ROOTS OF INCLUSION

The Parents Are Coming . . .

Who We Think of as Parents and Caregivers

Sometimes, when schools market events to parents, families, guardians, and other caregivers, they might think of the need for targeted programming for families whose children receive special education services, but they do not necessarily think of caregivers with disabilities themselves across the school community. Disabled caregivers can include everyone from a Blind aunt providing kinship care to a grandparent who uses a wheelchair, a young mother who experiences post-traumatic stress and anxiety to Deaf dads.

Please note that while many members of the Deaf community see an overlapping social justice struggle with disability justice and rights, they also recognize a separate Deaf culture, language, and identity and do not identify as people with disabilities.

To cultivate inclusive spaces, eliminate euphemisms such as “special needs” or “differently abled” and use accurate, affirming people-first (e.g., “caregivers with disabilities”) or identity-first (e.g., “disabled parents”) language. If you’re not sure what is preferred by your school community’s disabled caregivers, ask them.

Legal Obligations and Beyond

Yes, schools have legal obligations

Under Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, and the Washington Law Against Discrimination, schools are government entities that must protect qualified individuals with disabilities from discrimination on the basis of disability in their services, programs, and activities. Parents with disabilities need an equal opportunity to participate in and benefit from the school's offerings in their caregiver roles to the same extent as non-disabled parents.

Schools can create inclusive environments that welcome disabled caregivers and challenge stereotypes

School communities' obligations to welcome families and their identities should go beyond the floor of legal compliance. While schools' primary focus is on students, they cannot succeed without the expertise and wisdom of family and community members. As physical and social gathering spaces that are publicly funded, schools owe obligations to their visitors, including disabled family members. They must make reasonable changes to how they do things so that people with disabilities can participate fully in school programming. Some of the obligations are the ones that many people think of when they consider disability accessibility, such as:

- Meeting in physically accessible locations, including considering room and furniture layout for activities and participation
- Providing materials in accessible formats (e.g., screen-reader-friendly electronic documents, accessible websites, Braille documents when requested)
- Hosting events with amplification for both the key presenters and attendees with questions
- Welcoming service animals to events and within the school building
- Offering sign language interpreters and captioning
- Providing accessible restroom access
- Providing quiet spaces whenever possible for calming
- Requesting that other attendees avoid bringing or wearing allergy-triggering items such as strong fragrances or chemicals

- Offering accessible transportation to enable participation, such as for a disabled caregiver to chaperone a field trip
- Providing materials in plain language and in advance so that a parent with intellectual or developmental disabilities can participate effectively in a meeting

Other examples of access might be less apparent, but are equally impactful. For example, setting a bus stop in a location that is not accessible for a disabled parent to pick up or drop off their young child prevents the child from getting to and from school safely. It also prevents the parent from supervising the transition from the bus to home - unlike other parents who do not have access needs. When a parent or caregiver raises access issues, the most helpful way to understand the access need is to ask whether the parent's disability prevents them from participating in the activity to the same extent as nondisabled parents. If it does, then the school should accommodate or modify the activity to eliminate the barriers to equal participation.

The obligations under civil rights law extend to not discriminating against disabled caregivers, which means that schools should not think less of or act with less respect toward a parent with a disability. Disability bias can creep into decision-making, but schools cannot make decisions driven by stereotypes about disabled people. For example, a school could be discriminating against a disabled caregiver if they assumed they were not competent to make decisions, only spoke to nondisabled family members about the students' academics, or decided to exclude disabled parents from parent-teacher conferences because staff felt awkward about disability.

Schools cannot charge disabled caregivers for accommodations or changes to their processes and policies. They must meet these obligations through their 504 and civil rights compliance officers and with existing school funding and not expect volunteer groups, such as parent-teacher associations, to supplement this work.

Tips

- Encourage caregivers with disabilities to identify themselves to school leadership by providing early and frequent messaging about the best points of contact for accessibility requests
- Always offer accessibility information when hosting events
- Develop relationships with American Sign Language (ASL) interpreters, tactile interpreters, transcription, captioning, and other accessibility professionals proactively

- Keep disability needs confidential. While others might need to be involved to fulfill access requests, school personnel should not tell the stories of disabled caregivers or speak about them in a way that seems charitable or burdensome
- Consider hosting affinity groups for disabled caregivers
- Seek disabled perspectives for school planning committees for everything from attendance to school renovation
- Identify meaningful participation opportunities for disabled caregivers that honor their access needs and daily demands
- Provide community-wide training about disability identity as part of ongoing efforts for diversity, equity, inclusion, justice, and belonging
- Find partners on this journey for access and justice and share missteps, learnings, and emerging practices
- Ask for and receive feedback about how you are supporting disabled caregivers. Act upon it and note transparently where you are still struggling but are committed to continuous improvement and reflection

Additional Resources

Disabled Parenting Project: https://disabledparenting.com

National Council on Disability: Rocking the Cradle Report:
https://www.ncd.gov/assets/uploads/reports/2012/ncd-rocking-the-cradle.pdf

National Research Center for Parents with Disabilities:
https://heller.brandeis.edu/parents-with-disabilities/

Parenting with a Disability Toolkit:
https://www.ncd.gov/assets/uploads/reports/2016/ncd-parenting-toolkit-2016.pdf

Rights of Parents with Disabilities (ADA.gov): https://www.ada.gov/topics/parental-rights/

Through the Looking Glass: https://lookingglass.org

WA State Department of Children, Youth, and Families: https://www.dcyf.wa.gov/ada/resources