

Policy Brief: Establishing a Statewide Special Education Family Advocacy Program in Vermont

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Date: November 21, 2025

Overview

Vermont families of children with disabilities face increasing challenges navigating the special education process and ensuring appropriate educational services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). Vermont parents/guardians do not have access to trained advocates who can help them understand their rights, communicate effectively with schools, and secure equitable supports for their children.

With the recent downsizing and restructuring of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP), federal oversight and technical assistance to states have diminished. This creates an urgent need for Vermont to strengthen its own systems of support for families.

The Problem

- Schools spend significant time and resources managing preventable conflicts that could be resolved through early, informed collaboration. Mitigation and due process hearings are another time and resource drain.
- With less support and federal oversight, particularly from OSEP, parents are concerned about the education of students with disabilities and are looking for how the State will support them moving forward.
- The lack of advocacy support contributes to inequities in access to services and educational outcomes for children with disabilities as well as severely strained family-school relationships.
- Families frequently report feeling overwhelmed, intimidated, or uninformed during the IEP process.
- Limited access to trained advocates disproportionately affects rural and low-income families.

Proposed Solution

Establish a Vermont Special Education Family Advocacy Program — a statewide initiative providing families free or low-cost access to trained special education advocates.

Program elements could include:

- Training for IEP advocates using evidence-based, non-adversarial practices a

- Collaboration with existing organizations such as the Vermont Family Network, Disability Rights Vermont, and regional Parent Child Centers.
- Pilot implementation in select supervisory unions or regions, with outcomes evaluated before statewide expansion.
- Funding mechanisms through state appropriations, federal IDEA Part B set-aside funds, or public-private partnerships.

Expected Benefits

- Stronger collaboration and trust between families and schools.
- Reduced due process complaints and mediation costs.
- Increased compliance with IDEA requirements.
- Improved educational and behavioral outcomes for children with disabilities.
- Strengthened family engagement and equity across Vermont's diverse communities.

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