



**February 2026**

# **NASET Special Educator e-Journal**

*Exceptional Teachers Teaching Exceptional Children*

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## Special Education Legal Alert

**Perry A. Zirkel**  
**February 2026**

This month's update identifies two recent court decisions that address the nuances in the adjudication of not only FAPE but also remedies that are potentially of high stakes for the parties. For related publications and special supplements, see [perryzirkel.com](http://perryzirkel.com)

**On January 23, 2026, a federal court in Pennsylvania issued an unofficially published decision in *Laboratory Charter School v. A.M.*, addressing FAPE and remedy claims on behalf of a fifth grader. In grade 1 (2019–20), the child received private diagnoses of autism and ADHD. In grade 2 (2020–21), the charter school determined that the child was eligible under the classification of other health impairment (OHI) based primarily on ADHD and low academic achievement, and on February 1 provided him with an IEP. In 2021–22, he repeated second grade at his parents' request. The school failed to fully implement his continuing IEP and, despite progress reports showing no improvement in math, issued a substantially similar IEP at the start of the second semester. For the first half of grade 3 (2022–23), his progress reports revealed a decline in math skills. Despite his regression in math and increase in problematic behavior, the mid-year IEP did not change the nature and reduced the amount of special education services in addition to lacking a behavior intervention plan. In grade 4 (2023–24), his triennial reevaluation included an autism rating scale at his parents' request, and the teachers' total scores were in the "Very Elevated" range, but the IEP team concluded that his current classification was sufficient. The report also revealed achievement test scores that increased the gap from those of his nondisabled peers. The resulting mid-year IEP failed to address various needs, including emotional/behavioral regulation and sensory processing. In March, his parents arranged for an independent educational evaluation (IEE) that diagnosed him with autism, and they promptly provided the school with the evaluation report. However, the school did not revise the IEP until the start of grade 5 (2024–25), and then without adding autism as a primary or secondary classification and continuing his limited special education services. In November 2024, the parents filed for a due process hearing, claiming denial of FAPE for the three years starting with grade 3. The hearing officer (HO) ruled in their favor, ordering an IEE at public expense, a 100-day autism-exclusive diagnostic placement, a 3-year compensatory education award. The district appealed.**

First, the school claimed that the hearing officer erred by finding denial of FAPE based on procedural violations.	Denying this claim, the court upheld the hearing officer's ruling that the school violated procedural requirements, such as failing to timely produce student's records and to keep complete records, resulting in losses in meaningful parental participation and appropriate student progress.
Second, the school claimed that the IEPs met the substantive standard for FAPE.	Rejecting this claim too, the court concluded that the IEPs' failure to address the child's identified increasing deficits showed that they were not reasonably calculated to yield appropriate progress, which is the applicable substantive standard under <i>Endrew F.</i>
Finally, the school challenged the remedies of diagnostic placement and compensatory education.	Again affirming the HO's decision, the court concluded that (a) least restrictive environment does not apply to a diagnostic placement, and (b) the compensatory education award was equitable in

	relation to the denial of FAPE and not subject to the statute of limitations.
This decision is another illustration of the flexibility in the adjudicative standards for both denial of FAPE and the resulting remedies.	

**On October 8, 2025, the federal district court for the District of Columbia issued an unofficially published decision in *E.B. v. District of Columbia* specific to the placement of a seventh grader with ADHD. At the end of grade 2 (2018–19), the district determined that the student was eligible as OHI based on ADHD and provided an IEP at her public school. At the end of grade 3 (2019–20), the parents disagreed with the next similar IEP based on her limited progress and unilaterally placed her in a well-established local private school specializing in students with specific learning disabilities (SLD), including those who also have ADHD. They filed for a due process hearing that resulted in a May 2021 decision in their favor, finding that the proposed placement in the school system was not appropriate, the private placement was appropriate, and tuition reimbursement was equitable for the 2020–21 school year. Meanwhile, the district proposed an IEP for public school placement for grade 4 (2021–22) that the parents challenged in another due process hearing. After the hearing officer issued an interim ruling that the private school was the stay-put, the parties settled the case for reimbursement for 2021–22. Starting earlier in that year, the district again proposed an IEP for placement back in the public schools, and the parents filed for another hearing. This time, the hearing found that the student qualified under the classifications of not only OHI but also SLD and needed the specialized features of the private school, including small classes and intensive instruction in reading. In this November 2022 decision, the remedy was not only reimbursement for tuition to date but also prospective continued placement at the private school for the rest of grade 5 (2022–23). At the end of the school year, the same pattern started again for grade 6 (2023–24). This time, the hearing officer ruled that the proposed placement was not appropriate, but the parents had not met their burden to prove that the private school met the standards for appropriateness. Because only a small percentage of the private school teachers had certification in special education, the hearing officer reasoned that the school did not meet the student’s need for extensive and intensive special education services. Consequently, the remedy was limited to an order for the district to issue a revised IEP. The parents appealed to federal court.**

First, the parents argued that the latest hearing officer, unlike the previous one, erred in applying the third of the five factors that the federal appeals court had specified for prospective placement – “the link between [the child’s] needs and the services offered by the private school.”	The court agreed with the parents for three alternative reasons: (1) the IDEA does not define “special education” to include only instruction provided by special education teachers; (2) the applicable certification regulations in D.C. are explicitly limited to public school teachers; and (3) the private school holds a certificate of approval to serve special education students from D.C.’s education agency.
Second, the parents argued that they were entitled to reimbursement for the residual tuition costs based on the IDEA’s stay-put provision.	Agreeing instead with the hearing officer, the court denied the parents’ request because the record in this case lacks specific evidence of inadequate or withheld tuition payments.

This case illustrates (1) the differences between the remedies of tuition reimbursement (for which teacher certification and other procedural standards applicable to public schools do not apply to the appropriateness of private schools) and prospective placement (for which this leading jurisdiction has established a multi-factor standard), and (2) the ponderously slow process of litigation under the IDEA (which in this case amounted to a declaratory judgment rather than a definitive resolution of the payment for the private school's costs for 2023-24 and the subsequent period extending beyond 2024-25). Moreover, the potential additional issues include appeal or separate enforcement actions of this court decision and determination of the district's liability for the parents' attorneys' fees.

## Buzz from the Hub

<https://www.parentcenterhub.org/buzz-january2026/>

### **Learning and Living the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.: Lesson plans, activity ideas & other resources for teaching MLK Day**

In honor of Martin Luther King Jr. Day, *Learning and Living the Legacy of Martin Luther King, Jr.* from the National Education Association (NEA) offers a wide range of lesson plans, activities, and educational resources designed to help students understand Dr. King's life and his significance in American history.

**[Access all the resources here.](#)**

### **Pre-K Reading Assessment**

The *Pre-K Reading Assessment* from the National Center on Improving Literacy (NCIL) is an interactive experience designed to help adults understand the early reading and language skills of their pre-kindergarten students. Children complete short, playful activities guided by Moji and Pebble, while adults score their responses. It can be used in classrooms, learning centers, or at home to observe early literacy development.

**[Learn more about the assessment here.](#)**

### **IDEA Disability Category Tip Sheet Series**

This series of tip sheets developed by the PROGRESS Center, provides an overview of the qualifying disability categories as outlined in IDEA, describes how these disabilities may impact students, shares strategies for success, and provides links to additional resources.

**[Access the tip sheets here.](#)**

### **Making the Move to Managing Your Own Personal Assistance Services: A Toolkit for Youth**

This guide from the National Collaborative on Workforce and Disability for Youth (NCWD/Youth) assists youth in strengthening some of the most fundamental skills essential for successfully managing their own Personal Assistance Services (PAS): effective communication, time-management, working with others, and establishing professional relationships.

**[Read the guide here.](#)**

### **Plan Your Future: A Guide to Vocational Rehabilitation for Deaf Youth**

This guide by the National Deaf Center on Postsecondary Outcomes explains how vocational rehabilitation (VR) services can support deaf young people in planning and achieving their education and career goals, outlining available services, how to apply, and tips for working with VR agencies to get the most out of the process.

**[Access the guide here.](#)**

### **Enhancing the School-Home Connection: Empowering Parents with Artificial Intelligence**

Chapter 5 from the Center for Innovation, Design, and Digital Learning (CIDDL) report, *Artificial Intelligence: The Impact of AI on Education for All Learners*, emphasizes the pivotal role of parents in integrating artificial intelligence (AI) into their children's educational journey, particularly for students with disabilities. It underscores the importance of collaboration between schools and parents to ensure AI effectively enhances learning experiences in and out of the classroom.

**[Access the chapter here.](#)**

### **Disability Advocacy Videos for Families**

The PACER Center has created a set of short videos in multiple languages that address parent's common questions and concerns about advocating for their child with a disability at school and beyond. Tip sheets are also available in English and Spanish and can be found in the video's description.

**Watch the videos here in English, Spanish, Somali, and other languages.**



## Update from the U.S. Department of Education

<https://www.ed.gov/>

### **Birth to Grade 12 Education-Resources**

<https://www.ed.gov/birth-to-grade-12-education>

### **Available Grants**

<https://www.ed.gov/grants-and-programs/apply-grant/available-grants>

### **U.S. Department of Education Issues Guidance on Prayer and Religious Expression in Public Schools**

February 5, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (the Department) issued guidance on constitutionally protected prayer and religious expression in public elementary and secondary schools.

### **U.S. Department of Education Issues Proposed Rule to Make Higher Education More Affordable and Simplify Student Loan Repayment**

January 29, 2026

The Department today issued a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking aimed at reducing the cost of higher education and simplifying federal student loan repayment, as outlined in President Trump’s historic Working Families Tax Cuts Act

### **U.S. Department of Education Finds California Department of Education Violated Federal Law by Hiding Students’ “Gender Transitions” from Parents**

January 28, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education’s Student Privacy Policy Office found that the California Department of Education (CDE) is in continued violation of the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).

### **U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights Finds San José State University Violated Title IX**

January 28, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office for Civil Rights (OCR) found that San José State University (SJSU) violated Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972 (Title IX).

### **U.S. Departments of Education and Treasury Release Joint Fact Sheet on Historic Education Freedom Tax Credit**

January 27, 2026

The U.S. Departments of Education and Treasury today released a joint fact sheet on the Education Freedom Tax Credit that was created by President Trump's historic Working Families Tax Cuts Act.

### **U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services Refer Minnesota Case to U.S. Department of Justice for Title IX Non-Compliance**

January 26, 2026

Today, the ED's Office for Civil Rights and HHS' Office for Civil Rights notified the Minnesota Department of Education and the Minnesota State High School League that it is referring their case to DOJ for enforcement action.

### **U.S. Department of Education Announces Negotiated Rulemaking to Reform and Strengthen America's Higher Education Accreditation System**

January 26, 2026

The Department today announced its intent to establish the Accreditation, Innovation, and Modernization negotiated rulemaking committee to develop proposed regulations to reform accreditation.

### **U.S. Department of Education Celebrates National School Choice Week**

January 26, 2026

The Department of Education kicked off its celebration of National School Choice Week, a time to highlight the many different types of education across the United States and to empower families to choose the best learning option for their child's success.

### **U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Honors Louisiana Custodian Donella Wagner as 2026 RISE Award Honoree**

January 22, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon named Donella Wagner, Head Custodian at Raintree Elementary School in Baldwin, Louisiana, as the 2026 National Recognizing Inspiring School Employees (RISE) Award honoree.

### **U.S. Department of Education Finds Connetquot Central School District Violated Title VI by Complying with Native American Mascot Ban**

January 22, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) concluded its investigation into Connetquot Central School District (the District) in Long Island, New York.

### **U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Highlights Civics Education at History Rocks! Event in New Orleans**

January 21, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Sophie B. Wright Charter School in New Orleans, Louisiana as part of the U.S. Department of Education's national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

### **U.S. Department of Education Encourages States to Maximize Schoolwide Program Flexibilities to Improve Student Success**

January 21, 2026

The Department's Office of Elementary and Secondary Education sent a letter to every chief state school officer highlighting the existing flexibility states have to encourage Title I schools to consolidate their federal, state, and local funds.

### **U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Celebrates President Trump's Historic First Year**

January 20, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon released the following statement to celebrate a historic first year of education reforms under the Trump Administration.

### **Secretary McMahon Visits Georgia on the Returning Education to the States Tour**

January 16, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Georgia on her Returning Education to the States Tour, she was joined by U.S. Congressman Brian Jack and Georgia Lieutenant Governor Burt Jones.

### **U.S. Department of Education Delays Involuntary Collections Amid Ongoing Student Loan Repayment Improvements**

January 16, 2026

ED announced that it will delay the implementation of involuntary collections on federal student loans, including Administrative Wage Garnishment and the Treasury Offset Program, to enable the Department to implement major student loan reforms.

### **U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Kentucky on History Rocks! and Returning Education to the States Nationwide Tours**

January 15, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Georgetown Middle School in support of the Department's History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour and Bluegrass Community and Technical College on her Returning Education to the States Tour.

### **Title IX Special Investigations Team Probes the California Community College Athletic Association for 'Transgender Participation Policy'**

January 15, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's (ED's) and the U.S. Department of Justice (DOJ's) Title IX Special Investigations Team (Title IX SIT) initiated an investigation into the California Community College Athletic Association.

### **U.S. Department of Education and U.S. Department of Labor Take Next Steps to Implement Postsecondary Education Partnership**

January 15, 2026

Today, the U.S. Departments of Education (ED) and Labor (DOL) announced that they have taken additional steps to integrate the nation's postsecondary education and workforce development programs.

**U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Highlights Civic Learning at History Rocks! Event in Fayetteville, NC**

January 14, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Jack Britt High School in Fayetteville, North Carolina as part of the Department of Education's national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour.

**U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights Initiates 18 Title IX Investigations**

January 14, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights (OCR) initiated investigations into eighteen educational entities in ten states based on complaints submitted to OCR alleging that they have violated Title IX.

**Secretary McMahon's Speech Outside of Supreme Court as Justices Hear Landmark Title IX Cases**

January 13, 2026

U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Speaks at Supreme Court as Justices Hear Landmark Title IX Cases

**U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Visits Rhode Island on History Rocks! and Returning Education to the States Nationwide Tours**

January 13, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Rhode Island in support of both the Department's History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour and her Returning Education to the States tour.

**U.S. Department of Education Reaches Consensus on Historic New Accountability Framework and Concludes Higher Education Reform Rulemaking Sessions**

January 9, 2026

The Department has reached consensus on the third and final regulatory package to implement the historic changes made to higher education as part of President Trump's Working Families Tax Cuts Act .

**U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Highlights Civic Literacy at History Rocks! Event in Elmira, New York**

January 9, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon visited Elmira High School as part of the U.S. Department of Education's national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour in celebration of America's upcoming 250th birthday.

**U.S. Departments of Education, Interior, and Labor Announce Tribal Consultation on Indian Education Partnership**

January 9, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon sent a Dear Tribal Leader Letter inviting tribal leaders to a consultation on the Indian Education Partnership Interagency Agreements.

**U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon Highlights Civic Learning at History Rocks! Event in Newport News, Virginia**

January 8, 2026

Today, U.S. Secretary of Education Linda McMahon was joined by Virginia Governor Glenn Youngkin at An Achievable Dream Middle & High School on the national History Rocks! Trail to Independence tour in celebration of America's 250th birthday!

**U.S. Department of Education Approves Iowa's Returning Education to the States Waiver**

January 7, 2026

Today, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) approved Iowa's Returning Education to the States Waiver, empowering state education officials to have more discretion over their federal education dollars. Iowa is the first state to apply for and receive such

**U.S. Department of Education Announces Release of \$169 Million Under the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education**

January 5, 2026

The Department awarded \$169 million from the Fund for the Improvement of Postsecondary Education in new grant awards to support AI, foster civil discourse, drive reforms in accreditation, and build capacity for high-quality, short-term programs.

## **From Triggers to Glimmers: The Joy of Being a Special Education Teacher**

***By: John Paul G. Luaña***

### **Triggers.**

Anyone who works in Special Education knows this word well—and understands how powerful it is. Every single day, we are on high alert, watching for triggers: anything that might cause a strong, unexpected reaction from our students. Triggers can be internal or external. Sometimes we can see them coming; most of the time, we honestly have no idea what just happened. That is why we collect, collect, and collect ABC data. For those outside Special Education, ABC stands for Antecedent (what happened before the incident—often the trigger), Behavior (what happened), and Consequence (what happened after). Through this process, we begin to understand the root causes of behavior. We identify triggers, and with that knowledge, we can better support our students.

In my eleven years in education, I have seen all kinds of triggers. I still remember one of my very first students in an extensive support needs special day class when I moved to the United States from the Philippines. Her trigger? The idea of burping. Whether someone in the room burped, a fish burped in a computer-assisted activity, or she simply read the word burp on a worksheet, it would immediately throw her off. Our calm, chill day would suddenly turn into a very exciting one.

Another memorable trigger I encountered was the word graduation. I once taught a wonderful, incredibly artistic student—the sweetest voice, the gentlest gestures, and the kindest heart. He was loving and calm... until he heard the word graduation. When it was



mentioned, his voice would drop into a deep, intimidating tone, and he would begin flipping tables. Yes, my sweetest student could flip desks when triggered.

Over time, we learned that graduation symbolized growing up, and that transition terrified him. Beginning in his junior year, we slowly introduced intentional exposure strategies and coping skills. To make a long story short, he graduated with no problems at all. I walked beside him during the ceremony as support, and he whispered, “I’m going to make you proud today, Mr. JP.” He marched, graduated smoothly, and afterward I told him, “You made me proud today, but I’m even more proud of you.”

This year, I have a student who is so deeply empathetic that when I correct his classmates’ behavior, he tries to protect them: by hitting me. Once, when a classmate threw a marker at him, I addressed the classmate’s behavior. He became upset with me and almost threw a marker back at me. Through social stories and role-play, he learned not to hurt people. So instead of throwing the marker at me, he threw it at the bulletin board instead. Progress? Definitely.

His trigger turned out to be adults correcting his friends. When I dug deeper, I learned he had experienced trauma from adults who had hurt him in the past. For him, any adult correction, even calm, proactive, and nonviolent, felt threatening. This understanding helped guide a more trauma-informed approach to supporting him.

One of the most common triggers in the Special Education world is the word “no.” Denying access to preferred items, food, activities, or people is rarely easy for students. That is why, in Special Education classrooms, you will hear a great deal of positive language. Instead of “Don’t run,” we say, “Walking feet.” Instead of “No Chromebooks,” we say, “First worksheet, then Chromebook.” When students attempt to

hit, scratch, or slap, we do not say, “No hitting.” We say, “Safe hands.” The power of positive language is real.

When students are triggered, unbelievable things can happen in the classroom—things that might sound completely made up. I have been stripped of my shirt, watched a classroom TV break after a student slapped it when Lord Farquaad from Shrek appeared on screen, and had a student with OCD poke my pimple because he was not used to seeing me with one. And those are just a few examples.

Despite all of this, I stayed in Special Education. Not because I am a martyr—and certainly not because of the pay. I stayed because I see glimmers every single day. There are no dull days in Special Education, and no two days are ever the same. Within the chaos, there is constant joy.

### **Glimmers.**

Not everyone in the Special Education world talks about glimmers, but I believe everyone should. This work is draining—mentally, emotionally, and physically. The patience, love, empathy, tears, and sweat we pour into our days are immeasurable. That is why it is essential to notice the glimmers around us: the small and big moments of joy that recharge our souls. Some glimmers require intention to notice. Others are so powerful they hit you with joy without warning.

One day, I was completely exhausted. IEPs were piling up, behavior and progress reports needed to be written, and lessons had to be differentiated. I could not hide my stress anymore—and when you change, your students notice. One of my students, who typically avoided physical contact, came up to me and asked, “What’s the problem, Mr. JP?” I replied, “I’m just tired, but I’m okay.”

Out of nowhere, he hugged me and said, “Good boy. You are a good boy, Mr. JP.”

The entire classroom froze. Tears of joy were shed that day. A student who never wanted physical contact gave the warmest hug imaginable. We all laughed afterward because it is so rare for a teacher to be called a “good boy.”

Another glimmer I will never forget was when my student with selective mutism began speaking in class. I worked patiently with him, celebrating even the smallest progress. I joked with him, asked silly questions, and constantly checked in. I would ask him what my name was, and when he would not answer, I would give myself a ridiculous name instead. He would smile, and I would say, “Then you have to tell me my real name, I forget!” I asked him that question at least ten times a day.

One day, just as I was about to make up another silly name, he whispered, “Mr. JP.” I cried. A lot.

At first, people were skeptical because there was no “proof” he spoke to me. But the whispers continued. Now, he speaks in class using a microphone, sings during karaoke, reads paragraphs aloud, co-hosted a Kahoot game with me, and even spells words orally.

I love celebrating small wins, and in my classroom, every win—big or small—matters. These wins are glimmers. A student independently completing Morning Meeting. A student transitioning from drinking water with a spoon to using an adaptive bottle. A student writing sentences independently using speech-to-text. A student who once stayed silent now cracking jokes and singing. A student telling me, “I don’t need help anymore, Mr. JP. I can do it by myself.” Or a student reminding me, “Rule number six: If at first you don’t succeed, try, try, try again.”

These moments feed my soul. The glimmers fill my heart.

There are days when I get triggered too. On those days, I seriously think about finding a new career. I have told myself, “I’m quitting,” more times than I can count. But every single day, this job gives me glimmers—a kind of joy that is hard to find anywhere else. A fuel for my passion. A sense of purpose.

This job can be exhausting, overwhelming, and consuming, but it also fills me with love and joy in the form of glimmers. So the next time you feel triggered, pause. Take the self-care you need: guilt-free rest, a mental health day, a cup of coffee, a piece of chocolate, a conversation with loved ones, a massage, a quiet walk, binge-watching your favorite show—and maybe, just maybe, allow yourself to notice a glimmer. Triggers may shake us, but glimmers are the quiet miracles that keep us going!

## **Family Stress and Resilience Among Parents of Children with Disabilities**

*By Dominique Whitehead*

Families raising children with disabilities often balance joy with ongoing emotional, physical, and logistical demands. Daily routines may include therapy appointments, school meetings, medical decisions, behavior planning, and managing services across agencies. These layers of responsibility can make parents feel overwhelmed, isolated, or stretched thin, especially when support systems are inconsistent.

At the same time, research continues to show that families are not defined by their stress. With the right combination of support, information, cultural connection, and school partnership, parents often develop remarkable resilience. Understanding how stress and resilience interact is essential for educators because the emotional health of caregivers directly influences the child's learning environment.

This article brings together insights from recent studies to help educators better understand what contributes to parental stress, how resilience develops, and what practical steps teachers can take to strengthen school–family partnerships.

### **Understanding Parental Stress**

Parents of children with developmental or intellectual disabilities consistently report higher stress levels compared to parents of typically developing peers. Woolfson and Grant (2006) found that daily caregiving demands, such as managing behavior, communication challenges, or intensive supervision, can make it difficult for parents to maintain consistent routines, even when they want to.

Similarly, Pastor-Cerezuela et al. (2016) noted that stress is often tied to the child's support needs, communication level, and level of independence. Parents who felt less confident in their ability to manage these demands reported more emotional strain. The study also highlighted an important point for educators: parents' perception of their own resilience can protect them from stress-related outcomes such as depression, frustration, or burnout.

More recent work by Skura et al. (2025) emphasized the role of self-compassion. Parents who engaged in realistic thinking, sought emotional support, and gave themselves grace were less likely to internalize challenges as personal failures. For educators, this serves as a reminder that communication should avoid judgment and instead reinforce parents' strengths, efforts, and small victories.

### **How Families Build Resilience**

Resilience does not mean families stop experiencing stress. Instead, it reflects their ability to adapt, recover, and continue supporting their child in meaningful ways.

### **Brief, Practical Supports Make a Difference**

VanVoorhis et al. (2023) found that even a single 5-hour psychoeducational workshop significantly reduced parental anxiety and improved coping. The workshop covered practical strategies, communication tools, and guidance for navigating school-home collaboration. Caregivers left feeling more confident and connected.

For educators, this shows that support does not need to be long, complex, or clinical. Short, focused check-ins, family workshops, or resource-sharing sessions can boost caregiver confidence.

## **Community and Shared Experience Matter**

Supporting families is not only about providing information. Connection itself can be healing.

Zuurmond et al. (2019), studying caregivers of children with cerebral palsy in Ghana, found that parents gained confidence simply by being surrounded by others who understood their experiences. Peer support reduced guilt, strengthened coping, and helped families interpret disability in more hopeful ways.

This reinforces the value of:

- Parent support groups
- Family-to-family mentorship
- School-sponsored community gatherings
- Spaces where families can talk openly without fear of judgment

When schools create opportunities for parents to connect, resilience grows.

## **The Power of Cultural and Informal Supports**

Culture shapes how families view disability, what types of support they trust, and how comfortable they feel interacting with schools.

Rose et al. (2024) found that Latino parents relied heavily on informal networks—extended family, neighbors, church communities, and friends, for both emotional and

practical support. These informal systems often filled gaps left by limited formal services. Families with strong cultural networks also reported more positive interactions with educators.

However, the study also identified barriers: language differences, fear of judgment, and previous negative school experiences. These barriers can cause families to disengage even when they care deeply about their child's learning.

For educators, this means:

- Communication must be respectful, culturally aware, and free of jargon
- Translation and interpretation should be accessible
- Extended family members should be welcomed, not excluded
- Teachers should learn about the cultural networks that sustain families

By honoring the family's cultural identity, schools shift from being a system families must navigate to becoming a team families can trust.

### **What This Means for Educators: Practical Takeaways**

Research consistently shows that educator actions, big or small, can strengthen or weaken family resilience. Special education professionals, especially in early childhood settings, can play a significant role in supporting families by being intentional in their communication and relationship-building.

#### **1. Normalize the Stress Parents Feel**

Families often believe they are alone in their struggles. Teachers can help by:



- Acknowledging that raising a child with a disability brings unique challenges
- Reassuring parents that emotions such as worry, fatigue, or frustration are normal
- Highlighting efforts rather than focusing solely on outcomes

This builds trust and decreases self-blame.

## **2. Offer Short, Realistic Supports**

Not all families can attend long workshops or meetings. Instead, teachers can:

- Provide short, focused resource sheets
- Host quick 15-minute check-ins
- Share simple coping strategies, breathing exercises, visual schedules, or community referrals
- Send home clear, step-by-step guidance on behavior or communication strategies

Small supports can have a big impact.

## **3. Strengthen School–Family Collaboration**

Parents feel more resilient when they feel valued by professionals. Teachers can:

- Invite parents to share what works at home
- Make communication two-directional
- Avoid overwhelming families with paperwork without explanation
- Collaborate on goals in a way that feels doable, not demanding

This turns partnership into shared problem-solving.

#### **4. Connect Families to Each Other**

Schools can foster community by:

1. Organizing parent coffee hours
2. Matching new families with experienced mentors
3. Creating WhatsApp or ClassDojo groups for support
4. Inviting families to share strategies with one another

Connection reduces isolation.

#### **5. Honor Culture and Belonging**

Culturally responsive communication is a protective factor. Educators should:

- Ask families about preferred communication styles
- Provide translated materials and interpreters
- Recognize the role of extended family
- Avoid assumptions about disability based on cultural norms

Families feel respected when their values are reflected.

#### **Conclusion**

Family stress is a real and ongoing part of raising a child with a disability, but the research is clear: resilience grows when families feel supported, understood, and connected.

Educators play a powerful role in easing stress by building strong relationships, sharing practical tools, and honoring families' cultural strengths.

When schools adopt a partnership mindset, one rooted in empathy, shared problem-solving, and cultural responsiveness, families become more confident, children thrive, and the entire learning community becomes stronger. Supporting family resilience is not extra work; it is an essential part of effective special education practice.

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