvenile justice pipeline. (*American Academy of Pediatrics, Pediatrics, 2024; Behnken et al., Journal of Criminal Justice, 2014*)

38.8% of suspensions go to Black students, who are 15.1% of enrollment. (CRDC 2017-18, cited by ScienceDirect, 2023)

62% of agreed ADHD accommodations are actually implemented by teachers on average. Plans on paper are not the same as support in practice. (Piffner and DuPaul, 2015)

BEFORE YOU WRITE THE REFERRAL: A DECISION FRAMEWORK

- **Step 1: Ask the neurological question:** Could this behavior be ADHD-related? Impulsive speech, difficulty waiting, emotional outbursts, moving when supposed to be still, and not completing work are all documented features of ADHD neurology.
- **Step 2: Check your interpretation:** Would I interpret this same behavior the same way in a white student? Research shows that educators interpret identical behaviors differently across racial lines. (*Owens, Social Psychology Quarterly, 2023; Liu, Hayes, and Gershenson, EdWorkingPaper, 2022*)
- **Step 3: Try a support-based response first:** Before referring to the office, try a specific, targeted classroom intervention and document the outcome.
- **Step 4: Document the pattern:** If behavior is persistent and not responsive to classroom intervention, document specifically what behavior, when, what preceded it, what followed it, and what interventions were attempted.
- **Step 5: Refer for evaluation, not just to the office:** When a behavioral pattern is persistent, pervasive, and not responsive to typical classroom supports, the appropriate referral is to the school's evaluation team. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414*)

ALTERNATIVES TO EXCLUSIONARY DISCIPLINE

Environmental Modifications

- **Seating:** Preferential seating near the teacher and away from high-traffic areas or windows reduces the sensory and social inputs that compete for the ADHD student's attention. This is a free, immediate, evidence-based intervention. (*DuPaul and Stoner, ADHD in the Schools, 2014*)
- **Transition warnings:** A verbal warning five minutes before a transition, and again two minutes before, reduces the dysregulation that transitions produce.
- **Reduced sensory load:** Noise, visual clutter, and competing stimuli all increase the attentional and regulatory demand on a student with ADHD. Environmental simplification is an intervention.

Instructional Modifications

- **Chunk assignments:** One task at a time. One direction at a time. Breaking large assignments into smaller, clearly defined steps reduces the executive function demand of long-horizon tasks. (*DuPaul and Stoner, 2014; Piffner and DuPaul, 2015*)
- **Provide written directions:** Verbal-only instructions require working memory to hold and sequence. Written instructions externalize that cognitive demand.

- **Frequent low-stakes check-ins:** Brief, regular check-ins during independent work catch difficulty before it compounds and communicate that the educator is engaged with the student's progress.

Behavioral Supports

- **Movement breaks:** Brief, structured movement breaks reduce hyperactivity-related behavioral disruption and improve subsequent attention. They are not rewards. They are regulatory tools. (*Pontifex et al., Pediatrics, 2013*)
- **Positive behavioral acknowledgment:** Students with ADHD receive a disproportionate volume of negative feedback. Consistent, specific positive acknowledgment counteracts the cumulative damage of that ratio and increases prosocial behavior. (*DuPaul and Stoner, 2014*)
- **Private redirection:** Public correction of ADHD-related behavior in front of peers triggers shame and emotional dysregulation, producing the opposite of the intended effect. Quiet, private redirection is more effective and more respectful.

Restorative practices have accumulating evidence of reducing exclusionary discipline and showing promise for reducing racial disparities in discipline. (*Gregory and Evans, 2020, cited by ScienceDirect, 2023*)

LEGAL PROTECTIONS YOU MUST KNOW

- **Manifestation determination:** Under IDEA, when a student with a disability covered by an IEP is subject to a suspension of more than 10 days, the school must conduct a manifestation determination review to assess whether the behavior was caused by or substantially related to the disability. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1415(k)*)
- **Section 504 protections:** Section 504 prohibits disability discrimination by any entity receiving federal financial assistance. Disciplining a student for a behavior that is a manifestation of their disability may constitute discrimination. (*Section 504, 29 U.S.C. 794; OCR Guidance, 2022*)

In July 2022, the U.S. Department of Education issued updated guidance on the discipline of students with disabilities, emphasizing that disproportionate exclusionary discipline of students with disabilities is a significant equity concern. (*U.S. Department of Education, 2022; NAESP, 2023*)

The most important question to ask yourself before any disciplinary action involving a Black or brown student: Do I know whether this student has been evaluated for ADHD or any other disability? If not, is the behavior I am responding to potentially disability-related? If the answer is yes or possibly, evaluation should precede escalation. (IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414; Section 504, OCR Guidance, 2022)



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EDUCATOR BRIEF 03

IEPS, 504 PLANS, AND ADVOCACY*Supporting Black and Brown Students with ADHD Through the System***WHAT EVERY EDUCATOR NEEDS TO KNOW ABOUT IDEA AND SECTION 504**

Federal law provides two distinct frameworks for supporting students with ADHD in public schools. Understanding both is foundational knowledge for any educator who wants to advocate effectively for Black and brown students.

IDEA and the IEP: When Specialized Instruction Is Needed

- **What it is:** The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act guarantees a Free and Appropriate Public Education to students with qualifying disabilities, including ADHD under the "Other Health Impairment" category. An IEP provides both accommodations and specialized instruction tailored to the student's needs. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1400 et seq.*)
- **What it includes:** Measurable annual goals, specialized instruction, related services, accommodations, behavioral support plans, and transition planning for students 16 and older. Everything in the IEP is legally binding. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414*)
- **Educator role:** General education teachers of a student with an IEP are required participants in the IEP team and are responsible for implementing the accommodations and instructional modifications specified in the plan. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414(d)*)

Section 504 and the 504 Plan: When Access Is the Primary Need

- **What it is:** Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act is a civil rights law that prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities by entities receiving federal funding. A 504 Plan provides accommodations that remove barriers to accessing the general education curriculum. (*Section 504, 29 U.S.C. 794; Rehabilitation Act of 1973*)
- **Who qualifies:** Any student with a physical or mental impairment that substantially limits a major life activity, including learning, concentrating, reading, or thinking. The eligibility definition is broader than IDEA's. (*Section 504, 29 U.S.C. 705(20)*)
- **An important legal point:** Section 504 explicitly prohibits schools from considering the positive effects of medication when determining eligibility. A student whose ADHD is managed by medication still qualifies if unmedicated symptoms would substantially limit a major life activity. (*OCR, 2022; iepfocus.com, 2026*)

THE EVALUATION REFERRAL PROCESS: WHAT EDUCATORS CAN DO

- **Who can refer:** Any educator, parent, or guardian, or the school itself, can refer a student for a disability evaluation. Educators do not need parental permission to initiate a referral, though parents must provide written consent before the evaluation begins. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414(a)(1)*)
- **What happens next:** The school must respond to a written request within a state-determined timeline, typically 60 days. Evaluation is provided at no cost to the family. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414(a)(1)(C)*)
- **Your role in the evaluation:** Teacher behavioral rating scales are a required component of ADHD evaluation. Your observations carry clinical weight. Complete rating scales thoroughly, specifically, and with concrete behavioral examples. A carelessly completed rating scale produces an inaccurate evaluation. (*DuPaul et al., 2016; Connors, 2014*)

IMPLEMENTING ACCOMMODATIONS EQUITABLY

Research documents that teachers implement on average only 62% of agreed ADHD accommodations. For Black and brown students, inconsistent accommodation implementation represents both a legal risk and an equity failure. (*Pfiffner and DuPaul, 2015*)

- **Extended time:** This is the single most impactful accommodation for most students with ADHD. Extended time must be provided consistently, not selectively. The accommodation applies to all timed assessments and assignments as specified in the plan. (*DuPaul and Stoner, 2014*)
- **Preferential seating:** Arrange seating to minimize distraction, not to isolate. Near the teacher, away from windows, doors, and high-traffic areas. (*DuPaul and Stoner, ADHD in the Schools, 2014*)
- **Chunked assignments:** Break multi-step tasks into explicitly sequenced smaller steps with clearly identified checkpoints. Provide one step at a time when possible. (*Pfiffner and DuPaul, 2015*)

- **Written directions:** All multi-step assignments or complex instructions should be provided in written form in addition to verbal delivery. This is non-negotiable for students with working memory deficits.
- **Behavioral support plans:** When a student with ADHD has a behavior support plan as part of their IEP, the strategies in that plan must be implemented consistently across all settings by all staff who interact with the student. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1414(d)*)

WHEN PLANS ARE NOT WORKING: HOW TO ADVOCATE

- **Request a review meeting:** If a student's IEP or 504 Plan is not producing results, any team member including the classroom teacher can request a review meeting. Document what is not working with specific examples and data.
- **Raise concerns in writing:** A written concern, emailed to the case manager and copied to the special education coordinator, creates a record and initiates a formal response obligation.

If a school is failing to implement a 504 Plan, families can file a complaint with the Office for Civil Rights at the U.S. Department of Education. In fiscal year 2023, the OCR received 6,749 disability-related complaints, the highest disability total on record. (*U.S. Department of Education, OCR Annual Report, 2023; structural-learning.com, 2024*)

- **Support families in navigating the system:** Many Black and brown families do not know their child's legal rights under IDEA and Section 504. Educators who explain these rights clearly, without jargon, are providing one of the most impactful forms of equity-focused advocacy available to them.

The central advocacy question: Is this student receiving the support they are legally entitled to? If not, what is the next concrete step I can take within my professional role? Advocacy does not require going outside your role. It requires using your role fully. (*IDEA, 20 U.S.C. 1400; Section 504, 29 U.S.C. 794*)



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