



## *African American Children and Learning Differences*

### **Who We Are**

The AACLD is a non-profit founded in 2000 by a mother and her two sons for the purpose of increasing awareness in minority communities about learning differences and promoting parent advocacy. For more than a decade the family had struggled with academic challenges that seemed almost insurmountable at times. The maze they traveled for academic success resulted in a strong desire to make the road easier for other families in similar situations.

The AACLD has now grown to serve thousands of African American families throughout the United States. In addition, it has continued to serve the broader public by responding to an extraordinary number of requests for information nationwide from a very diverse audience including teachers, public and private K-12 schools, colleges and universities, social service agencies, psychologists, hospitals, churches, lawyers, parent groups, and other organizations.

### **The Challenge**

Since the 1960's, the disproportionate representation of African American children in special education has received national attention but not much has changed. According to the National Center for Education Statistics, African Americans currently make up approximately 16.6% of public school enrollment. Yet, information derived from the Data Accountability Center funded by the U.S. Office of Special Education Programs shows that the representation of African Americans in the high incidence categories has continued to hover around 30% for Mental Retardation (recently renamed Intellectual Disability), 28% for Emotional Disturbance, and 21% for Specific Learning Disability.<sup>1</sup>

Special education is intended to provide support and services to help students with disabilities learn to their full potential. Historically, special education has too often been a place to segregate minorities and students with disabilities. Disproportionate representation is defined as the extent to which membership in a given ethnic group affects the probability of being placed in a specific special education disability category.<sup>2</sup> To the extent that minority students are misclassified, segregated, or inadequately served, special education can contribute to a denial of equality of opportunity, with devastating results in communities throughout the nation.<sup>3</sup>

### **The Solution**

Although the input of teachers, principals, and school psychologists is important in the identification of children for special education services, parents cannot allow these decisions to depend solely on the opinions of school personnel. Parents *must* be aggressive and actively seek information about their legal rights and responsibilities provided under Federal and State law. They *must* learn to understand their children's educational needs and then become their children's strongest advocates.

The reality is that the current legal process must be used to obtain the appropriate services and supports that every child is entitled and needs for school and later life success. *Parents should not resist evaluations for a child who is struggling but they should be vigilant, making sure that the findings are accurate and that the interventions rendered result in continuous academic and social progress.*

Parents can become involved in the special needs decision-making process for their children by learning about the Federal law that guarantees a "free appropriate public education" for all children—the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA). Although there are widespread reports of noncompliance by the majority of States, this law clearly defines parents' rights and responsibilities. Knowledge of the law will help parents to force compliance and access the services their children need.

It is also important for parents to become familiar with their State special education law. There are minimum requirements that States must meet in order to receive Federal funds to assist in providing special education and related services but the specifics of each State law may vary.

### **AACLD Resources and Opportunities**

Research has demonstrated that the education of children with disabilities can be made more effective by strengthening the role of parents. The AACLD offers the following resources and opportunities:

#### ***Website***

www.aacld.org provides information and resources for parents of children with learning differences in their journey to obtain the desired educational outcomes for their children.

#### ***Parent Handbook***

The AACLD publication, *One Child at a Time . . . A Parent Handbook and Resource Directory for African American Families with Children Who Learn Differently*, was last published after the reauthorization of IDEA 2004. Although it is no longer available in hard copy, it is available on the website. The publication will be updated and reprinted after the next reauthorization.

#### ***Parent Network and Parent Leadership Institute***

The Parent Network was established for the purpose of keeping families informed and raising the level of community awareness. Through the creation of a Parent Leadership Institute (PLI), the AACLD is striving to reach an unprecedented number of African American families by selecting proven advocacy leaders in strategic locations throughout the United States to serve as its primary members.

#### ***Parent Advocacy Trainings***

With the intent of creating a movement for change that results in an improved and socially just quality of education, the AACLD will launch a series of nationwide parent advocacy trainings, *Empowering Parents for African American Student Achievement*, in August 2012. A free, online course for individuals interested in helping families with children who are struggling to learn will be offered beginning in 2013.

### **Contact Information:**

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<sup>1</sup> Data Accountability Center (2009-2010 Tables), funded by Office of Special Education Programs, U.S. Department of Education.

<sup>2</sup> Oswald, D.P., Coutinho, M.J., Best, A.M., & Singh, N.N. (1999). Ethnic Representation in Special Education: The Influence of School-Related Economic Demographic Variables. *The Journal of Special Education*, 32, 194-206.

<sup>3</sup> Harvard Civil Rights Project Press Release (March 2, 2001). Harvard Studies Find Inappropriate Special Education Placements Continue to Segregate and Limit Educational Opportunities for Minority Students Nationwide.