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Ignored, Punished, and Underserved

Understanding and Addressing Disparities in Education Experiences and Outcomes for Black Children with Disabilities

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Glossary of Terms

504 Plan: A legal document that schools develop to give kids with disabilities the support they need. This plan covers any condition that impacts a disabled student's ability to access education to the same degree as nondisabled students.[1]

Ableism: A set of beliefs or practices that devalues and discriminates against people with physical, intellectual, or psychiatric disabilities and often rests on the assumption that disabled people need to be "fixed" in one form or another.

Attention-Deficit/Hyperactivity Disorder (ADHD): A medical condition marked by an ongoing pattern of inattention and/or hyperactivity-impulsivity that interferes with functioning or development.[2]

Autism Spectrum Disorder: A neurological and developmental disorder that affects how people interact with others, communicate, learn, and behave. Autism is known as a "spectrum" disorder because there is wide variation in the type and severity of symptoms people experience.[3]

Cultural competency: The ability to effectively interact with people from cultures different from one's own, especially through a knowledge of and an appreciation for cultural differences.

Cultural responsiveness: The use of disciplinary and instructional practices that are uniquely relevant to students' ethnic, geographic, familial, or linguistic experiences in a way that recognizes and incorporates the assets and strengths students bring to the classroom.[4]

Disability: A long-term physical, mental, intellectual, or sensory impairment that, in interaction with various barriers, may hinder an individual's full and effective participation in society on an equal basis with others.[5]

Early Intervention Services: Services and supports, in accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), that are available to babies and young children with developmental delays and disabilities and their families.[6]

Early special education services: Special education services for students ages 3 to 5 provided under the IDEA.[7]

Inclusion: Education programs that support students with disabilities through individual learning goals, accommodations, and modifications so that they are able to access the general education curriculum (in the general education classroom) and be held to the same high expectations as their nondisabled peers.

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA): The primary federal law that makes available a free appropriate public education to eligible children with disabilities throughout the nation and ensures special education and related services to those children. The IDEA governs how states and public agencies provide early intervention, special education, and related services to eligible infants, toddlers, children, and youth with disabilities.[8]

Individualized Education Program (IEP): A legal document designed to address the unique special education needs of individual students with disabilities. The IEP creates an opportunity for teachers, parents, school administrators, related services personnel, and students (when appropriate) to work together to improve educational results for children with disabilities.[9]

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Integrated Co-Taught (ICT) Class: General education classes wherein students with disabilities are educated alongside students without disabilities. These classes provide specially designed instruction to students with disabilities, allowing them to access special education services in an inclusive classroom setting.[10]

Intersectionality: The inequalities produced by statuses that combine, overlap, or intersect and how they influence the life course of an individual or a group, especially those who are marginalized.

Marginalization: A reciprocal process through which an individual or group with distinctive qualities becomes identified as one that is not accepted fully into the larger group.[11]

Mechanical restraint: The use of any device or equipment to restrict a student's freedom of movement.[12]

Paraprofessional: Employees who provide instructional support under the direct supervision of a teacher, including one-on-one tutoring and assisting with classroom management, such as organizing instructional and other materials.[13]

Physical restraint: A personal restriction that immobilizes or reduces the ability of a student to move their torso, arms, legs, or head freely.[14]

Placement: The classroom setting wherein students with disabilities are educated based on their IEP. Students' placement should be the least restrictive environment appropriate to support the student.[15]

Racism: The systemic oppression of a racial group to the social, economic, and political advantage of another; and a political or social system founded on these systems of oppression and designed to execute its principles.[16]

School psychologist: A psychology practitioner concerned with children, youth, families, and the schooling process. These professionals intervene to support children in schools at the individual and system levels and develop, implement, and evaluate programs to promote positive learning environments for children and youth.[17]

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act: A federal law designed to protect the rights of individuals, including students, with disabilities in programs and activities that receive federal financial assistance.[18]

Self-contained class: A classroom, typically separated from general education classrooms, where a special education teacher is responsible for the instruction of all academic subjects.[19]

Social (or cultural) capital: An individual's ability to exert influence over decisions made by those in power.

Special education: Specially designed instruction and services intended to meet the unique needs of children with disabilities.[20]

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Executive Summary

At every point in their educational journeys, children of color with disabilities and their families experience discrimination. This report uses insights from interviews with families, qualitative research, quantitative data, and interviews with scholars, education advocates, and school leaders to better understand the experiences of children of color with disabilities, with a particular focus on Black children.

We identify four areas where educators, schools, and districts treat students of color with disabilities differently than their white and nondisabled peers:

✦ Identification
✦ Placement
✦ Discipline
✦ Family engagement and support

Key Findings

IDENTIFICATION

- Students of color with disabilities are often identified later in life and are more likely to be misidentified than white students with disabilities.
- Parents of color are more likely to report major difficulties in accessing services.
- Children of color are less likely to access necessary medical screenings and referrals for formal evaluations for disability support.
- Educators are more likely to recommend that students of color receive stigmatizing disability classifications like intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, and developmental delay, leading them to receive inadequate instructional supports.
- Educators less frequently recommend students of color for services under Section 504, depriving these students of the academic supports these services provide.

PLACEMENT

- A self-contained class is comprised entirely of students with disabilities, so students may have little to no contact with nondisabled peers.
- Students of color with disabilities are disproportionately recommended for self-contained special education classes, depriving them of the opportunity for socialization and the higher academic expectations more common in integrated settings.
- Poor-quality special education instruction and services lead many families of color with children with disabilities to see special education as a "dead-end road" intended to silence and segregate students rather than support them.

DISCIPLINE

- Students of color with disabilities — Black students in particular — experience more, and more serious, school-based discipline relative to their white peers.
- Black students with disabilities are removed from class more frequently than all other students with disabilities.
- Behaviors that might be addressed with sensitivity and care when seen in white students with disabilities are met with punishment when seen in students of color.
- Black students with disabilities are disproportionately restrained, physically and mechanically, relative to students with disabilities of other races.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT AND SUPPORT

- Many teachers, schools, and special education administrators do a poor job of accommodating requests, listening to concerns, and ensuring inclusion of families of children of color with disabilities.
- Lack of cultural competency among educators reinforces bias and racist practices in identification and service provision for students of color with disabilities.
- Families of children with disabilities whose primary language is not English face acute challenges and obstacles in accessing special education services.
- When families of color advocate for their children, they are often ignored or met with hostility — by contrast, white families are often listened to, and their interests accommodated.

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Recommendations

While every family we spoke with had unique experiences, their stories highlight the need for substantive investments to better support children of color with disabilities. We target our recommendations at three parts of the education ecosystem:

EDUCATORS
- Programs that train novice teachers and provide ongoing professional development for school-based staff should ensure that all educators have the skills and training needed to effectively serve diverse learners and implement culturally affirming practices.
- Colleges and universities, as well as public agencies and private organizations funding education scholarship, should invest in research about best practices for supporting children of color with disabilities and move away from practices based largely on the experiences of white students.
- Local leaders should invest in efforts to diversify the teaching profession (e.g., partner with teacher training programs with large numbers of people of color, or recruit nontraditional teacher candidates like paraprofessionals and after-school program staff).

DISTRICT LEADERS
- Invest in efforts to foster more authentic collaboration with families of children of color with disabilities.
- Create systems and structures for engagement with the needs of families in mind (e.g., parent surveys, parent-teacher associations, communication in languages commonly spoken among families in the community, partnerships with advocacy groups).
- Rethink and reform the way special education placement decisions are made for students of color with disabilities, putting a greater emphasis on inclusion.
- Ensure meaningful academic progress and quality instruction for students whose needs can, currently, only be met in more restrictive settings.

POLICYMAKERS
- Expand access to high-quality early intervention and early special education services in communities of color.
- Expand access to health clinics with comprehensive pediatric supports in communities of color.
- Increase funding for early learning programs in communities of color and low-income communities.
- Increase special ed funding available to states and school districts.
- Support nonprofit and community-based, family-led organizations through philanthropy.

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Introduction

Personal experiences of families provide insight into broader issues impacting children of color with disabilities.

The United States' child population is becoming increasingly racially diverse,[21] and the proportion of children identified with disabilities is on an upward trajectory,[22] but persistent disparities in outcomes based on race and disability status across education systems endure. At the intersection of these populations are children of color with disabilities, who experience greater obstacles along their education pathways and poorer academic outcomes than their nondisabled and/or white peers.

For this report, we interviewed families of children of color with disabilities to understand their experiences with education, recognizing these families as experts in their own lives. The first-person narratives in this report are central research components of our work.

The families we spoke with came from communities across the country and included children and youth at every stage of the educational journey, from toddlers preparing for preschool to teenagers getting ready for college to young adults who recently completed school. These families are also diverse in their composition, including traditional nuclear families, multigenerational families raising children with the communal help of extended family, single parents, grandparents, stepparents, and adoptive parents. To protect the privacy of these families, we have anonymized their stories and consolidated their experiences into five composites. However, each of the introductions below represents some aspect of the lived experience of one or more of the many families we heard from, and the quotes are verbatim.

While every interview was unique, the stories of these families illustrate the challenges many families of color with children with disabilities face in accessing high-quality services. Despite differences in geography, family structure, and the types of disabilities that their children have, the problems these families face — and their ideas for how to make things better — were consistent.

Ms. Emmanuel is a Black mother living in Minneapolis with her two teenage sons, Miles and Monroe, both of whom have autism. Over the years, Ms. Emmanuel has had to navigate the stigma associated with having children with disabilities and experienced challenges with administrators at her sons' schools who assume

she does not understand her sons' education needs. She has also struggled with people not knowing how to handle, understand, or respect her sons, both as Black children and as children with disabilities.

The Morrisons live in Louisville, Kentucky. Mrs. Morrison is an Asian American mother of three multiracial children. Mrs. Morrison's middle child, Alex, has severe dyslexia, which has hindered his ability to access education since he started school. Alex is entering his senior year in high school. Though Alex had challenges in school as early as kindergarten, his school district did not provide him with special education services until he was in seventh grade. Mrs. Morrison fought with school and district administrators for years before they agreed to provide Alex with the support he needed, only after Mrs. Morrison threatened to sue Alex's school and its district. Though he is a capable learner, Alex has had to overcome teachers' low expectations of him as a student of color with a disability.

Mr. and Mrs. Mitchell are in Orange, California. They are an interracial couple raising a multiracial son, Tim, a 3-year-old with speech-language delays. The Mitchells first noticed Tim's challenges with language development around his second birthday, when Tim still had not started speaking. Though the Mitchells reached out to agencies in the county to get Tim the support he needed, they have been struggling for the past year to get access to evaluations, therapy services, and specialized preschool programs. The Mitchells are

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trying to do everything they can to make sure that Tim starts school on an equal playing field with nondisabled students, but they believe that institutions are creating barriers to Tim's success instead of helping him.

Like the Mitchell family in Southern California, **Ms. Smith**, in Brooklyn, New York, is trying to access supports for her 4-year-old son, Kaleb. Ms. Smith is a single Black mother in her early twenties. She had Kaleb as a teenager and is raising him with the help of her mother, brother, and extended family. As is the case for many young, single mothers of color, Ms. Smith is balancing motherhood with the pressures of a full-time job and taking classes toward a college degree. Ms. Smith first noticed that Kaleb might have learning delays when he was 3 years old and struggled to keep up with his preschool peers. She immediately reached out to her local school district for assistance. Like the Mitchells, Ms. Smith was confronted with delays, inefficiencies, and poor service provision. She knows that if Kaleb does not get support soon, he will start kindergarten without the skills he needs to achieve his fullest potential.

Finally, **Mr. Richards** is a Black father from Chicago who adopted his grandson, Brian, who is in his early twenties and has severe autism. Because of the extent of his disability, Brian struggles to communicate verbally and uses assistive technology devices. In kindergarten, Brian was placed in a self-contained special education class comprised entirely of students with disabilities, and he has spent most of his time as a student in specialized schools that only serve students with disabilities. Brian has always been big for his age. When he started high school, he was well over 6 feet tall. This caused problems for him, as teachers and school staff saw his size and silence as a problem and regularly felt threatened by him. Mr. Richards has had to fight to make sure that Brian's schools provide him with rigorous instruction, something Mr. Richards believes was not always offered.

Underlying all these experiences are the destructive effects of racism and ableism. Children of color with disabilities do not just experience discrimination as children of color *or* as children with disabilities, but as *both*. This type of discrimination is intersectional because it does not simply layer racism on top of ableism. Instead, it is a form of discrimination all its own that deserves specific analysis and tailored remedies.

The challenges and frustrations experienced by the families we spoke with are common among families of color with children with disabilities. They are the result of policies and practices that lead to conditions under which children of color with disabilities and their families are treated as lesser than their white peers, and their needs addressed with less care than those of white students.

This report uses insights from family interviews to identify **four primary dimensions** across which educators, schools, and districts treat students of color with disabilities differently than their white and nondisabled peers, leading to disparities in outcomes, including:

- The ways in which education systems **identify** children of color with disabilities;
- How educators make **placement decisions** for children of color with disabilities;
- The harshness with which schools **discipline** children of color with disabilities; and
- The failure of educators and schools to effectively **engage and support** families of children of color with disabilities.

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We then offer recommendations for high-impact investments that individuals and institutions can make to address those challenges. These recommendations focus on three elements of the education ecosystem: **Educators** and those responsible for making changes to the way teachers are recruited, trained, and supported; **School and District Leaders** who are responsible for engaging families and facilitating the delivery of special education programs; and **Policymakers** responsible for deciding what special education programs are created and how special education funding is allocated.

This report was created by reviewing and analyzing qualitative research and quantitative data on special education outcomes for children of color with disabilities. We combined this research with insights from interviews with scholars, education advocates, and school leaders studying the intersectional relationship of race and disability and working directly with children of color with disabilities and their families, as well as from interviews with families. We quote directly from our conversations with families and from our interviews with academics, educators, and advocates to share firsthand insights into the problems affecting children of color with disabilities, and their perspectives on how to solve these problems.

Finally, in considering the issues raised in this report, it is important to acknowledge the effect that the ongoing COVID-19 pandemic has had — an impact experienced disproportionately by students of color and students with disabilities.[23] Our analysis, however, focuses on the conditions that existed well before the pandemic began.

> While centering the experiences of children of color with disabilities generally, this report has a particular focus on the challenges faced by Black children with disabilities. This is a deliberate emphasis because Black children with disabilities tend to face the greatest barriers and most overt discrimination.
>
> The authors of this report believe that focusing on the most acute instances of discrimination and disparate treatment gives policymakers the opportunity to generate solutions that better meet the needs of *all* students. As a result, this report closes with recommendations for investments that are targeted to support children of color with disabilities while improving education opportunities for all children.

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Understanding the Current Challenges

From our research and interviews, we identified the biggest challenges faced by children of color with disabilities and organized them into the following four categories:

✦ Identification
✦ Placement
✦ Discipline
✦ Family engagement and support

1. Identification

Students of color, especially Black students, experience disparate treatment and outright discrimination in the identification process.

Identification for special education services is the process through which a school or school district first acknowledges that a child has a disability that might affect their ability to learn or access education. Early, accurate identification of disabilities is critical to ensuring that students receive the supports and services they need. Students of color with disabilities are often identified later in life than their white peers, and they are more likely to be misidentified than white students with disabilities.

Access to early intervention and early childhood special education services is a challenge for many families of color.

Children of color with disabilities are identified later than their white peers as needing special education services, missing opportunities to address their needs.[24] As a result, these children are less likely to receive early intervention and early childhood special education services than their white peers.[25] Drawing from a nationally representative sample of nearly 4 million children born in 2001, researchers found that of all toddlers eligible for early intervention services at 24 months of age, white toddlers were five times more likely to receive early intervention support than Black toddlers.[26]

Compared with white children, fewer children of color are identified as eligible for special education services early in their academic journeys. In one study of Florida data, only 9% of Black students and fewer than 8% of Hispanic students with disabilities were identified for special education services in kindergarten, while nearly 12% of white students with disabilities were identified in this early grade.[27] By fourth grade, several years after many students start showing signs of needing help, the disparity in the disability identification rates between white and Hispanic students persists.[28] The disparity in the disability identification rates between Black and white students levels off, but researchers believe that this suggests under-identification of Black students with disabilities.[29]

From their first efforts to get services, the Mitchells experienced delays, inefficiencies, and inadequate responses to Tim's needs. Mr. Mitchell knows these problems have exacerbated Tim's challenges and negatively affected his son:

> *"We've been on a waitlist for one evaluator for a year. That place still doesn't have any openings. So, for a kid in a situation where the speech delay is an issue, waiting a year to have a professional assess them is just not acceptable."* [30]

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Like the Mitchells, Ms. Smith had to wait for months just to get an evaluation for Kaleb. Ms. Smith reached out to Kaleb's school district in September 2021 but did not get a call back until May 2022. Even then, the district representative told her that Kaleb could not be evaluated until July or August 2022, meaning Kaleb would go nearly a year without support. Ms. Smith managed to secure an evaluation only because of personal intervention on her behalf:

> *"It's crazy, it's absurd…After having a family member who worked for the district intervene, within two days — after I'd been trying to get an appointment for the last six months — within a matter of two days, I had an appointment… It shouldn't have to take for me to know someone to get me this appointment."* [31]

Under IDEA, the primary federal law in the United States protecting the rights of children with disabilities, states are required to provide early intervention evaluation and support for infants and toddlers with disabilities, and early childhood special education services for children older than 2 but younger than the compulsory school age.[32] Effective early intervention services are critical to setting children up for success in school and life.[33] In fact, supports for children with disabilities are often most effective when provided to young children, as their developing brain is most capable of change.[34]

These interventions can encompass an array of services: speech therapy, for children with speech delays; physical therapy, for children whose ability to walk or perform other age-appropriate physical tasks are delayed; and other supports for children who struggle in different ways to make age-appropriate progress.[35] Evaluation for early intervention services for children younger than 3 is usually conducted by a representative connected to a family through their state or local municipality's early intervention center.[36] For children older than 3 but not yet in school, these evaluations are conducted by a representative from the school district in which the child lives.[37]

Research shows that while most families report that accessing early intervention screening and services is fairly easy and straightforward, parents of color are more likely to report that accessing services requires a lot of effort.[38]

From the earliest steps in the special education process, students of color are treated differently than their white counterparts. One analysis found that children of color with developmental delays are 78% less likely than white children to be identified for, or receive, early intervention services.[39] As a result, these children are less likely to get these early supports.

Iheoma Iruka, research professor at the University of North Carolina – Chapel Hill, attributes this to racism:

> *"Racism is a permeating factor all the way down…You're less likely to be identified early, so even if your parents say, 'Oh, my goodness, I think something is wrong,' you're less likely to get services. They'll say, 'Oh, maybe because you're poor, or your family's chaotic,' or whatever. They'll make some sort of social reasons as opposed to recognizing that you actually do need to be identified."* [40]

When we analyze why these disparities in identification exist, the insidious effects of poverty and racism, in the form of neighborhood segregation and inadequate investment in communities of color, become apparent. For example, a study assessing the effectiveness of early intervention supports on young children from racially diverse backgrounds found that medical screenings are pivotal in spotting delays that could be indicative of disabilities.[41] Screenings conducted by medical professionals assess whether children might have problems in specific functional areas.[42] These screenings often lead to referrals for formal evaluations for disability support.[43]

Because people of color in the United States tend to live in racially segregated communities with less access to high-quality medical care than white people,[44] children of color are less likely to have access to medical screenings by pediatricians, relative to their white counterparts. Without reliable access to doctors capable of identifying disabilities, very young children of color are less likely than their white peers to receive the support and intervention they need for a successful start to their academic journey.

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If an initial screening suggests that a child has developmental delays or deficits, a formal evaluation is conducted by an expert in identifying disabilities in children, often a child psychologist, to determine whether these delays are due to a disability and, if so, to identify the disability and how the child should be supported.[45] Beyond barriers to screening, children of color are more likely than white children to live in communities with inadequate access to those follow-up evaluation services.[46] This lack of access to evaluators means that it takes longer for children to be formally evaluated.

Students of color with disabilities are often misidentified as having disabilities that are intellectual, behavioral, or emotional.

Education theorists have pointed to a hierarchy of special education supports.[47] Theorists posit that disability classifications like autism and attention-deficit hyperactivity disorder (ADHD) — classifications that people consider mild and that allow students to maintain typical social behavior — have been assigned a high status while classifications like intellectual disability, emotional disturbance, developmental delay, and learning disability — classifications that are seen as more severe and make it difficult for children to maintain acceptable social behavior — are stigmatized as low status.[48] These theorists contend that those classifications with high-status valuation "provide students with greater access to classroom teachers and peers, the general curriculum, and valued instructional supports."[49]

The disproportionate identification of students of color for intellectual disability and emotional disturbance classifications is consequential because students with these classifications are often recommended for programs that fail to provide them with adequate support to address their academic needs.[50]

Professor Iruka explained that students of color given low-status classifications are likely to receive lower-quality supports:

> *"When you're identified, your services are either below par or lack the intensity that you need and are not quality."* [51]

When Mrs. Morrison finally convinced the district to evaluate Alex, district representatives were convinced that he had an intellectual disability. The district had not conducted a formal evaluation of Alex, observed him in any of his classes, or spoken to any of his teachers. Based solely on reviewing a few documents in his academic record, the evaluator concluded that he had an intellectual disability. It was not until Mrs. Morrison procured a private neurological evaluation that she learned Alex did not have an intellectual disability but in fact had dyslexia and substantive speech-language delays. Even then, Mrs. Morrison

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had to fight with the district to appropriately classify Alex as having a speech-language disability and not an intellectual disability.

Educators are more likely to recommend that students of color receive disability classifications on the lower end of the status hierarchy.[52] For example, Black students with disabilities are more likely than white students with disabilities to be identified as having an emotional disturbance or an intellectual disability.[53] Hispanic and Native American students are more likely to be classified as having an intellectual disability than their white peers, and Native American students are more likely to be identified as developmentally delayed than their white counterparts.[54]

Misidentification is acute for students of color with autism. Children of color with autism, especially Black children, are routinely misidentified as having other disabilities, such as emotional disturbance and intellectual disability.[55] One study looking at racial disparities in autism diagnoses found that children of color were less likely to be identified as having autism, even in cases in which evidence indicated that they met the definition.[56]

The consistent under-identification and misidentification of students of color means they miss out on the targeted supports that an accurate autism classification provides. Dr. Paula Pompa-Craven, chief clinical officer for Easterseals Southern California, explained how misidentification can lead to insufficient support:

> *"In some instances, in a classroom setting, or in a doctor's office, if a Black child, especially a male, goes in to be diagnosed, or the family has a concern about autism, there's more of a likelihood that they're going to be found to have ADHD or a conduct disorder rather than an autism diagnosis, or even be considered for that type of diagnosis."* [57]

One reason Black children are less likely than white children to be identified as having autism is because of the lack of participation of Black families in research studies.[58] Only 2.3% of participants in the most influential research studies on autism are Black.[59] By contrast, 85% of these families are white.[60] One prevailing explanation for this disparity is that researchers typically exclude participants with family structures that are not uniform with other participants' or that create challenges to gathering complete or comparative information (for example, if both parents are not available or if the child does not have a full sibling). In addition, researchers might not do enough to overcome other barriers to participation that Black families are more likely to have, such as transportation and childcare.[61] As a result, existing research used to interpret and identify autism broadly almost exclusively represents the manifestations of autism in white children.

Educators less frequently recommend students of color for services under Section 504, depriving these students of that support.

Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act (Section 504) is another, broader, federal law protecting the rights of people with disabilities.[62] It applies to students with disabilities in public schools and provides these students with additional resources and access to academic supports and services. One of the benefits of services provided under Section 504 is that, unlike under the IDEA, students can qualify for services even if they are not falling behind academically but are simply having challenges that impact their ability to fully access education opportunities.[63] In many ways, Section 504 provides a much larger group of students with extra support to engage in learning.

Students are often given 504 Plans for milder disabilities that are given higher status, and white students receive services under Section 504 at higher rates than students of color. During the 2017-2018 school year, though white students made up just over 47% of total public school students, they made up more than 61% of students with 504 Plans.[64]

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> **Eventually, I met another single parent whose son attended the same school. He pulled me to the side one day and said, 'Hey, you know, they are not doing anything with your son, not providing adequate supports nor services. They're just kind of pushing him to the side and letting him play with toys.' Hearing this was quite disheartening.**
>
> —MR. RICHARDS, FATHER FROM CHICAGO

2. Placement

Though IDEA requires that students with disabilities be placed in the most inclusive settings appropriate to meet their special educational needs, students of color with disabilities are more likely than white students to be isolated from their nondisabled peers.

Students of color are more likely to be placed in restrictive education environments.

A self-contained class is comprised entirely of students with disabilities who may have little to no contact with nondisabled peers. In contrast, in an inclusive classroom, students with disabilities are educated alongside nondisabled students, receiving the same instruction, with educators adapting either the curriculum or the classroom environment to better support students with disabilities.[65]

Benefits of inclusion for students with disabilities are, among other things, more access to higher-quality learning opportunities, greater general engagement with school, and higher productivity in adulthood.[66] Research shows that students with disabilities taught in fully inclusive general education classrooms were five times more likely to graduate on time compared to other students with disabilities.[67] After high school, students with disabilities who had most of their classes in inclusive general education classrooms were 11% more likely to be employed than students with disabilities who spent most of their time in school in self-contained special education classes.[68]

Students of color with disabilities are disproportionately recommended for self-contained special education classes.[69] During the 2019-2020 school year, an average of about 65% of all students with disabilities were placed in inclusive classes with nondisabled students for more than 80% of the school day.[70] Nearly 68% of all white students with disabilities spent at least 80% of their time in inclusive general education classes.[71] Only about 63% of Hispanic students, 60% of Black students, and 57% of Asian students with disabilities spent that much time in inclusive classes.[72] These practices disproportionately deprive students of color of the opportunity for socialization and of the increased academic expectations more common in inclusive classrooms.

Research comparing instructional practices in self-contained special education classes to those in inclusive general education classrooms, conducted with elementary school students who all had similarly severe learning disabilities, found that teachers in self-contained classes spent more time on noninstructional classroom management.[73] Researchers also observed that teachers in general education classes provided more actual instruction to all students, regardless of their disability status, gave students with IEPs more one-on-one instructional time, and frequently matched peers without disabilities to help support students with disabilities.[74] These activities were not observed in self-contained classes.[75]

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In theory, students are placed in self-contained classes because their disabilities are too severe to effectively address in an inclusive general education setting.[76] In practice, however, these settings may not give students greater attention or support.[77] They may lack structure and high-quality curriculum and instruction and may have a larger proportion of disruptive students than inclusive classrooms.[78]

For the entirety of his time in school, Brian, whose severe autism limited his ability to communicate verbally, was educated in classes comprised entirely of students with disabilities. School district representatives would likely contend that these placements allowed Brian to learn at his own pace and receive instruction specially tailored to his unique needs. However, Brian and his fellow students were held to low standards, with little invested in ensuring that they made any meaningful academic progress. Mr. Richards recalled the day he realized that the school Brian attended had failed him:

> *"I'd say that special education for my son from the start was failing. He began school at an early childhood program in a predominately white community. The racial makeup of this school was similar, with a majority of two-parent households. As a single working parent, I was unable to check on my son as much as I would have wanted. I had to trust that the school team were doing their job.*
>
> *Eventually, I met another single parent whose son attended the same school. He pulled me to the side one day and said, 'Hey, you know, they are not doing anything with your son, not providing adequate supports nor services. They're just kind of pushing him to the side and letting him play with toys.' Hearing this was quite disheartening."* [79]

Poor-quality special education instruction and services can lead to distrust and disillusionment among families of color.

Dr. Hailey Love, professor of education at the University of Wisconsin-Madison, provided helpful insight into how special education does not always help families of Black children with disabilities:

> *"We have this long history of special education being used, for all intents and purposes, to overturn or get around Brown v. Board, to still segregate Black kids. And with that in mind, families, of course, are hesitant for their kids to be labeled."* [80]

Many families of color have a fraught relationship with special education. A case study conducted with families of color with children with disabilities noted that special education felt like a "dead-end road" for their children.[81] In the experience of families studied, special education is not used to support, but to segregate.[82] They may feel that decisions about placement and service provision are intended to silence students and make life easier for teachers. Case study results revealed that participants "shared strong reservations about special education's legitimacy."[83]

The case study showed that parents' misgivings "were based on concerns about students' culture being viewed as a liability, the lack of commitment to students identified with special needs, and the high numbers of African-American children separated into self-contained special education settings…[and] the misuse of special education practices and procedures by schools, as well as what participants viewed as diminished quality of life after high school for those who have been placed in special education."[84]

The extent to which special education has harmed Black families, rather than support them, often leads to justified distrust among Black families about special education.

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Aubry Threlkeld, dean of the Endicott College School of Education, described this friction:

> *"Schools often treat Black families as if they have nothing to offer their own children. Their cultural wealth and knowledge is not addressed; it is not seen as an asset. Over and over again, I read research where Black parents share their perspectives of feeling marginalized, ridiculed, talked down to, and mistreated by school systems; yet these same parents are supposed to believe that when special education is presented to them, it is a solution to their child's difficulties?"* [85]

Dr. Seena Skelton, operations director of the Great Lakes Equity Center, a nonprofit agency in Indiana that helps schools and school districts improve how they support diverse students, explained how she herself experienced marginalization as a Black child with a disability. She was forced to leave her community because she was recommended for placement in a self-contained class:

> *"There was not an option to be fully included in my neighborhood school, so I was bused to a school in a different part of the city than where I grew up...None of my teachers in elementary school really understood the importance of racial identity development or finding one's racialized identity. That was just not talked about or addressed at all."* [86]
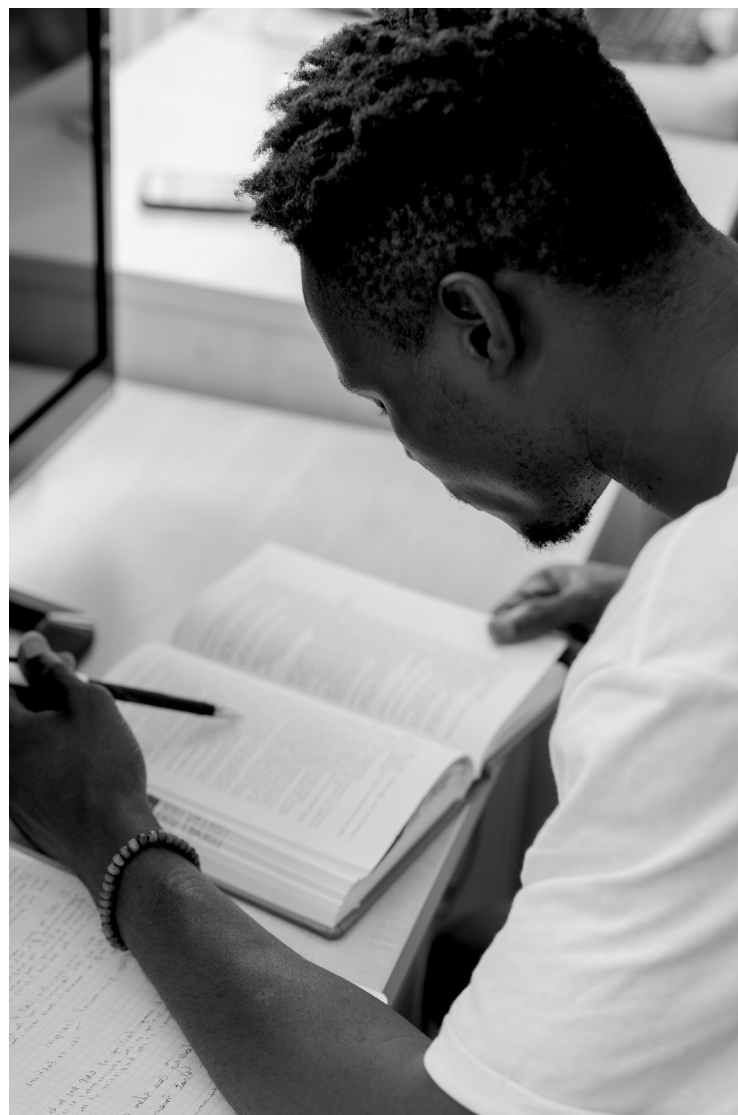
After high school, students with disabilities who had most of their classes in inclusive general education classrooms were 11% more likely to be employed than students with disabilities who spent most of their time in school in self-contained special education classes.

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> The restraint became almost like a trigger for him because they'd apply this pressure on him. He used to like very tight, strong, nice hugs. That used to calm him down. After the restraining happened, he just did not like the pressure of hugs and things like that anymore. As a parent, that was really hard for me to deal with.
>
> —MS. EMMANUAL, MOTHER FROM MINNEAPOLIS

3. Discipline

Students of color with disabilities, and Black students in particular, experience discrimination through more, and more serious, school-based discipline.

Evidence indicates that Black students (with and without disabilities) are disproportionately disciplined relative to their white peers. During the 2017-2018 school year, Black students made up roughly 15% of the United States' total student population, but 38% of students suspended and 39% of students expelled.[87] White students, by contrast, made up roughly 47% of total students, yet just 33% of students suspended or expelled (Figure 1).[88] That sames school year, Black students also accounted for 29% of students referred to law enforcement and 32% of students arrested.[89] In comparison, white students made up less than 38% of students referred to law enforcement and about 34% of students arrested (Figure 2).[90]

This pervasive disproportionality is magnified for Black students with disabilities who are subjected to both racism and ableism.

Black students with disabilities are removed from class more frequently than all other students with disabilities.

Although IDEA prohibits schools from punishing students with disabilities who engage in behavior that is a manifestation of their disabilities,[91] students with disabilities are still overrepresented in the number of students removed from class — meaning suspended (both in and out of school), expelled, unilaterally
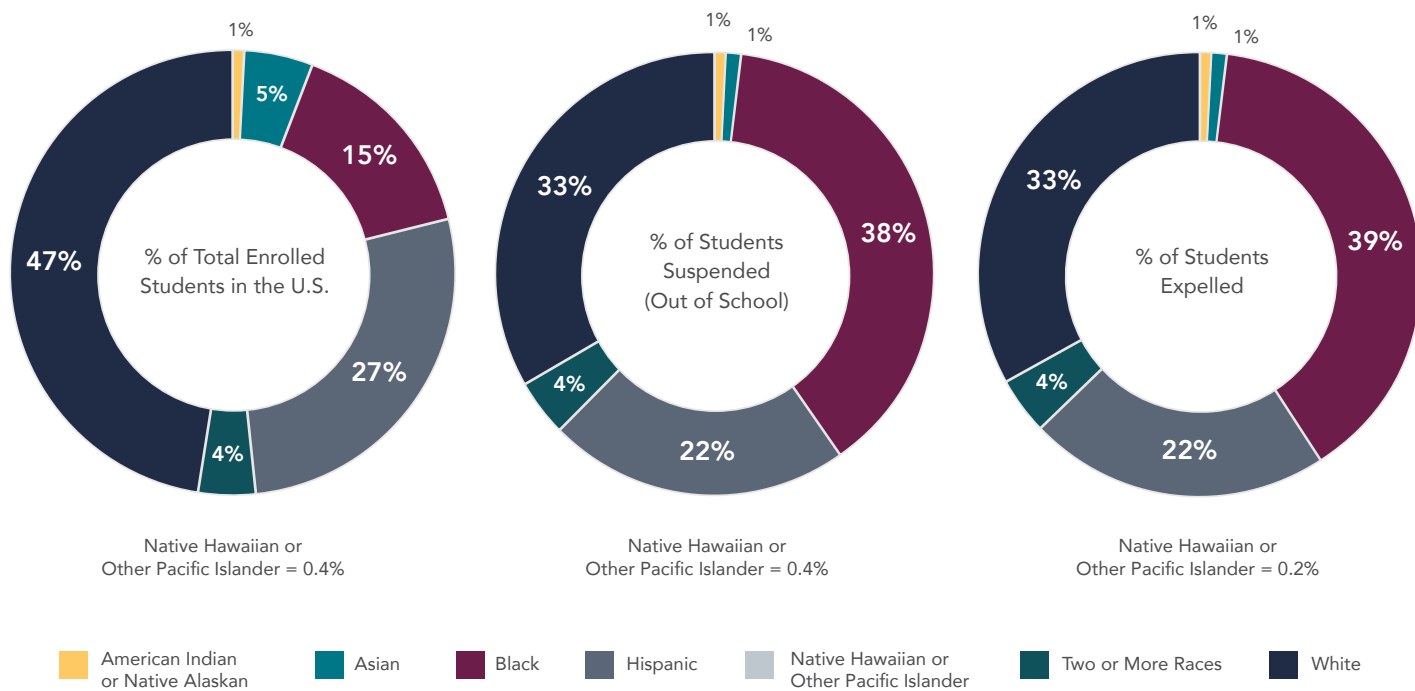
removed by school staff, or ordered removed by a hearing officer — for disciplinary reasons.[92] While exclusionary discipline for any student with disabilities is concerning, it is particularly acute for students of color.[93] During the 2015-2016 school year, Black students with disabilities accounted for just over 2% of the total U.S. student population, yet they made up nearly 9% of *all* students suspended.[94]

Alex recalled witnessing the treatment of his classmates who were also students of color with disabilities:

> *"I know a couple of my friends are currently going to college, and that's a very good thing to see, but I know a few that fell through the cracks of what the education system was supposed to fill. I believe that they were confused about the world. They had a lot of outbursts and stuff like that, and no teacher realistically told them, 'This is not okay.' What instead they told them was, 'Be quiet so the other kids can learn.'"* [95]

Alex's experience provides a powerful example of the intersectional effects of racism and ableism: Behaviors that might be addressed with sensitivity and care when seen in white students with disabilities are met with punishment when seen in students of color with disabilities.[96]

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FIGURE 1: DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS IN THE U.S. THAT WERE SUSPENDED OR EXPELLED (2017-2018)

% of Total Enrolled Students in the U.S.
- 47% White
- 5% Asian
- 1% American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 15% Black
- 27% Hispanic
- 4% Two or More Races

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.4%

% of Students Suspended (Out of School)
- 33% White
- 1% Asian
- 1% American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 38% Black
- 22% Hispanic
- 4% Two or More Races

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.4%

% of Students Expelled
- 33% White
- 1% Asian
- 1% American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 39% Black
- 22% Hispanic
- 4% Two or More Races

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.2%

Legend:
- American Indian or Native Alaskan
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Two or More Races
- White

FIGURE 2: DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS IN THE U.S. THAT WERE REFERRED TO LAW ENFORCEMENT OR ARRESTED (2017-2018)

% of Total Enrolled Students in the U.S.
- 47% White
- 5% Asian
- 1% American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 15% Black
- 27% Hispanic
- 4% Two or More Races

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.4%

% of Students Referred to Law Enforcement
- 38% White
- 2% Asian
- 2% American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 29% Black
- 26% Hispanic
- 4% Two or More Races

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.4%

% of Students Arrested
- 34% White
- 1% Asian
- 2% American Indian or Native Alaskan
- 32% Black
- 26% Hispanic
- 4% Two or More Races

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.9%

Legend:
- American Indian or Native Alaskan
- Asian
- Black
- Hispanic
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander
- Two or More Races
- White

Figure 1 and Figure 2 Source: *U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection 2017-2018, available at https://ocrdata.ed.gov/estimations/2017-2018.*

Note: *For Figure 1, expulsions refer to expulsions where students received educational service after removal. For Figure 1 and Figure 2, data includes information for public school students in all 50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.*

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There are many different ways schools and educators look at discipline for Black students. Brian shared painful memories of negative interactions with school staff who seemed to fear him more than they understood him:

> *"In the past, school staff of different races appeared to be afraid of me because of my size and dark color of my skin. Therefore, quite often, I am pushed to the side or placed in a corner. They wouldn't interact with me much. Of course, because of my inability to speak, I didn't know any better. Also, school staff mistook my behavior for aggression when all I may have needed was a break, didn't feel well, or needed to go to the bathroom."* [97]

When disaggregated by race, the data from 2018-2019 shows that 24 out of every 100 white students with disabilities were removed from class for disciplinary reasons, while a startling **64** out of every 100 Black students with disabilities were removed for the same reasons (Figure 3).[98] Black male students from low-income backgrounds receiving special education services are suspended at a higher rate than *any* other subgroup.[99] During the 2015-2016 school year, roughly 1 in 5 Black male students and 1 in 7 Black female students with disabilities were suspended at least once.[100] In contrast, only about only 1 in 10 white males with disabilities and 1 in 25 white female students with disabilities were suspended that year.[101]

Black students with disabilities are disproportion-ately restrained, physically and mechanically, relative to students of other races with disabilities.

Schools and educators also enact racist and ableist disciplinary measures on the very bodies of Black students with disabilities by restraining their movement. Physical restraint is among the most serious forms of discipline, as it involves school staff physically engaging with students in particularly intimate and sometimes violent ways, and it is most commonly used on students with disabilities.[102] Mechanical restraint involves handcuffs or some kind of device used to hold down students.

During the 2017-2018 school year, Black students made up only 18% of students with disabilities but 26% of students with disabilities who were subjected to physical restraint and 34% of students with disabilities who were mechanically restrained (Figure 4).[103]
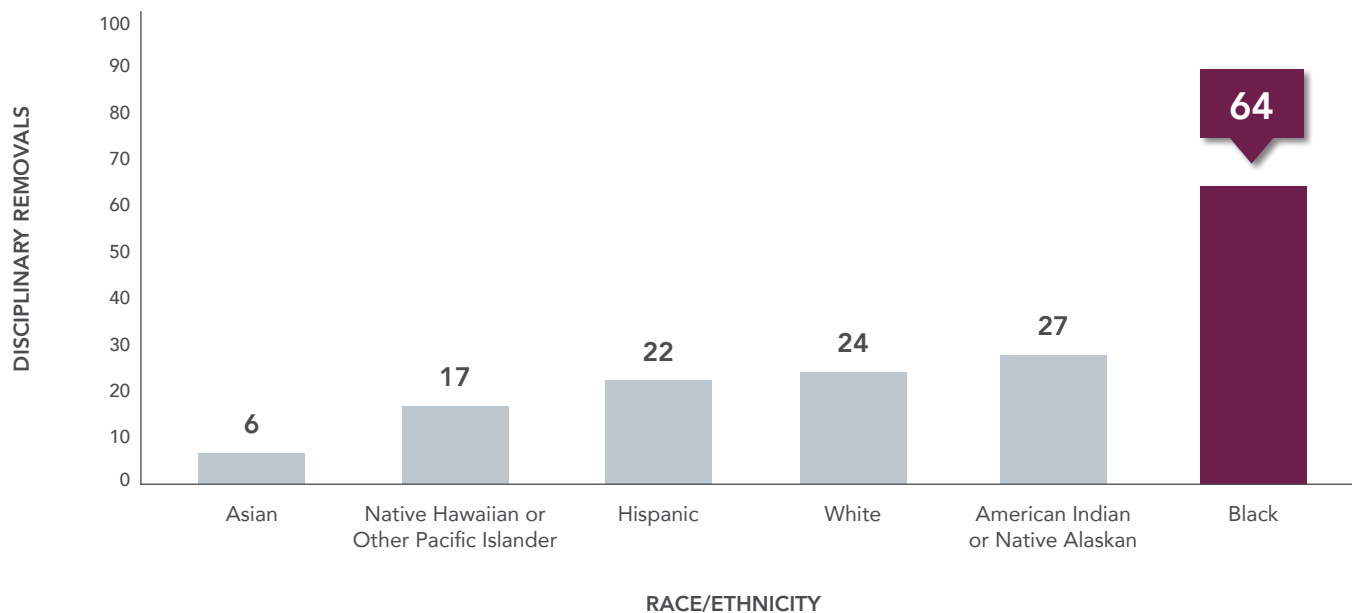
When Ms. Emmanuel's older son, Miles, was in kindergarten, school officials told her that, although Miles was only five at the time, school staff had started physically restraining him in response to tantrums he would occasionally have during class. Ms. Emmanuel recalled that although these tactics "worked" (in that they stopped Miles from behaving in a way school staff disapproved of), they changed something in her son:

> *"The restraint became almost like a trigger for him because they'd apply this pressure on him. He used to like very tight, strong, nice hugs. That used to calm him down. After the restraining happened, he just did not like the pressure of hugs and things like that anymore. As a parent, that was really hard for me to deal with."* [104]

Mildred Boveda, associate professor of education at Penn State University, explains how the excessive use of restraint on Black students shapes their experience with education into one that is particularly negative and damaging:

> *"There are very aggressive interventions that are sanctioned. This shows the carceral state of school. Who gets restrained? Nobody can touch me anywhere else, but if I have a disability, and I have a 'certain type' of disability, where Black children tend to be overrepresented, the school has permission to jack me up because I'm 'misbehaving.' That's not bias, that's racism."* [105]
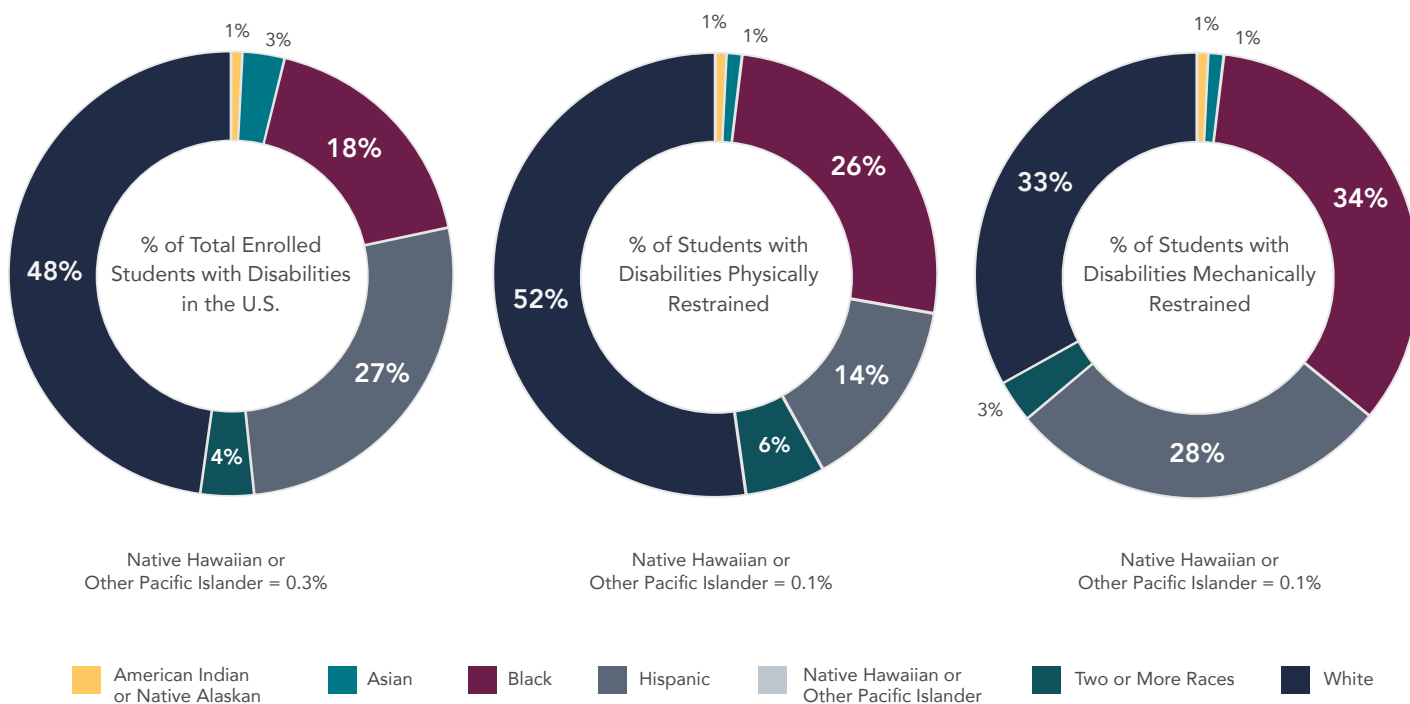
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FIGURE 3: DISCIPLINARY REMOVALS PER EVERY 100 STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE U.S., BY RACE/ETHNICITY (2018-2019)

Bar chart showing DISCIPLINARY REMOVALS by RACE/ETHNICITY:
- Asian: 6
- Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander: 17
- Hispanic: 22
- White: 24
- American Indian or Native Alaskan: 27
- Black: 64

Sources: U.S. Department of Education, EDFacts Data Warehouse (EDW): "IDEA Part B Child Count and Educational Environments Collection," 2018-19, available at https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/part-b-data/child-count-and-educational-environments/bchildcountandedenvironments2018-19.csv; EDFacts Data Warehouse (EDW): "IDEA Part B Discipline Collection," 2018-19, available at https://www2.ed.gov/programs/osepidea/618-data/state-level-data-files/part-b-data/discipline/bdiscipline2018-19.csv. (Links download data automatically.)

Note: Classroom removals refers to students suspended (both in and out of school), expelled, unilaterally removed by school staff, or ordered removed by a hearing officer — for disciplinary reasons. Data includes information for students in public schools, correctional facilities, home-school settings, hospital and homebound settings, parentally placed private schools, and residential facilities. Data includes information for students in all 50 states, all U.S. territories, outlying areas and freely associated states, and students receiving services provided by the Bureau of Indian Education.

FIGURE 4: DISTRIBUTION OF STUDENTS WITH DISABILITIES IN THE U.S. THAT WERE SUBJECTED TO RESTRAINTS (2017-2018)

Donut chart: % of Total Enrolled Students with Disabilities in the U.S.
- 1% (American Indian or Native Alaskan)
- 3% (Asian)
- 18% (Black)
- 27% (Hispanic)
- 4% (Two or More Races)
- 48% (White)

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.3%

Donut chart: % of Students with Disabilities Physically Restrained
- 1% (American Indian or Native Alaskan)
- 1% (Asian)
- 26% (Black)
- 14% (Hispanic)
- 6% (Two or More Races)
- 52% (White)

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.1%

Donut chart: % of Students with Disabilities Mechanically Restrained
- 1% (American Indian or Native Alaskan)
- 1% (Asian)
- 34% (Black)
- 28% (Hispanic)
- 3% (Two or More Races)
- 33% (White)

Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander = 0.1%

Legend: American Indian or Native Alaskan | Asian | Black | Hispanic | Native Hawaiian or Other Pacific Islander | Two or More Races | White

Source: U.S. Department of Education's Civil Rights Data Collection 2017-2018, available at https://ocrdata.ed.gov/estimations/2017-2018.

Note: Data includes information for public school students in all 50 states, District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

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> **❝**
>
> **Far too often, we hear from families who feel like they were not heard, that they were not respected. We hear from families who were told you have to go to a hearing if you want to get anything more for your child, when the parent is simply trying to ensure that their children's needs are met.**
>
> —RANDI LEVINE, ADVOCATES FOR CHILDREN OF NEW YORK

4. Family Engagement and Support

Many teachers, schools, and special education administrators do a poor job of accommodating requests, listening to concerns, and ensuring inclusion of families of children of color with disabilities.

Family engagement is a meaningful part of ensuring that students succeed in school. Effective family engagement helps improve outcomes for students.[106] When educators can connect with families and partner with them to reinforce at home things learned at school, students do better academically.[107] Additionally, educators understanding and accommodating unique cultural or lingual dynamics of families makes it easier for parents to work with schools and educators to support their children as students.

Lack of cultural competency of educators reinforces racist practices in identification and service provision for students of color with disabilities.

When teachers lack the necessary skills to support students across lines of racial and cultural difference, they may not be able to value the unique identities of families that differ from their own. Cultural competency is the set of skills needed to effectively relate to, understand, and navigate cultural differences.[108] Having cultural competence allows an educator to successfully teach students who come from cultures other than their own.[109] It entails developing certain personal

and interpersonal awareness and sensitivities, and certain bodies of cultural knowledge and mastering a set of skills that, taken together, underlie effective cross-cultural teaching.[110] Though cultural competency is important in serving diverse student bodies, many educator training programs still do not teach these skills. This risks reinforcing bias and racism by failing to prepare educators to challenge them proactively.[111]

All teachers can benefit from training to become more culturally competent. Yet because most teachers in the United States, even in schools dominated by students of color, are white, challenges with cultural competency often take the form of white teachers failing to appreciate the cultures of families of color.[112] In 2020, just under 75% of special education teachers were white; just under 10% of special educators were Black.[113]

In one survey of nearly 1,500 special educators, many respondents indicated discomfort in engaging with issues of cultural diversity.[114] Only 37% of special educators responded as feeling confident in engaging families from racially and ethnically diverse backgrounds, and just 22% of educators responded as having a high level of confidence in engaging diverse families when factoring in language diversity.[115] Only about half (53%) of the special educators surveyed stated that they had a high level

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of competency in responding to disciplinary concerns with culturally responsive strategies.[116] Similarly, just 51% of respondents stated that they had a high level of competency in using culturally responsive instructional strategies.[117] Culturally responsive education and discipline practices involve using disciplinary or instructional practices uniquely relevant to students' ethnic, geographic, familial, or linguistic experiences in a way that recognizes and incorporates the assets and strengths that students bring to the classroom.[118]

While many educators work hard to cultivate the cultural competency needed to effectively serve students and families of color, these self-reports indicate that special education teachers may not yet have sufficient opportunities to develop these skills. Absent a strong set of cultural competency practices among educators, students of color with disabilities and their families risk being perpetually underserved and misunderstood.

While improving cultural competency training for all teachers is important, diversifying the pool of special educators may help address concerns about cultural competency and cultural responsiveness. For example, research studying the impact of diversity among special educators found students of color were more likely to be identified for special education services and, once identified, given more diverse disability classification types in schools with a higher percentage of educators of color.[119] Specifically, students of color were less likely to be given emotional disturbance classifications.[120] Researchers noted that these results may suggest that teachers of color hold higher expectations of students and less bias in the presumed disability classification of students.[121]

The lack of cultural competency creates additional obstacles for families of color whose primary language is not English.

Families of children with disabilities whose primary language is not English face acute challenges in accessing special education services. University of Illinois – Chicago professor of special education Federico Waitoller has studied how lingual differences between families and educators often lead to misunderstandings that negatively affect students:

> *"English language learners are being disproportionately placed in special education services, particularly in the categories of learning disabilities and speech and language, and that is in part because many of them are not receiving quality opportunities to learn that are both culturally and linguistically responsive and universally designed."* [122]

For families whose primary home language is not English, the barriers created by language access make navigating the complicated world of special education even more challenging. Of the more than 5 million public school students identified as English learner (EL) students in the 2019-2020 school year, about 94% were students of color.[123] Nearly 77% of these students were Hispanic and more than 10% were Asian.[124] Though often not included in conversations about language access, almost 4% of ELs were Black.[125]

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Education systems' failure to recognize and value the social and cultural capital of families of color leads to practices that favor white parents and their interests over families of color and their needs.

Evidence from scholars, practitioners, and families indicates that when families of color advocate for their children, they are often ignored or met with hostility. These experiences are reflective of a larger phenomenon in which the social or cultural capital of families of color — meaning their ability to convince individuals in positions of authority to meet their needs — holds less weight among decision-makers than that of white families.[126] White families are often listened to, and their interests accommodated.[127]

Mr. Richards recounted trying to convince administrators at Brian's school that his grandson was capable of more than his teachers seemed to believe:

> *"We took him to the school. They made the determination that he should communicate using a device. In the back of my mind I felt, 'This isn't really the way I'd like him to do it, but I'll rely on the people I consider to be leaders in the field.' But I realized that he wanted to be verbal...I went back to them and said I think this device is more of a hinderance... It took me more than two years fighting with them before they would agree not to use the speech device in school.*
>
> *Even though they may tell you that they're glad that parents are involved, I think there's a limit to that, and it's only where your involvement isn't rustling feathers and showing them shortcomings."* [128]

One intensive multiyear study focused on a school district in Ohio appeared to support children and families of all races equally. However, the study revealed differences in experience and outcomes for students based on race: It found that when white families were vocal about policies they disliked or changes they wanted to see in the

school, administrators listened. When Black families expressed similar concerns, they were ignored. The researcher explained, "[A]ffluent white parents who disliked a policy dangled the option of leaving and enrolling in private schools…The district and school staff often responded to those threats of exit by acquiescing to their demands…In contrast, low-income and African-American parents often did not have the financial resources to … send their children to private schools; thus, their voices and concerns were given less consideration than those of their white counterparts."[129]

Several of the experts we spoke with who work with families of color on a day-to-day basis noted that many parents feel the education system erected barriers to their efforts to exercise their own agency and advocate for their children. Travis Brown, founding principal of Pharos Academy, made an observation:

> *"We hear from a lot of families who find that the folks that they're talking to are not open to working with them collaboratively, are sometimes hostile to their needs, [and when parents] ask for things, [they] are told 'that's not possible' or 'we don't have the funding for that' or 'we can't do that [or] this.'"* [130]

Randi Levine, policy director of Advocates for Children of New York, and others, found that families of color have to fight to ensure that their children's basic needs are met:

> *"Far too often, we hear from families who feel like they were not heard, that they were not respected. We hear from families who were told you have to go to hearing if you want to get anything more for your child, when the parent is simply trying to ensure that their children's needs are met."* [131]

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Recommended Investments

While every family we spoke with had unique experiences, they had very clear ideas for solutions. They highlight the need for additional **investments** in existing initiatives, systems, and reforms. In addition to their direct effects of better supporting children of color with disabilities, these investments could improve the way education systems function and special education policy decisions are made.

Investments should focus on three parts of the education ecosystem: **Educators** and those responsible for making changes to the way teachers are recruited, trained, and supported; **School and District Leaders** responsible for engaging families and facilitating the delivery of special education programs; and **Policymakers** responsible for deciding what special education programs are created and how special education funding is allocated.

Ms. Emmanuel shared her longing to see greater investments by educators and administrators to support parents and elevate their voices:

> *"There should be more talking to parents and students, just showing them that there is nothing wrong with them. Educators should be taught how to say, 'You are human, you're a person, and that's what you're meant to be,' and it's on the teachers' and administration's part to treat you as such. They're supposed to treat you like a regular person…you just must be taught a little bit differently."* [132]

Dr. Skelton noted her desire for greater investments in efforts to ensure that every classroom had the resources and supports needed to ensure full inclusion for all students:

> *"We should make every classroom like a special needs classroom so that every child will get what they need. There will be greater empathy for children with disabilities and all children."* [133]

Although the positive impact of these investments may not always have a direct one-to-one relationship to each problem identified in the previous section, the investments are relevant first steps to addressing the complex and long-standing problems that cut across geography, conventional age groupings, typical political alliances, and disability type. Additionally, while these investments would be of particular benefit for students of color with disabilities, every one of them would benefit *all* children with disabilities, regardless of race, and would help improve educational practices related to all students, with and without disabilities.

Investments by Educators

Improving training and skill building for teachers, school psychologists, principals, and other family-facing school-site staff, and expanding typical thinking about the teacher workforce

Invest in training for school-site staff to help all educators build skills to properly support diverse students.

It is critical to invest in initiatives to train educators and other school-site staff, like school psychologists, to engage with students and families with cultural responsivity at the forefront of their mind. In addition, educators who recognize the intersectional relationship between race and disability can more effectively support children of color with disabilities.

Building the skills of teachers and other school-site staff to use culturally responsive education practices would help them provide better instruction for students

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with disabilities,[134] identify students with disabilities more readily and make better recommendations and placement decisions,[135] better engage non-English-speaking families,[136] and implement fairer discipline polices for children of color with disabilities.[137]

Programs that train novice teachers *and* programs that provide ongoing professional development should provide high-quality instruction and coaching to ensure that all educators have the skills and training needed to effectively serve diverse learners. This goes beyond standalone courses and targeted sessions to embedding cultural competency training in all courses to give educators deeper grounding in how to implement culturally affirming practices in their classrooms.

Invest in expanding research about best practices for supporting children of color with disabilities.

An absence of research to identify the strategies and pedagogy most effective for children of color with disabilities means that the bulk of teaching methods used in educating and assisting children of color with disabilities is based on research about white children.[138] This is a particular problem for small student populations, like Native Americans, for whom it is difficult to gather meaningful data in larger research studies.[139] Expanding research to gather more information about what practices best support students of color with disabilities would enable practitioners to better understand students' unique experiences and ensure appropriate supports and interventions.

Colleges and universities, as well as public agencies and private organizations funding education scholarship, should invest in research about best practices for supporting children of color with disabilities and move away from practices based largely on the experiences of white students.

Invest in efforts to diversify the teaching profession.

Research has shown that teacher diversity enhances a school's ability to deliver genuine culturally relevant pedagogy because teachers of color tend to have an intrinsic understanding of the educational needs of students of color.[140] These teachers engage students in ways that tend to support students' social and community needs.[141] Research further shows that teacher diversity is acutely important in special

education, and there is reason to suspect that more special education teachers of color may lead to less bias in the identification process and less discrimination in special education placement.[142] It may also give parents of color more meaningful points of connection to special education, as their children would be in the hands of educators they can relate to.

There are well-researched strategies for increasing the diversity of the teacher workforce, and they can be targeted to address the need for more special educators of color. Strategies include building partnerships with teacher training programs, especially those with large numbers of people of color;[143] investing in "grow your own" teacher programs, recruiting teacher candidates from nontraditional populations of local adults like paraprofessionals and after-school program staff;[144] and offering teacher residency programs, partnering with local school districts to subsidize and improve training for teachers who work in high-need schools and in high-demand subject areas.[145]

Investments by School and District Leaders

Changing school- and district-level policies to dismantle racist and ableist systems and better support students of color

Invest in creating initiatives and implementing practices that better engage families of children of color with disabilities.

Many families experience special education in adversarial terms.[146] Investing in efforts to foster more authentic collaboration with families and seeking ways to elevate rather than silence their voices could have a profound effect on the learning experiences of children of color with disabilities. Research shows that teachers developing and fostering strong, collaborative relationships with families and communities results in better outcomes for students — with results such as fewer behavioral incidents and more consistent attendance.[147]

In addition, it is not enough to invite families to participate. Systems and structures for engagement need to be created with the needs of families and

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the communities they come from in mind. These systems should be created in ways that make it easy and comfortable for families to get involved. Schools might conduct parent surveys and take them seriously when deciding on what academic and extracurricular programs to offer; build active parent-teacher associations that have real power; provide all communication about school events and community-facing initiatives in languages commonly spoken among families in the community, not just English; create extracurricular programs that serve the local community, not just the school's interests; ensure day-to-day parent and student engagement, especially among families of color; and partner with parent and community advocacy groups on policy decisions. These efforts would be particularly beneficial for families of color, who often describe feeling excluded from these efforts.

Incentivize and provide resources for increased inclusion of students with disabilities.

One particularly important systems-level change that policymakers should adopt is to rethink the way special education placement decisions are made for students of color with disabilities. Investing in efforts to reform the way schools make decisions about special education placement by putting greater emphasis on inclusion would give students of color with disabilities access to the benefits afforded by inclusive general education classrooms. More inclusion would also give students who have otherwise been placed in self-contained classes access to more rigorous instruction and socialization opportunities, and it would help raise expectations for these students' academic performance.[148]

One strategy for expanding inclusion could be to ensure that every general education class is an ICT class in which a general education teacher and a special education teacher provide joint instruction to students with and without disabilities.[149] In this model, the two teachers share responsibility for the delivery of primary instruction, planning, and evaluation for all students.[150] Both teachers work collaboratively to provide instruction to all students in the class, ensuring that the diverse learning needs of all students are met.[151] Research has shown that integrated co-taught classes can be beneficial for children with and without disabilities.[152]

Invest in improving self-contained classes and services for students whose disabilities require placement in these classes.

While it is important to ensure that students of color with disabilities can learn alongside their nondisabled peers, high-quality special education options for students whose needs can currently only be met in more restrictive settings are also essential.

For many students of color with disabilities who are placed in self-contained special education classes, little effort is made to ensure they make meaningful academic progress.[153] To improve education outcomes for all children with disabilities, investments must be made in self-contained classes that provide adequate instruction to challenge these students and encourage them to learn.

Investments by Policymakers

Supporting broad change to the way education systems are designed and funded

Improve resources to help expand access to high-quality early intervention and early special education services in communities of color.

Effective early intervention has positive effects on student academic performance and family well-being.[154]

One substantive investment that state and local lawmakers can make to improve access to early intervention supports is to expand health clinics with comprehensive pediatric supports in communities of color. Medical professionals, typically pediatricians, are often the first to see the delays that would necessitate early intervention. Improving access to these professionals would help families who have historically been deprived of their support to get the screening and insight they need.[155] From there, leaders could provide funding to school districts to hire more evaluators and therapists to serve young children in need of early intervention support.

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Another strategy to increase access to early special education supports is to increase funding for early learning programs in communities of color and low-income communities (Head Start being the most prominent model). Research shows that nearly all students benefit from high-quality early learning programs.[156] Giving students of color equal access to these programs would give them the opportunity to benefit from the enrichment these programs provide. In addition to adequate funding policies, administrators running existing Head Start and other early learning programs should analyze whether their programs are accessible to all families in their community and invest in training on cultural competency so their staff have the skills necessary to support all students. They should also invest in diversity efforts to attract staff of color.

Increasing the number of high-quality services and programs for young children in communities of color, boosting the quality and cultural responsivity of these programs, and expanding the access that children of color with disabilities have to these programs could improve outcomes for all children.[157]

Increase special education funding to add resources to better support all children with disabilities.

Additional funding for special education would help improve access to high-quality services and supports and demonstrate legislators' strong commitment to support children with disabilities.[158] One way to do this is to increase funding available to states and school districts under IDEA, providing states with more resources to ensure all students with disabilities receive the supports they need to succeed.[159]

Philanthropy can support nonprofit and community-based organizations led by families.

Though the public investment here is critical, philanthropy also can influence the decisions being made in the public space. Philanthropic organizations can support nonprofit and community-based organizations led by families that are committed to advocating for special education programs for children of color. In addition to sustaining the work of these organizations, funding this advocacy sends a message to politicians and policymakers that individuals and institutions will fight to protect the rights of students of color with disabilities and that these problems cannot be ignored or dismissed.
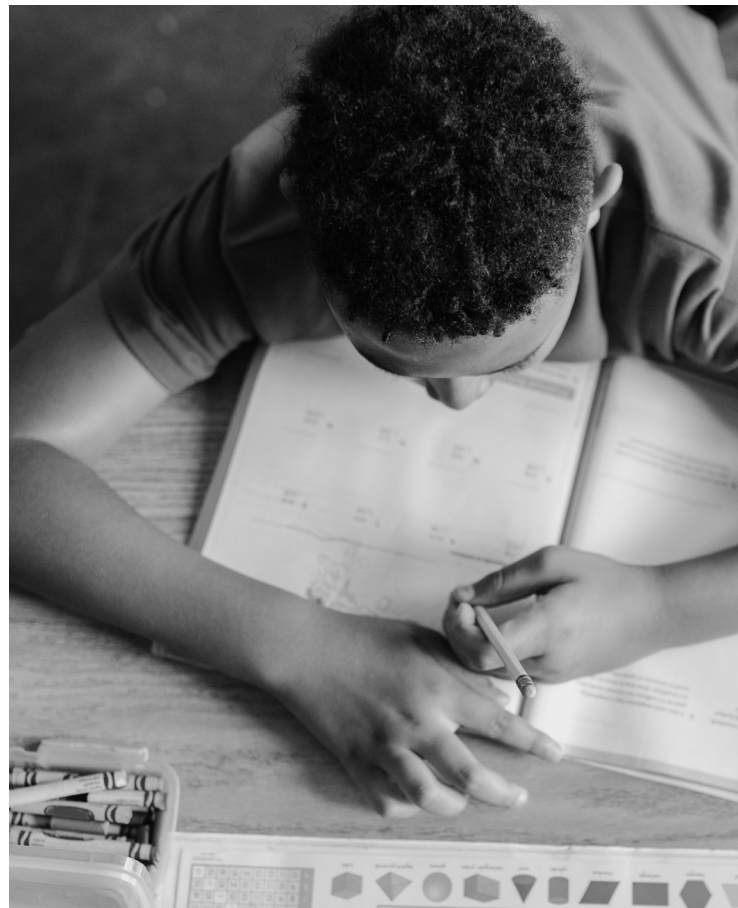
Conclusion

Children of color with disabilities experience the intersectional effects of racism and ableism in accessing high-quality education. These experiences mean children of color have poorer education and life outcomes than their white and nondisabled peers. Those responsible for making decisions about education have an obligation to ensure that these children have the supports, services, and instruction they need to succeed.

Although the problems described in this report specifically address the needs of children of color with disabilities — with a focus on Black students and families — the corresponding recommendations are beneficial for all children. Creating robust solutions to fix problems facing students of color with disabilities improves outcomes for all students with disabilities, regardless of race, and helps improve education systems overall. ✦

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Appendix A. Family Interviews

Family Member Interviewed	Location of Family	Date of Interview	Family Composition	Other Family Details
A.Y.	Brooklyn, NY	May 19, 2022	Single Mother Grandmother Teenage Brother 1 Toddler Son	**Black American family**: single mother raising toddler son communally with her mother and teenage brother
A.M.T. A.T.	Brooklyn, NY	May 27, 2022	Mother Father 2 Teenage Sons 1 Daughter	**Immigrant, interracial family**: Asian-Caribbean mother, Afro-Caribbean father raising 3 first-generation American multiracial teenage children
S.H.	Chicago, IL	June 1, 2022	Single Mother 1 Adult Son	**Black American family**: single mother and adult son
D.L.	Chicago, IL	June 2, 2022	Grandfather Grandmother 1 Teenage Grandson	**Black American family**: grandparents legally adopted teenage grandson
A.H.	Chicago, IL	June 7, 2022	Single Mother 1 Adult Son	**Black American family**: single mother and adult son
D.C.	Covington, WA	June 23, 2022	Single Mother 2 Adolescent Sons 1 Toddler Son	**Black American family**: single mother raising 3 sons
D.S.	Minneapolis, MN	June 22, 2022	Mother Stepfather 2 Teenage Sons	**Immigrant, Afro-Caribbean family**: mother and children's stepfather raising 2 first-generation American teenage sons
E.W.	Riverside, CA	May 27, 2022	Mother Father 2 Toddler Sons	**Interracial family**: multiracial mother, Black American father raising 2 toddler sons in traditional nuclear family

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About Bellwether

Bellwether is a national nonprofit that exists to transform education to ensure systemically marginalized young people achieve outcomes that lead to fulfilling lives and flourishing communities. Founded in 2010, we work hand in hand with education leaders and organizations to accelerate their impact, inform and influence policy and program design, and share what we learn along the way. For more, visit **bellwether.org**.

About Easterseals

At Easterseals, equity, inclusion, and access are at the core of our purpose and our impact in the lives of people with disabilities, families, and the communities we serve. For more than 100 years, we have worked tirelessly – through our nation-wide network of affiliates and advocacy efforts – to assure that the one in four Americans living with disability today are valued, respected, and accepted as full and equal participants in society.

Easterseals recognizes the nuanced and challenging barriers that exist for marginalized individuals and communities and the need to bring visibility and perspective to those issues. **Easterseals Intersection Collective: Disabilities + BIPOC Youth** is an effort to develop more effective programming and research to support youth at the intersection of race and disability by closing the gaps in educational attainment, health, and social wellbeing, and to provide equitable access to opportunity through advocacy and action.

Together, we're empowering people with disabilities, families, and communities to be full and equal participants in society. Learn more at **easterseals.com/intersectioncollective**.

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