



Teachers' Corner

Supported Decision-Making as an Everyday Classroom Practice



Charles B. Walters, PhD
Center for Transition and Career Innovation at the University of Maryland College Park

When students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) exit high school, there are many complexities for them to navigate alongside their families and caregivers. One such complexity is how they will make important decisions about their life. Such decisions range from those made on a daily basis like who they will spend time with to those made less frequently like where they will live or what they will do for work.

Historically, many families and supporters of people with IDD have been encouraged to rely on mechanisms like guardianship that seek to limit risk and harm in their lives. Guardianship, also known as conservatorship in some states, refers to a formal court process for appointing a person to make some or all decisions on behalf of a person that has been deemed “incapacitated” (Blanck & Martinis, 2015). Not only is there little evidence to suggest guardianship keeps adults with disabilities safer, such arrangements are highly restrictive and a poor fit for the actual support needs and preferences of many people as they age (Blanck & Martinis, 2015; Martinis et al., 2024).

Supported Decision-Making

Increasingly, people are turning to less restrictive ways of navigating the complexities of adult life, like *supported decision-making* (SDM). SDM “refers to an arrangement between two or more persons where one person agrees to receive varying kinds of assistance to make decisions from one or more supporters” (Institute on Community Inclusion, n.d.). For many adults with IDD, SDM provides a way of ensuring they have the support they need to navigate the complexities of their lives without removing their right to make important decisions. Education

professionals at every level can help by ensuring that the learning environments they create for students reflect the ideals of SDM. To do so, it may be helpful to reflect on how we think of independence for the students we serve.

In education we are often focused on whether a student is able to complete a task *on their own*. For instance, does a student tie their shoes independently? Such assessments can be helpful when applied to discrete, age appropriate tasks. The answer to the question is a simple “yes” or “no,” and our goal as educators is often to work towards a day when such an assessment yields a consistent “yes.” When applied to people or complex situations, however, such assessments are often problematic. Consider, for instance, the following questions about a student’s independence:

- Can they make decisions about personal safety independently?
- Are they independent?
- Will they be an independent adult?

Judgements about the degree to which a student makes independent safety decisions, *is independent*, or *will be independent* often rely on subjective determinations rather than measurable observations. These claims often say more about the expectations of the person making them than anything else.

Rather than focus on a false binary of independence, there are ways of thinking about our practice with students that can help create environments where everyone can thrive. All educators can:

- **presume competence** rather than set up conditions for students to prove it,
- **value interdependence** as an aim that fits most people far better than ideals about one’s independence,
- **maintain high expectations** for all students, and
- **celebrate risk and failure** as necessary conditions for growth.

By reframing our perspective of what independence may look like for students, we can incorporate practical routines in our classrooms and schools that challenge common attitudinal barriers and affirm student voices.

What Supported Decision-Making Looks Like in Classrooms

While SDM is a term that typically refers to the support one obtains to make and communicate adult decisions, it is a term

with broad applications across the lifespan for students with IDD. In my research, I've learned that many educators feel under prepared, under trained, and at risk for "getting it wrong" when it comes to helping students with IDD and their families to navigate using SDM (Plotner & Walters, 2021; Walters et al., 2022; Walters et al., 2023). Fortunately, in my research, I've also learned a lot about what we can do in education to affirm

SDM as a practice (Walters et al., 2024; Walters et al., 2025; Walters & Plotner, 2023).

Making decisions with support is something that all people can do. Educators can be an important part of providing foundational opportunities for students to learn and practice making decisions at any age. Table 1 outlines some education practices, ways of understanding them, and suggestions for putting them into action.

Table 1. Supported Decision-Making Education Practices

Practice	Description	Action Steps
Give choices	Building in frequent opportunities for both structured choices and free choices provides students with an environment where they can learn to choose. When students are given meaningful opportunities to choose in the classroom, it shows in both their interest and their task completion (Reutebuch et al., 2015; Tounsi et al., 2022). When experts around the country on SDM were asked how educators could prevent the use of undue and overbroad guardianship, one of the most agreed upon recommendations was to give students opportunities to make choices from the earliest possible ages (Walters & Plotner, 2023).	Build in student choice wherever possible and use prompts to highlight those choices. For instance: "Do you want to read with a partner or use the tablet?" "What would you like to read about?"
Create room to express and explain preferences	Part of creating an environment that supports student choice is creating an environment where students can explore the preferences that inform their choices. When students express and explain their preferences, it helps them build self-awareness (Shogren & Wehmeyer, 2020).	Embed simple reflection prompts such as "I chose this because..." into daily instruction to empower students to recognize their own preferences and their ability to affect change around them.
Support students to identify and use sources of support	Identifying and tapping into trusted people when making decisions is a skill that students can and should be explicitly taught. A fundamental aspect of being self-determined is actively directing one's support to help them achieve goals, rather than passively receiving help (Shogren et al., 2015).	Provide formal and informal opportunities for students to identify available supports (such as peers, staff, or technology), choose when to access them, and articulate their own support needs (Flanagan & Bumble, 2022).
Reflect on decisions together	When students take time to reflect on what worked, what didn't, and what they might do differently in their decision-making, they're building self-awareness and self-confidence. Facilitating brief, collaborative reflections after academic or social choices can help students understand the connection between their actions and outcomes, reinforcing that their decisions matter and can be adjusted over time to support their goals (Burke et al., 2019).	Provide students with a place to reflect on decisions and help them to normalize and understand that risk and failure are simply aspects of pursuing a life that reflects their preferences, interests, and goals (Bumble et al., 2022).
Provide opportunities for setting and evaluating goals	Setting goals and evaluating progress towards those goals are skills that every educator can teach and provide frequent opportunities to practice. When students learn to set personal goals, plan actions, and evaluate their progress, they show measurable gains in self-determination, academic achievement, and post-school readiness (Burke et al., 2019; Raley et al., 2020; Shogren et al., 2015).	Integrate goal-setting routines into everyday instruction by using simple formats such as "My goal is...", "One step I will take today is...", and "What I will try next is...". As you do, support students to regularly monitor their progress and adjust their plans as part of classroom practice. Packages such as the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction (SDLMI) can help provide a more explicit, research-backed framework for supporting students in this way.

(continued on page 3)

In Closing

Many resources have been created to help professionals understand the complex legal, practical, and ethical issues related to supporting the decision-making of students with intellectual and developmental disabilities (IDD) as they age. If you are new to these topics, some excellent primer resources on supported decision-making (SDM) and alternatives to guardianship have been gathered by the Guardianship Alternatives and Transfer-of-Rights (GATOR) project (<https://gator.communityinclusion.org/>) and the Center on Youth Voice, Youth Choice (<https://youth-voice.org/>). You don't need to be an expert on this topic to meaningfully support student self-direction, choice, and autonomy.

When educators provide students with opportunities to make choices, express their preferences, seek and direct support, reflect on their decisions, and set meaningful goals, they are actively helping to create environments that foster student autonomy and dignity. These practices do not require a new curriculum or specialized credentials; they require a shift toward honoring student voice, embracing interdependence, and viewing mistakes as part of learning rather than something to be avoided. By integrating SDM into daily routines, teachers can play a critical role in disrupting long-standing assumptions about disability and independence and in nurturing students' confidence to lead their own lives. ■

References

- Blanck, P., & Martinis, J. (2015). "The right to make choices": The National Resource Center for Supported Decision-Making. *Inclusion*, 3, 24–33. <https://doi.org/10.1352/2326-6988.3.1.24>
- Bumble, J. L., Worth, C. R. J., Athamanah, L. S., Rooney-Kron, M., Regester, A., & Lidgus, J. (2021). "Messy inclusion": A call for dignity of risk in inclusive postsecondary education. *Inclusive Practices*, 1(2), 64–72.
- Burke, K. M., Shogren, K. A., Raley, S. K., Wehmeyer, M. L., Antosh, A. A., & LaPlante, T. (2019). Implementing evidence-based practices to promote self-determination. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 54(1), 18–29.
- Flanagan, M. F., & Bumble, J. L. (2022). Mapping Assets for Post-school Success (MAPS): Using Digital Resource Mapping to Enhance the Transition Process. *TEACHING Exceptional Children*, 56(4), 256–264. <https://doi.org/10.1177/00400599211068143>
- Lindsey, P., Guy, B., Wehmeyer, M. L., & Martin, J. (2001). Age of majority and mental retardation: A position statement of the Division on Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities. *Education and Training in Mental Retardation and Developmental Disabilities*, 36(1), 3–15.
- Martinis, J. G., Shogren, K. A., & Blanck, P. (2024). Turning off the school-to-guardianship pipeline: incorporating supported decision-making into special education. *Inclusive Practices*, 3(3), 69–77.
- Plotner, A., & Walters, C. (2021). Perceptions of district- and school-level special education leaders on guardianship and adult decision-making support. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073211006395>
- Raley, S. K., Shogren, K. A., Rifenshark, G. G., Lane, K. L., & Pace, J. R. (2021). The Impact of the Self-Determined Learning Model of Instruction on Student Self-Determination in Inclusive, Secondary Classrooms. *Remedial and Special Education*, 42(6), 363–373. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0741932520984842>
- Reutebuch, C. K., El Zein, F., & Roberts, G. J. (2015). A systematic review of the effects of choice on academic outcomes for students with autism spectrum disorder. *Research in Autism Spectrum Disorders*, 20, 1–16.
- Shogren, K. A., & Wehmeyer, M. L. (2020). Self-determination and transition. In *Handbook of Adolescent Transition Education for Youth with Disabilities* (pp. 195–205). Routledge.
- Shogren, K. A., Wehmeyer, M. L., Palmer, S. B., Forber-Pratt, A. J., Little, T. J., & Lopez, S. (2015). Causal agency theory: Reconceptualizing a functional model of self-determination. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 50(3), 251–263.
- Tounsi, O., Masmoudi, L., Trabelsi, K., Koubaa, A., Clark, C., Anouda, C., & Bahloul, M. (2022). Effects of class-wide choice making on the behaviour of students with mild intellectual disability. *International Journal of Disability, Development and Education*, 69(1), 33–46.
- Walters, C. & Plotner, A. (2023). A Delphi study to generate, clarify, and prioritize professional recommendations on age of majority-related practice in special education. *Journal of Disability Policy Studies*, 35(3), 185–197. <https://doi.org/10.1177/10442073231185740>
- Walters, C., Plotner, A., Allison, M. & Mojica, A. (2022). An exploratory study of special education director experiences with issues related to age of majority, guardianship, and alternative options for adult decision-making support. *Journal of Special Education Leadership*, 35(1), 18–32.
- Walters, C., Plotner, A., & Oertle, K. (2023). Perceptions of special education teachers on guardianship and alternative options for adult decision-making support. *Journal of Rehabilitation*, 88(3), 4–10.
- Walters, C. B., Smith-Hill, R., & Plotner, A. J. (2024). Advancing supported decision-making through special education professional advocacy. *Inclusive Practices*, 3(3), 61–68.
- Walters, C. B., Smith-Hill, R., Plotner, A., & Springate, A. (2025). Special education professional perspectives on challenges to supporting youth with disabilities and their families into legal adulthood. *Education and Training in Autism and Developmental Disabilities*, 60(1), 35–48.



Legal Brief

The Potential Consequences of Funding IDEA through Block Grants



Karin Fisher, PhD

*Past-President, Georgia Council for Exceptional Children
Associate Professor of Special Education, Georgia Southern University*

The Individuals with Disabilities Education Act is a civil rights law (U.S. Commission on Civil Rights, 2002). Congress enacted IDEA and offered financial incentives for states to comply with the law's requirements (Department of Education, n.d.). The financial incentives states receive are referred to as entitlement or formula grants. To receive this federal funding, states must provide a free and appropriate public education (FAPE) to students with disabilities in the least restrictive environment (LRE). States apply for federal funding each year and provide the U.S. Department of Education with assurances and certifications that they meet IDEA's requirements (Williams, 2024).

The Heritage Foundation first proposed moving federal education support to block grants in 1981 (Romig, 2025). The proposal is also detailed in Project 2025, and the current administration has signaled support for block grants for education funding (Spurrier et al., 2025). Block grants provide state and local governments with funding to assist them in addressing broad purposes, generally offering them more control over the use of the funds (Jaroscak, 2022). Block grants have fewer administrative conditions and restrictions on how the funds can be spent than categorical grants. The decentralized nature of the grants makes them challenging to measure and hold state and local officials accountable for their decisions (Jaroscak, 2022). They often have no federal requirement for uniform data collection on outcome measures and spending, making it difficult to compare data across states (Finegold et al, 2004). Thus, the flexibility reduces Congress's ability to provide oversight.

Congress has converted entitlement grants to block grants in the past. An example was the Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), which was an entitlement grant providing cash assistance to needy families. In 1996, Congress voted to overhaul the program and created Temporary Assistance for

Needy Families (TANF) block grants. The grant has fixed funding and is not adjusted for inflation. When the economy was good, states diverted the funds to other resources, and those funds were never replaced to help families in need. In 1996, 70% of the funds went to families in need. By 2023, 25% of the funds were spent on basic assistance for low-income families, as shown in Figure 1 (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024). Instead, states allocated funds to support the Department of Children and Families case management, preschool education, the Departments of Corrections and Mental Health, financial aid for college students, drug courts, and substance abuse programs. Because basic assistance reaches fewer poor families, U.S. children living in deep poverty have increased by 50% since the creation of TANF (Schaefer & Edin, 2014). Congress has sent significant funding to states, yet it has little knowledge about how states spend the money. Consequently, many states have shown that maintaining a strong safety net for the poorest families was not a priority (Schott et al., 2015).

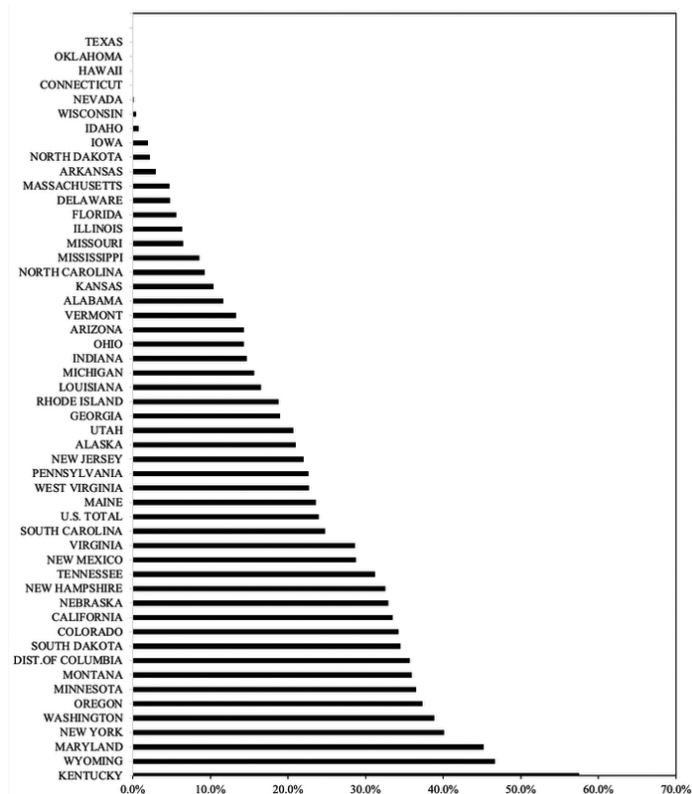
If IDEA funding is converted to block grants, evidence from similar policy changes, such as the transition from AFDC to TANF, suggests a significant risk that students with disabilities may lose critical civil rights protections. Reduced federal oversight and accountability may result in diminished access to a FAPE in the LRE, as well as erosion of due process rights for families, with fewer mechanisms to challenge violations or hold systems accountable.

Preserving strong federal and state accountability systems under IDEA is therefore essential to ensuring that the civil rights of students with disabilities remain protected nationwide.

To summarize, proposals to convert IDEA funding into block grants pose a serious risk to the civil rights of children

(continued on page 5)

Figure 1. Percentage of TANF block grants spent on basic assistance (not including Maintenance of Effort funds contributed by each state).



Data Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, TANF Financial Assistance Tables, 2024

with disabilities by weakening oversight, accountability, and consistency across states. Historical precedent, most notably the 1996 shift from AFDC to TANF, demonstrates how such changes can erode protections, reduce funding over time, and divert resources away from those most in need. Without strong federal enforcement, children could lose access to a FAPE in the LRE, and parents could see their due process rights diminished. Members are encouraged to stay informed, connect with the Council for Exceptional Children (CEC) Legislative Action Center, share these concerns with policymakers, and advocate to preserve IDEA's current entitlement structure to ensure equity and accountability for all students with disabilities (Fisher & Miller, 2021). ■

References

- Finegold, K., Wherry, L., & Schardin, S. (2004). Block grants: Details of the Bush proposals. *New federalism: Issues and options for states*. The Urban Institute, p. 9.
- Fisher, K. M., & Miller, K. M. (2021). Special educators as self-advocates. *Teaching Exceptional Children*, 53(3), 244–252. <https://doi.org/10.1177/0040059920970988>
- Jaroscak, J. V. (2022). Block grants: Perspectives and controversies. *Congressional Research Service*. <https://www.congress.gov/crs-product/R40486>
- Romig, K. (2025, October). Trump administration threatens support for children with disabilities [Blog]. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. <https://www.cbpp.org/blog/trump-administration-threatens-support-for-children-with-disabilities#:~:text=They%20intervene%20if%20a%20school,overwhelmingly%20bipartisan%20basis%20in%201990>
- Schott, L., Pavetti, L., & Floyd, I. (2015). How states use federal and state funds under the TANF block grant. *Center on Budget and Policy Priorities*. https://www.cbpp.org/research/welfare-reform-tanf/how-states-use-federal-and-state-funds-under-the-tanf-block-grant?utm_source=chatgpt.com#_ftn7
- Shaefer, H. L., & Edin, K. (2014, Summer). The rise of extreme poverty in the United States. *Pathways*, http://web.stanford.edu/group/scspi/_media/pdf/pathways/summer_2014/Pathways_Summer_2014_ShaeferEdin.pdf. See also, Kathryn J. Edin and H. Luke Shaefer, *\$2 a Day: Living on Almost Nothing in America*, 2015.
- Spurrier, A., McMillan, B., & O'Neal Schiess, J. (2025, March). Block grants: A framework for states' response to potential flexibility in federal K–12 education funds. *A Bellwether Memo*, 1–15. <https://bellwether.org/publications/block-grants-a-framework-for-states-response/?activeTab=1>
- U.S. Commission on Civil Rights. (2002). *U.S. Commission on Civil Rights recommendations for the reauthorization of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act*. [U.S. Commission on Civil Rights]
- U.S. Department of Education. (n.d.) *A History of the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act*. Retrieved from <https://sites.ed.gov/idea/IDEA-History#1975>
- U.S. Health and Human Services. (2024). TANF and MOE Spending and Transfers by Activity, FY 2023. Office of Family Assistance. Retrieved from <https://acf.gov/ofa/data/tanf-and-moe-spending-and-transfers-activity-fy-2023>
- Williams, V. (2024). *Georgia IDEA Part B Grant Award Letter*. Retrieved from <https://www.ed.gov/laws-and-policy/individuals-disabilities/part-b-grant-award-letters#ga>

President's Message

Bree Jimenez

Dear DADD Colleagues,

As we close out another remarkable year, I am filled with gratitude and excitement for the incredible momentum within DADD. Our division continues to grow and thrive because of you, our community of educators, researchers, service providers, families, and advocates, who share a deep commitment to high-quality, research-based education and support for individuals with autism and developmental disabilities.

Over the past several months, we've had the privilege of hosting engaging webinars that highlight the importance of research and the need to combat misinformation. These sessions have sparked thoughtful dialogue, inspired reflection, and reaffirmed our collective responsibility to ensure that the work we do is grounded in evidence. Thank you to everyone who contributed their expertise, curiosity, and time to make these events a success.

Now more than ever, it is essential that we stay connected through professional organizations like CEC and DADD. Together, we are stronger. We are more informed, more empowered, and better equipped to make a meaningful difference in the lives of the individuals and families we stand alongside. DADD



continues to be a place where we can learn with and from one another, share best practices, and find support in a community that understands the challenges and joys of this work.

As we look ahead, I am especially excited for the opportunity to come together in person this January in Long Beach, California. There is nothing quite like reconnecting face-to-face—sharing ideas, celebrating accomplishments, and renewing our commitment to advancing education for all.

This is my final message as president, and I want to express my heartfelt appreciation for the privilege of serving this incredible division. It has been an honor to work with you and for you, to help ensure that DADD remains your trusted home for connection, professional growth, and shared purpose. I leave you with one of my favorite quotes from Eunice Kennedy Shriver, which I believe captures the spirit of our work together:

"You are the stars and the world is watching you. By your presence, you send a message to every village, every city, every nation. A message of hope. A message of victory."

Thank you for the honor of your trust and partnership. I look forward to seeing you all in January and to celebrating all that we continue to accomplish, together. ■

Bree Jimenez
DADD President



Interim Editor's Update

Jessica Bowman, PhD
Interim Editor, DADD Express

Dear DADD Colleagues,

This issue of *DADD Express* focuses on two mission-critical areas: empowering student autonomy and safeguarding the civil rights framework of special education.



Inside This Issue: Autonomy and Advocacy

This issue highlights articles that translate research into urgent action:

1. **Supported Decision-Making:** Our featured articles offer educators practical routines to cultivate student self-direction and autonomy. By prioritizing everyday practices like structured choice-making, teaching students to identify and use supports, and integrated goal-setting, we proactively challenge the overreliance on restrictive options like adult guardianship. These

practices are essential for nurturing the confidence students need to lead self-determined lives.

2. **Protecting IDEA:** We bring you urgent updates on the threats to federal special education governance. The DADD CAN Brief and Legal Brief detail the consequences of the recent Reduction in Force (RIF) at the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and the looming risk of converting IDEA's funding to block grants. Both actions threaten the federal oversight and accountability essential for ensuring Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) and Least Restrictive Environment (LRE) for all students.

Given this constant pressure on federal policy, I strongly urge you to read the briefs and join the advocacy effort. Please take a moment to advocate for OSEP's restoration and the preservation of IDEA's current funding structure with your elected representatives.

A Call for Submissions: Share Your Voice

As we look ahead, we invite you to share your expertise and innovative practices through *DADD Express*. The heart of

(continued on page 7)

(Interim Editor's Update, continued from page 6)

our newsletter is you—the practitioners, researchers, and advocates—who are applying evidence-based knowledge to real-world challenges. Whether you are addressing innovative practices, celebrating successes, or developing culturally responsive resources, your experiences directly advance our collective mission. We are actively seeking manuscript submissions that provide practical, evidence-based guidance to our community.

Passing the Torch

As I conclude my service as the interim editor for DADD Express, it is a pleasure to formally introduce Dr. Kelly Kearney, who will be taking over this vital role. Thank you, Kelly, for stepping up to lead the newsletter into its next chapter!

I extend my deepest gratitude to all of you for your tireless commitment to DADD's mission. ■

Jessica Bowman, PhD
Interim Editor, *DADD Express*

Diversity Committee Update

Sarah Cox



The Diversity Committee has been busy organizing the Fall 2025 Community Chats. These live webinars are an opportunity for our DADD members to learn more about topics of interest. After collecting feedback from the DADD membership, the Diversity Committee decided to host four community chats (one more than previous years) to address the most requested topics (Evidence-Based Practices, Partnering with Families, Behavior, and Transition Planning). Below is an overview of the four Community Chats along with links to registration. Community Chats are open to all interested attendees, so feel free to share with friends/family/colleagues.

October 27, 7 p.m. EST

Dr. Şeyma İntepé, “Implementing Evidence-Based Practices for Youth with ASD: What They Are and Where to Find Resources.”

Dr. İntepé outlined how EBPs are defined and where families and educators can locate implementation supports. During the Question and Answer portion, community priorities were highlighted: (a) making EBP resources available in families' native languages (including visual supports and video modeling), (b) expanding research with minoritized groups to clarify what works for whom under what conditions, (c) integrating neuro-affirming scholarship, and (d) reporting social validity as part of EBP repositories to highlight practices that are not only effective but desired and appropriate. Recordings of community chats can be found on DADD's YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/@divisiononautismanddevelop1275>

November 18, 7 p.m. EST

Dr. Mandy J. Rispoli, “Partnering with Families: Supporting Caregiver Mediated Intervention.”

Dr. Rispoli discussed how education should improve autistic students' lives across home, community, and future work, which requires partnering with families to understand their pri-

orities, values, and needs. This chat gave concrete strategies for schools and providers to help families implement meaningful, feasible supports beyond the classroom. Dr. Rispoli answered community-generated questions during the final ten minutes of the session. Recordings of community chats can be found on DADD's YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/@divisiononautismanddevelop1275>

December 3, 8 p.m. EST

Dr. Julie Thompson, “Predict. Prevent. Respond: Functional Strategies for Challenging Behavior in Autism and Developmental Disabilities.”

Dr. Thompson showed how to identify patterns early, adjust environments to reduce friction, and respond in ways that protect dignity and preserve instructional time, translating research into concrete routines that help classrooms run smoother and help learners thrive. Dr. Thompson answered questions during the final ten minutes. Recordings of community chats can be found on DADD's YouTube Channel: <http://www.youtube.com/@divisiononautismanddevelop1275>

January 7, 7 p.m. EST

Millie Rodriguez, Ruby Humphris, and Libby Carter, “The Transition IEP: Building Paths for Life After High School.”

In this community chat, presenters will explore how students, families, and educators can work together to design Transition IEPs that go beyond compliance—plans that truly reflect students' identities, cultures, and dreams. We'll discuss transition assessments, guardianship, and goal setting through a culturally responsive lens, with practical ideas for ensuring every voice at the table is heard. Together, we'll walk through how each part of the transition IEP connects to the four key domains of transition—Employment, Independent Living, Community Participation, and Postsecondary Education—to support students as they prepare for meaningful, self-determined lives after school. Q&A to follow. Register at <https://tinyurl.com/mrxrtsvs>.

DADD Annual Meeting.

We will convene a brief Diversity Committee meeting to share updates and set 2026 priorities. Detailed information will be included in the conference program. ■

DADD CAN Brief

Protecting OSEP and IDEA: What Happened, Why It Matters, and What Advocates Must Do Now



Luann Ley Davis, PhD
DADD CAN Coordinator

What Happened

In October 2025, the U.S. Department of Education (ED) initiated a Reduction in Force (RIF) affecting nearly all personnel in the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP)—the federal office charged with ensuring implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) (National Down Syndrome Congress [NDSC], 2025).

During the subsequent federal shutdown, U.S. District Judge Susan Illston issued a temporary restraining order blocking the terminations from proceeding, ruling that the layoffs were likely unlawful and potentially politically motivated (NDSC, 2025). The ruling prevents further layoffs for now, but the Administration may still appeal, and OSEP remains at risk.

The Administration has characterized the shutdown as evidence that the Department of Education is unnecessary and has publicly proposed shifting IDEA oversight to the Department of Health and Human Services, a move that cannot occur without Congressional action and would fundamentally alter how special education is governed nationwide (NDSC, 2025).

Why This Matters

While IDEA remains federal law, enforcement capacity is in jeopardy.

OSEP provides:

- Federal oversight ensuring states adhere to FAPE and Least Restrictive Environment requirements.
- Distribution and monitoring of \$15+ billion in IDEA funding.
- Family supports, dispute resolution guidance, state improvement planning, and educator preparation tools (NDSC, 2025).
- Critical training and technical assistance to states, schools, and districts (Gilmour et al., 2025).

Without OSEP staffing:

- Districts may delay evaluations, reduce services, or return to segregated placements.
- Families may face greater barriers when enforcing procedural safeguards.
- Educators would lose consistent federal guidance on IDEA-compliant practices.
- Students with disabilities—especially in rural and under-resourced communities—face heightened inequity.

This is not simply a staffing issue—it is a structural threat to civil rights enforcement.

National Response

More than 800 disability, education, parent, and civil rights organizations have called for Congress to intervene (Council for Exceptional Children [CEC], 2025).

Educators, families, and advocates have sent over 40,000 letters urging restoration of OSEP staffing and federal oversight (CEC, 2025).

Take Action Now!

1. Contact Your Members of Congress

Ask them to:

- Hold oversight hearings in the Senate HELP Committee and House Education and Workforce Committee.
- Reverse OSEP layoffs.
- Prevent any transfer of IDEA to another agency (Amplification Toolkit, 2025).

2. Contact Your Governor and State Attorney General

- Request a public commitment to full IDEA enforcement within the state.

3. Continue Filing OCR Complaints When Rights Are Violated

- Documented complaints remain legally significant even during staffing interruptions (Amplification Toolkit, 2025).

Amplification Toolkit (Share Widely)

Take action today using this step-by-step guide:

<https://acrobat.adobe.com/id/urn:aaid:sc:VA6C2:3f8f4a1a-05ce-4163-9352-512e9ab4ffba> (Includes copy-and-send templates, phone scripts, talking points, and coordinated messaging.)

Key Message for Schools and Families

- **IDEA is still in effect.**
- **IEPs remain legally binding.**
- **Districts must continue compliance** with evaluations, services, procedural safeguards, and placement laws. ■

References

- Amplification Toolkit: November 4th Town Hall – *Protect Children with Disabilities, Protect IDEA*. (2025). National advocacy coalition digital toolkit.
- Council for Exceptional Children. (2025). *Restore the Office of Special Education Programs* [Policy statement].
- Gilmour, A., Bartanen, B., Bettini, E., Feng, L., Klinenberg, J., Mason-Williams, L., Redding, C., Scott, L. A., & Theobald, R. (2025). *The composition, distribution, and stability of the special education teacher workforce in seven states* (SPARC Working Paper No. 01-1025). American Institutes for Research. SPARC White Paper
- National Down Syndrome Congress. (2025). *Frequently Asked Questions: What's Happening at the Office of Special Education Programs (OSEP) and What It Means for Students with Disabilities*.
- U.S. District Court for the Northern District of California. (2025). *Temporary restraining order in AFGE v. U.S. Department of Education* (Illston, J.).