

# 42nd Annual InterCourt Conference



Session 4E: Changing the  
Story: Supporting Youth  
with Disabilities in the  
Justice System

March 13, 2026  
Hilton Columbus at  
Easton Town Center  
Columbus, OH

## FACULTY BIOGRAPHIES

**MARBELLA CÁCERES** is the Assistant Director and Statewide Accessibility Director for the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD). As Statewide Accessibility Director, she provides current information, resources, guidance, and answers to questions to support OCECD's staff of Information Specialists/trainers. She also assists families with language accessibility needs across Ohio through trainings regarding special education for parents and professionals, and individual assistance to those with Limited English proficiency and parents across the state. In addition, Marbella oversees the coordination of OCECD's empowerment groups for limited English proficiency parents of children with special needs, PLANEO and AMIGAS.

Marbella has studied special education and participated in professional development courses offered by the Ohio Department of Education, Pacer Center, CADRE, OSEP, and other professional organizations. She has earned professional certificates from the University of Wisconsin School of Continuing Education in Nonprofit Management: Board Relations, Grant Planning, Programming Impact, and Fundraising for Nonprofit Organizations.

Marbella has received numerous recognitions and awards for her strong leadership in advancing the educational needs of children with disabilities in Ohio. Marbella is also a parent of a child with disabilities.

**AMY FREEMAN, M.Ed.** holds a M.Ed. in Special Education and has worked over 45 years in special education roles.

Amy's passion for her life's work started when her mom helped organize the first school for children with Developmental Disabilities (DD) in her home county in Ohio. At age six, Amy's brother, Andy, was one of the school's first students. Beginning as a sibling of a brother who had Down Syndrome, and then becoming a mother of a daughter who had orthopedic differences, Amy has been connected to the importance of families advocating for their children.

Amy currently is OCECD's statewide transition-to-adulthood program coordinator. Her responsibilities include collaborating with other statewide agencies and local organizations to provide resources for post-secondary age youth and their families.

Through Amy's work with OCECD, she directed a 1:1 state-wide reading mentoring program for students with disabilities. Her work includes establishing partnerships with state and local juvenile justice centers, juvenile courts, local colleges & universities for the mentoring program to be available to justice-involved youth reading below grade level.

Amy has trained and supported families throughout Ohio to mentor their own children using 1:1 reading mentoring materials. This training includes working with

parents/grandparents who are incarcerated so they can mentor their children in reading when they reenter their community. Amy also helped develop resources for parents/families who have children with disabilities placed in justice facilities.

Amy was instrumental in introducing/implementing OCECD's self-determination training for post-secondary age youth at the Ohio Department of Youth Services. For the past three years, OCECD has provided this training for youth.

As a federal subject matter expert, Amy provided professional development support to a federal project designed to divert youth from becoming justice involved.

Amy has worked as a special education teacher, as well as a superintendent, workshop director, behavior specialist, and habilitation specialist for DD programs. She also was a regional program consultant for the Ohio Department of DD. Amy has served on the National Center on Improving Literacy's advisory board.

**LISA HICKMAN, Ph.D.**, holds a Bachelor's in Sociology from Otterbein University and a Masters and Ph.D. in Sociology from The Ohio State University. After graduate school, Lisa was a faculty member in the Department of Sociology at Grand Valley State University (GVSU in Michigan) as an Assistant Professor, then Associate Professor, and additionally served as chair for the department. She taught courses and conducted research in the areas of education, children and families, and was at GVSU for over 11 years. Lisa moved back to Ohio in 2017 began her work as the Research Specialist at the Ohio Criminal Sentencing Commission, conducting research to help inform criminal justice policy in Ohio and left this role in 2019. Lisa has been the Executive Director for the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities (OCECD). OCECD is the federally funded Parent Training and Information Center (PTI) for Ohio. The work of all PTIs across the nation is articulated in IDEA law, Part D. As part of this charge, all staff receive education and training on federal laws (IDEA, 504, ADA, WIOA) and Ohio State Operating Standards as well as regular, ongoing, professional development and training. OCECD has held a PTI grant for Ohio since 1984, and Lisa and the staff of OCECD carry out this work supporting parents, families and caregivers of children and youth with disabilities and the professionals that serve them with passion, compassion, and diligence every day. She is the parent of two phenomenal children, including a child with disabilities.

# **Changing the Story: Supporting Youth with Disabilities in the Justice System**

**Marbella Cáceres**

*Assistant Director/Statewide Accessibility Director  
OCECD*

**Amy Freeman**

*Statewide Transition-to-Adulthood Program  
Coordinator  
OCECD*

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*Executive Director  
OCECD*





# Changing the Story: Supporting Youth with Disabilities in the Justice System

Ohio Coalition for the Education  
of Children with Disabilities

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## ACTIVITY

### FIRST MENTI QUESTION:

How many people here today have ever heard of OCECD?

1- YES

2- NO

# ACTIVITY

## SECOND MENTI QUESTION:

How many people know what a PTI is, or a Parent Training and Information Center?

1-YES

2- NO

 **OUR MISSION**



Established in 1972  
State-wide, non-Profit organization

PTI Grant since 1984

Composed of numerous parent and professional organizations  
presenting over 50,000 individuals



The mission of the Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities is to endorse and promote efforts to provide appropriate quality education for children and youth with disabilities.



We do so in the belief that all children have a right to a meaningful and relevant education. This belief affirms the dignity of each child or youth with disabilities, whose needs are unique and whose needs must be met equally and appropriately.



OCECD is dedicated to ensuring that every child with disabilities is provided a free appropriate public education.



We will continuously strive to improve the quality of our services for all children and youth with disabilities in Ohio.

# PTIs

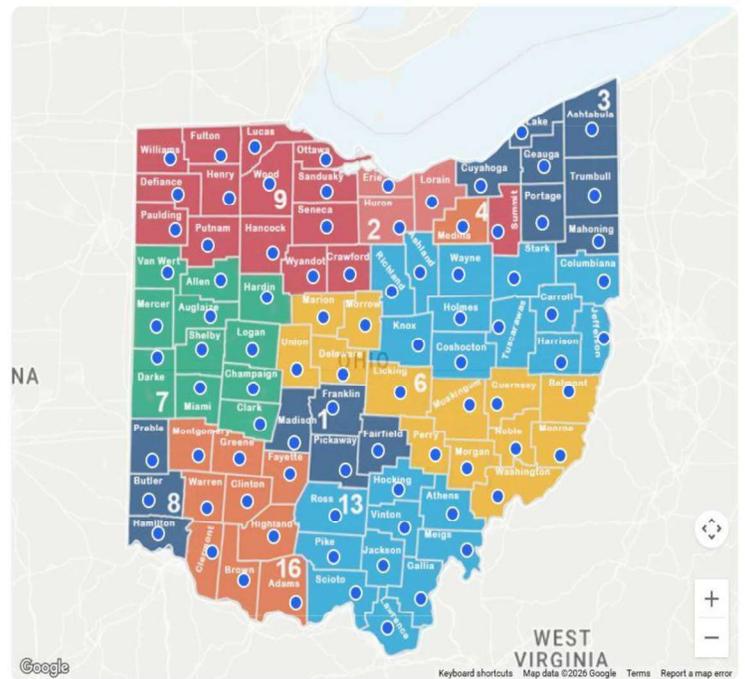
Parent Training and Information Centers

- Funded by the U. S. Department of Education, Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)
- Authorized in Part D of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
- Every state must have at least one Parent Center



## Regional offices located throughout the state of Ohio

Executive Office located in Marion, Ohio





## Ohio Coalition for the Education of Children with Disabilities

- Statewide non-profit organization
- Parent Training Information Center for Ohio
- Support families and give a voice to parents and children with disabilities
- Support to all families across Ohio, who need assistance
- Services at no cost to parents

OCECD's work with Ohio's parents, families, children and youth with disabilities, and professionals falls into 3 core areas:

- Education and empowerment
- Direct support
- Trainings
  - Transition-age self-determination, self-advocacy trainings for youth





## It's My Turn and GPS

It's My Turn and GPS are interactive self-determination curriculums for students with disabilities in middle school and high school.

**"Students do things that they have never had the incentive or courage to do before."**

**- School Personnel**



# It's My Turn & GPS Curriculum

- ▶ The Laws
- ▶ Employability
- ▶ Post Secondary Options
- ▶ Living Skills & Choices
- ▶ Community Participation

“I learned about the important part that I have in choosing what job I want for my future.” - Student



“All-Knowing” is a role-play activity that helps youth practice self-advocacy to build their Good Life.



"I wish everyone could view our kids the way we are tonight." -Principal



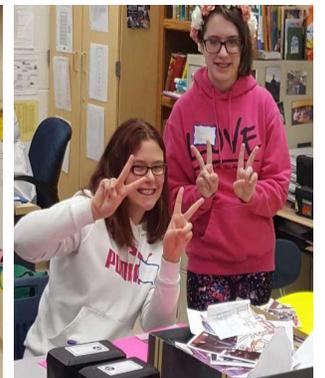
## Parent Night

- ▶ Families, Youth, School, and Community Coming Together!



## Charting the LifeCourse (CtLC)

- Develop a personal profile
- Explore options
- Setting goals
- How to locate and connect with agencies and people that can help them obtain their goals



Students will learn that they can shape their own lives by making informed choices, setting goals, and working toward their dreams

- Decide what you want to achieve.
- Focus on what matters most.
- Stay motivated.
- Build your self-confidence through small wins.
- Celebrate your success.



 **Ohio Department of Services** · Follow  
May 22, 2024 · 🌐

To grow as a person & pr requires learning 📖 and to work with others 🤝 . C recently worked on those [Ohio Coalition for the Ed Children with Disabilities](#) It's My Turn GPS (Goals, Success) empowers stud and set goals 📅 in schoc DYS. Each task starts wit and game plan. Then the plan into action and work through obstacles towar



## Youth Self-Advocacy and Empowerment

OCECD Youth Website – Advocating for Myself

<https://www.ocecd.org/youthportal.aspx>

# Parent engagement

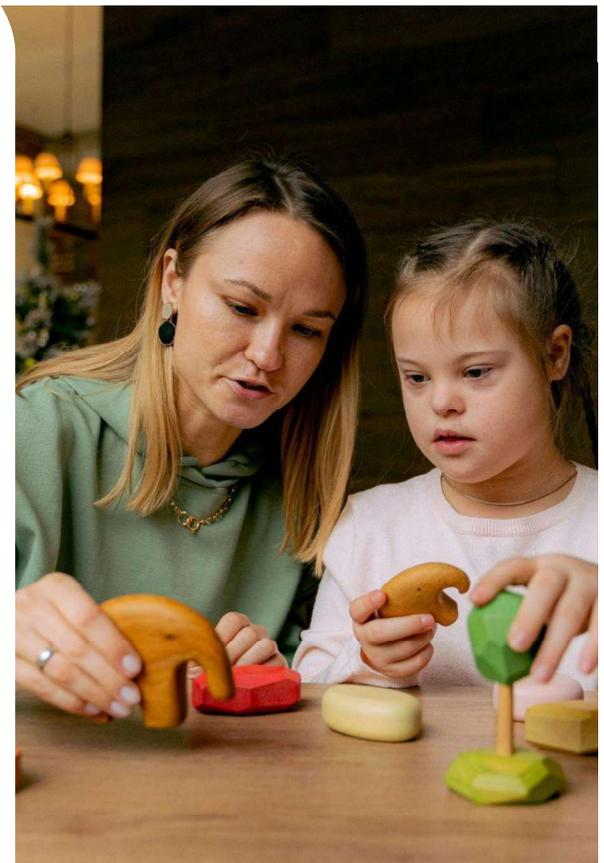
- Traditional perspectives on parent involvement center on families of children in general education classrooms.
- Often there is limited consideration of parents who have a child with a disability.

(de Apodaca et al., 2015)



- Parent involvement in these spaces can look different.
- In general education, parent involvement is viewed from an achievement standpoint, where parents' involvement efforts support children's school outcomes.
- Parent involvement in the context of a child's disability often associates parents' involvement with their adherence to the procedural aspects of the special education system and fulfillment of procedural mandates

(Burke, 2012)



Certainly, parents of children in special education face a complicated layer to their involvement that is not experienced by families of children in general education. In accordance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), parents are expected to be involved in their children's education services and actively participate on their child's Individualized Education Program (IEP) team, including providing consent for services and attending annual meetings ([IDEA, 2004](#)). Unlike some of the more traditional guidance for parent involvement, IDEA promotes partnerships between parents and educators in developing and managing educational programming and acknowledges that family participation strengthens special education services ([Haines et al., 2017](#))

(from Gasper and Shahay 2025)



- Parent understanding of special education, knowledge of processes, lack of confidence, not feeling like an equal member at the table, and other issues can impact parent participation.



One of the most effective means of ensuring academic success is to engage families in their children's education. While family engagement confers benefits on all students, those with disabilities often require a greater degree of parental involvement and advocacy than their peers without disabilities in order to be assured of receiving the same level of instruction as the general student population...

Their families play a number of supporting roles, including as their advocates and as people who can provide valuable insight into their specific needs to instructors...

when families and educators work together as partners, it enhances the likelihood that children with disabilities will have positive and successful learning experiences.

(Family Engagement and Children with Disabilities: A Resource Guide for Educators and Parents 2012)



## Parent involvement and the juvenile justice system

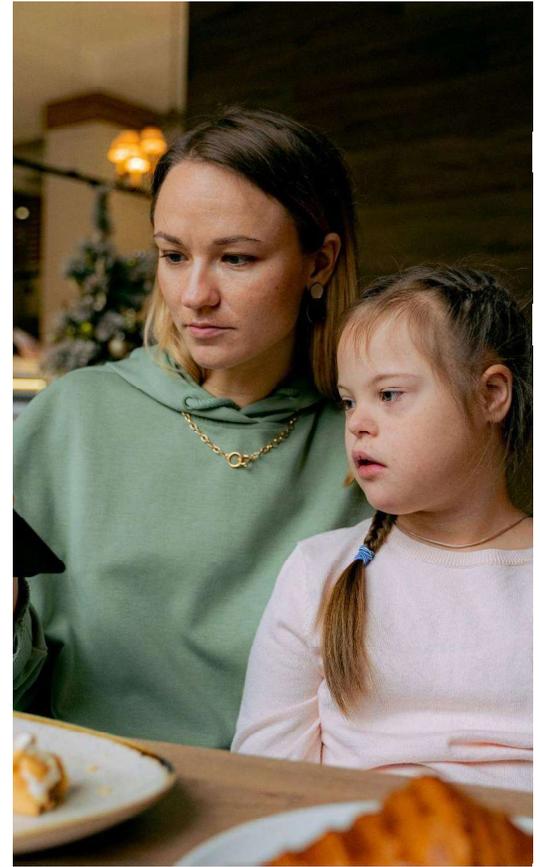
- In a survey of family members, 86% said they wanted to be more involved in their children's treatment while they were incarcerated.
- Parental and family engagement for youth involved in the juvenile justice system is proven to be effective for better youth outcomes.

(Vera Institute of Justice, Juvenile Justice Fact Sheet 5)



## Strategies for engaging parents and families

- Build trust (which is often broken).
- Follow through with your word.
- Show up consistently.
- Allow them to speak up for themselves (helping them prepare, letting them know you're there to support them, and do that).
- Be nonjudgmental.
- Understand and respect that fears, worries, concerns they have are legitimate.



## Strategies for engaging parents and families, continued

- Asking questions
- Listening, listening, and more listening
- Providing lots of opportunities for this to occur
- Meeting families where they are (physically and emotionally)
- Accessibility in all forms being vital, including language



# What YOU Should Know

## STEPS IN THE SUPPORT PROCESS

### ACTIVITY

- How many of you know or are familiar with the [Individuals with Disabilities Education Act \(IDEA\)](#)?
- How many of you know or are familiar with Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973? ([Section 504 Plan](#))
- How many of you know or are familiar with Americans with Disabilities Act? ([ADA](#))

## WHAT IS IDEA?

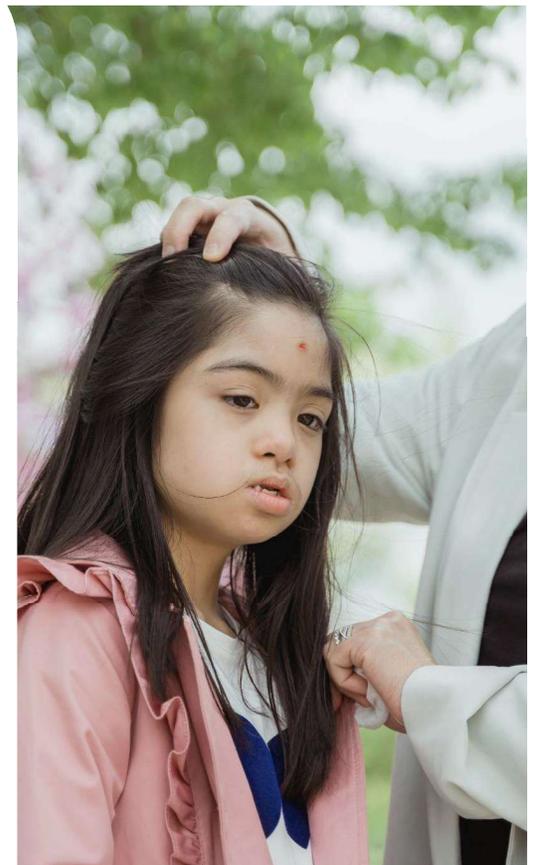
### Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)

- It is the federal law that makes a **Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)** available to eligible children with disabilities.
- Youth with disabilities involved in the Juvenile Justice systems are still **guaranteed** entitlements under IDEA, including an IEP and behavioral supports.



## WHO QUALIFIES

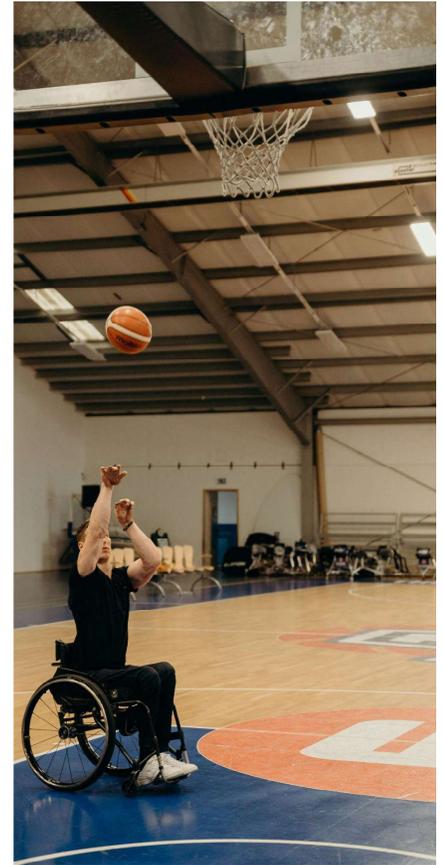
- To qualify under IDEA, a child must first meet one of 13 specific disability categories (like Autism, SLD, OHI, etc.), and because of that disability, requires special education and related services to make meaningful progress in school.
- A medical diagnosis alone is not enough; a comprehensive evaluation by a team of qualified professionals, including the parent, determines if services are needed for educational benefit.



# WHAT IS THE AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT (ADA)?

Civil Rights Law prohibiting discrimination against individuals with disabilities in **ALL** areas of public life (jobs, schools, transportation, and public/private spaces)

Ensures **EQUAL** opportunity, access, and requires “reasonable accommodations” to facilitate participation



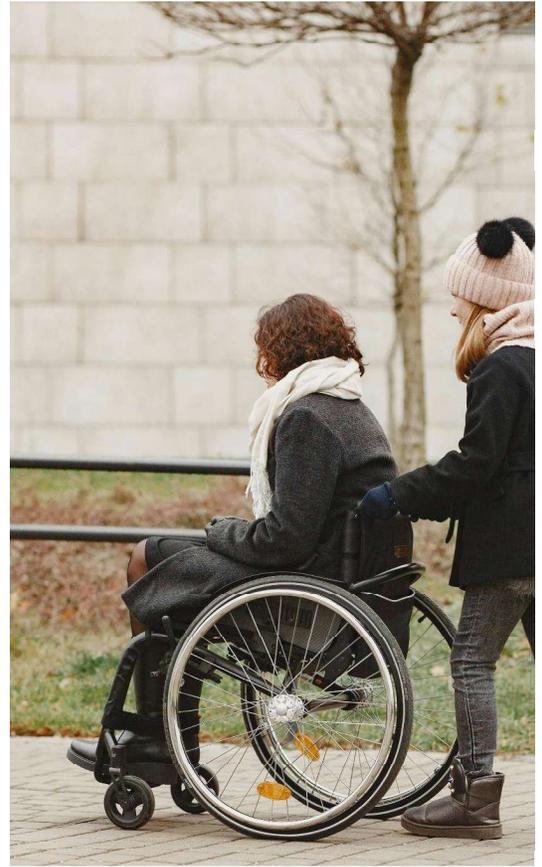
# WHAT IS SECTION 504?

- **Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973** is a national law that protects qualified individuals from discrimination based on their disability.
- **It requires** schools to provide students with disabilities an **equal opportunity** to participate in services, programs, and activities.



# WHO QUALIFIES

- A student must have a physical or mental impairment that **substantially limits one or more major life activities** (learning, walking, or breathing).
- A student must have a record of such an impairment, or be regarded as having one, requiring **accommodations** to ensure equal access to the educational programs.



# One "PILLAR" of IDEA: CHILD FIND

Requires that the State's Local Educational Agency (LEA) **identify, locate, and evaluate ALL** children with disabilities, regardless of the severity of their disability, and who need special education and related services.



# SIX “Principal” Components of IDEA

- Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE)
- Appropriate Evaluation
- Individualized Education Plan (IEP)
- Least Restrictive Environment (LRE)
- Parent Participation
- Procedural Safeguards



## WHAT IS FREE APPROPRIATE PUBLIC EDUCATION (FAPE)?

Education at **no cost** to the parents is available to **all qualified** children with disabilities between the ages of 3 and 21 years.

- This includes children with disabilities who have been **suspended** or **expelled** from school.

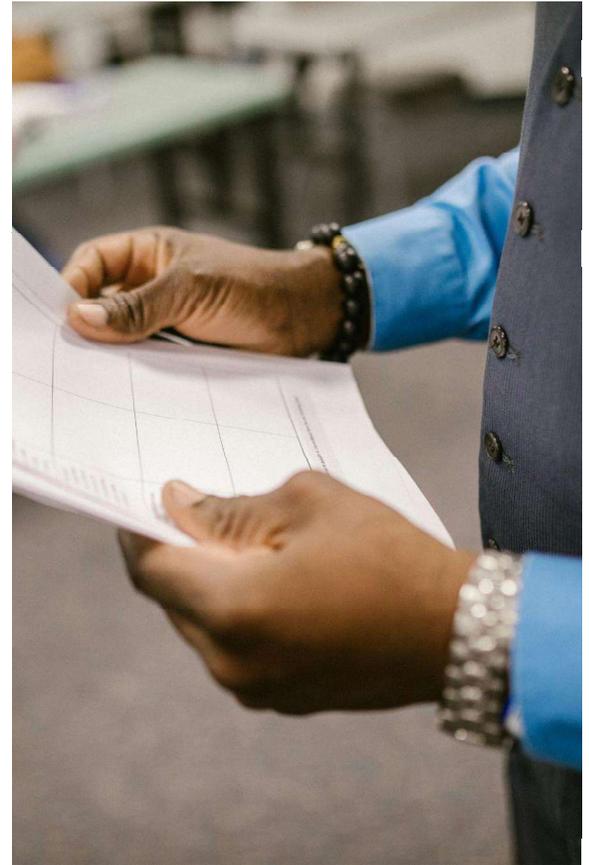


# APPROPRIATE EVALUATION

Comprehensive, individualized assessment, conducted by a team, in all **suspected areas of disability**

Uses a variety of tools (**not just one test**) to understand the child's unique strengths and needs (educational, social/emotional/behavioral, vision, hearing, health, intelligence, academics, communication, etc.)

**Ensuring fairness, cultural sensitivity/nondiscriminatory, and meaningful parental involvement**



# INDIVIDUALIZED EDUCATION PLAN (IEP)

- An (IEP) is a written plan that outlines the specialized instruction (goals), services, and supports that are individualized to **meet the unique needs of a child with a disability** to help them advance/progress and succeed in the public school.
- It is created by a team of educators, specialists, and the **PARENTS AND THE "STUDENT."**



# LEAST RESTRICTIVE ENVIRONMENT (LRE)

Under IDEA, it is mandated that students with disabilities must be educated with non-disabled peers to the **“MAXIMUM EXTENT APPROPRIATE.”**

There is to be removal to more restrictive settings **“ONLY”** when satisfactory education is not possible, even with supplementary aids and services.



# PARENT PARTICIPATION

- It is a **FUNDAMENTAL RIGHT**, under IDEA, making parents **EQUAL** partners in their child's education journey.
- It ensures that parent are **INVOLVED** in **ALL** decisions about **IDENTIFICATION, EVALUATION, PLACEMENT, AND DEVELOPING THE IEP.**

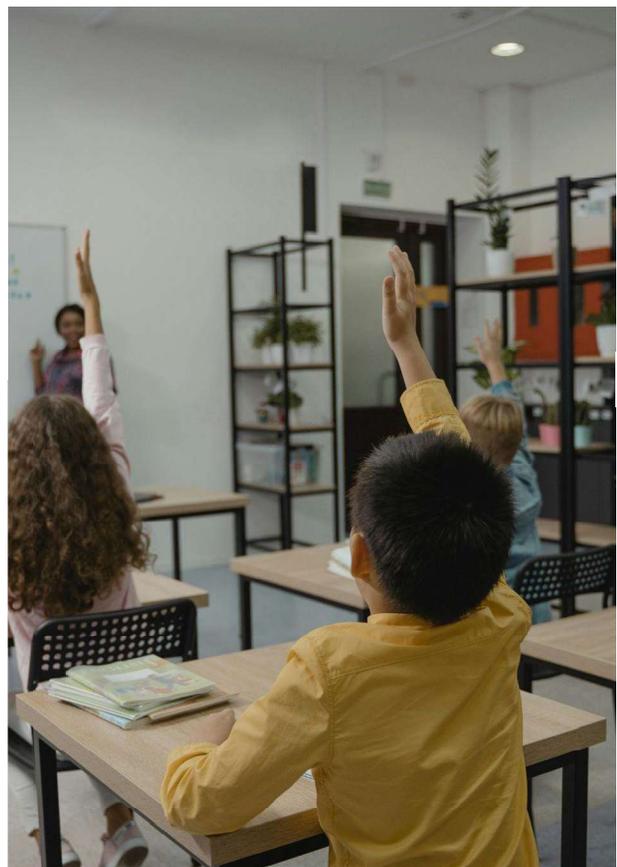


- CRUCIAL parental rights and protections ensuring SWD receive (FAPE)
  - Prior Written Notice (PWN)
  - Parental Consent
  - Access to student records
  - Participation in meetings
  - Independent Educational Evaluation (IEE)
  - Dispute Resolution (mediation, facilitation, due process)



## WHY IT MATTERS IF IT IS an IEP or 504

- Entitlement to FAPE/Accommodations for removing barriers
- Continuity of Services
- Assessment & Evaluation
- Addressing Behavioral Needs
- Student & Parent Involvement
- Transition Planning



# ACTIVITY

WHAT PERCENTAGE OF JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTH HAVE A MENTAL HEALTH DISORDER?

- (A) 20-40%
- (B) 40-60%
- (C) 60-70%
- (D) 70% +

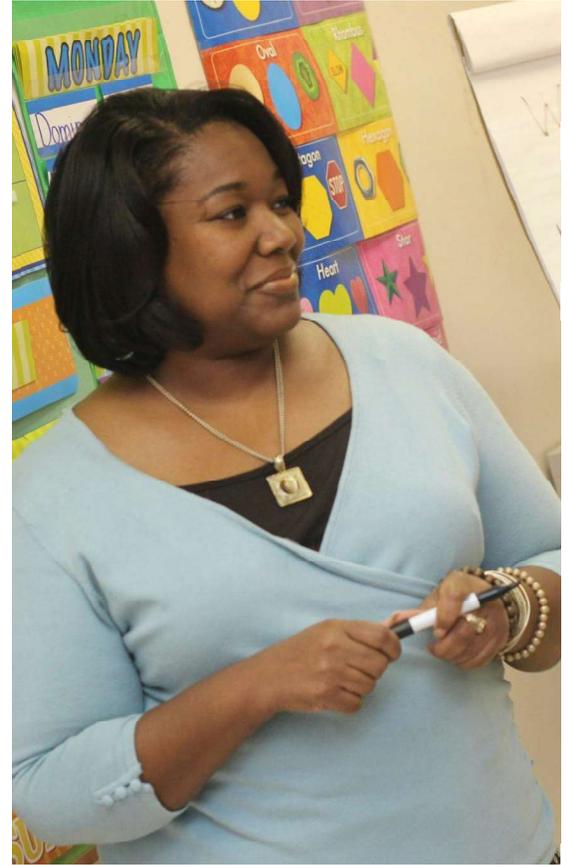
## ACTIVITY:

WHAT ARE THE MOST PREVALENT MENTAL HEALTH DISORDERS WITH JUSTICE-INVOLVED YOUTH?

- A. ADHD/ANXIETY
- B. DEPRESSION/POST TRAUMATIC STRESS DISORDER (PTSD)
- C. CONDUCT DISORDER
- D. ALL OF THE ABOVE

# Understanding the Relationship Between Disabilities and Behavior

- Challenging behaviors often stem from **UNMET** needs, communication difficulties, and/or difficulties with emotional regulation.
- They can be a reaction to frustration, anxiety, or sensory overload caused by a disability.
- Behavior is **COMMUNICATION** (get something, avoid something).



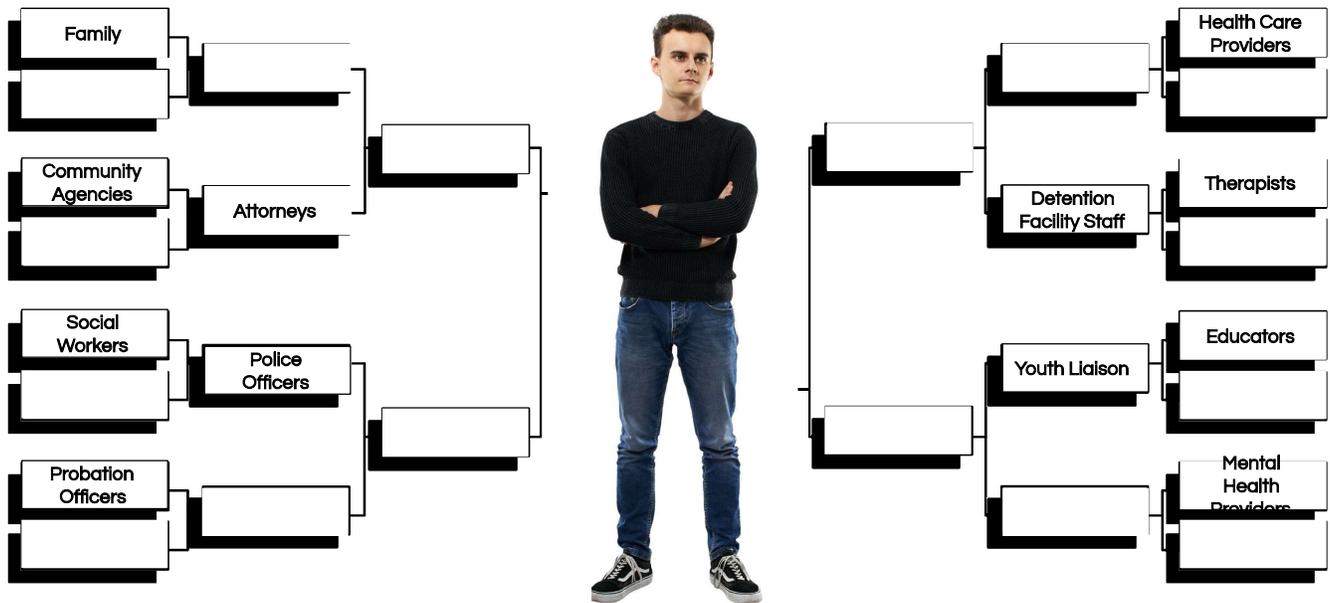
# Functional Behavior Assessment (FBA) & Functional Behavior Plan (FBP)

- IDEA mandates that schools consider **Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS)** for students whose behaviors impede learning.
- Focus should be on teaching replacement skills, understanding behavior functions (**FBA**), and creating supportive environments, rather than just punishing misbehavior.

Aiming for better academic and social-emotional outcomes is the goal.



# SUPPORTS AND SERVICES



## SUPPORTS AND SERVICES: The Importance of WRAP-AROUND Service Plans

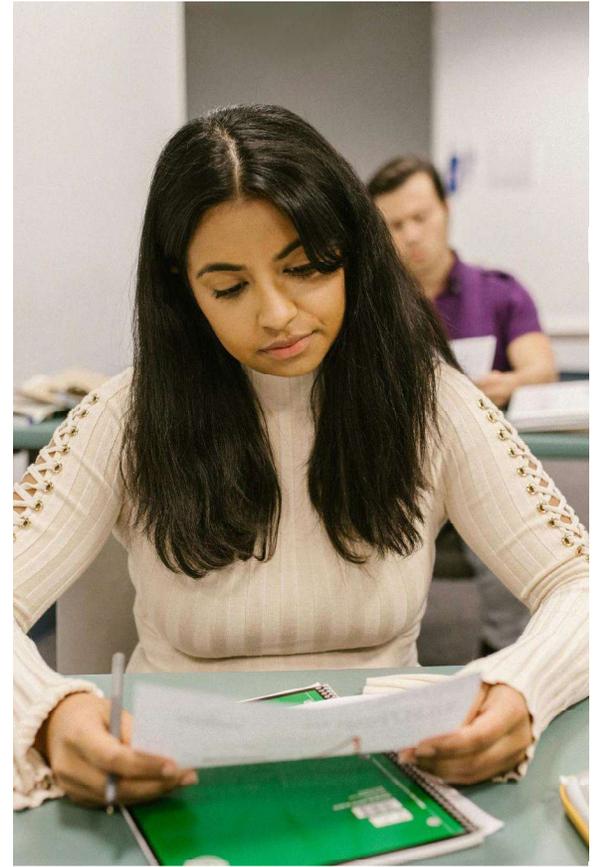
- EDUCATION: Parallel to Public Schools
- POSITIVE SKILLS-BUILDING
- MENTAL HEALTH: THERAPY/CRISIS INTERVENTION/SCHOOL-BASED SERVICES
- COMMUNITY-BASED PROGRAMS: MENTORING/VOCATIONAL TRAININGS
- FAMILY SUPPORTS: PARENT TRAINING/REFERRALS



## QUOTE:

“Supportive environments at home, work and school are crucial, with making schools safe and welcoming being a key part of fostering healthy adolescent development and keeping kids on positive paths, away from the justice system”

<https://www.aecf.org/>



## IMPACT

**91.2%**

Percent of parents who report that the assistance they received from OCECD made them better able to support their child

**92.0%**

Percent of parents who report the assistance they received from OCECD was useful

**98.5%**

Percent of students who felt the information they received in the training will be useful in preparation for their postsecondary transition experiences.

**94.3%**

Percent of students who report that, overall, the training they participated in was useful.





# RESOURCES

- [IDEA CATEGORIES](#)
- [SECTION 504 PLAN](#)
- [Parent Training Information Center \(OHIO\)](#)
- [IEP](#)
- [WHAT IS AN IEP?](#)
- [FUNCTIONAL BEHAVIOUR EVALUATION/PLANS](#)
- [PARENT PARTICIPATION](#)
- [DIAGNOSTIC AND STATISTICAL MANUAL OF MENTAL DISORDERS \(DSM-5-TR\)](#)
- [EVALUATION ROAP MAP \(ODEW\)](#)
- [OHIO POSITIVE BEHAVIORAL INTERVENTION SUPPORTS \(PBIS\)](#)
- [Reducing Student Referrals to the Juvenile Justice System - The Annie E. Casey Foundation](#)
- Dignity in Schools Campaign: [Check It Out: Pushout Assessment Checklist & Campaign Development Guide – Dignity in Schools](#)
- [Discipline of Special Education Students Under IDEA \(ODEW\)](#)
- <https://csgjusticecenter.org/topics/youth/>
- Intersection between Mental Health and Juvenile Justice System,” Office of Juvenile Justice and Delinquency Prevention, accessed March 21, 2022, [https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/intsection\\_between\\_mental\\_health\\_and\\_the\\_juvenile\\_justice\\_system.pdf](https://ojjdp.ojp.gov/model-programs-guide/literature-reviews/intsection_between_mental_health_and_the_juvenile_justice_system.pdf). For more information on the issues related to treatment and rehabilitation for youth, see <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/EJ1157674.pdf> and <https://www.cdc.gov/violenceprevention/aces/factfact.html>.
- [AMERICANS WITH DISABILITIES ACT](#)

# References

- [Burke, 2012](#)
- <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/chapter/bookseries/abs/pii/B9780123982612000052?via%3Dihub>
- de Apodaca et al., 2015 <https://eric.ed.gov/?id=EJ1085649>
- [Gasper and Shahay 2025](#)
- [Villalobos Agudelo. 2013.](#)
- [Family Engagement and Children with Disabilities: A Resource Guide for Educators and Parents 2012](#)
- [Vera Institute of Justice, Juvenile Justice Fact Sheet 5](#)

