
2024-2025 Annual Report



NAVIGATING A DIFFICULT JOURNEY

PROTECT
STUDENT
RIGHTS

The future
of our kids
depends
on us



COPAA

Protecting Rights. Creating Opportunities. Changing Lives

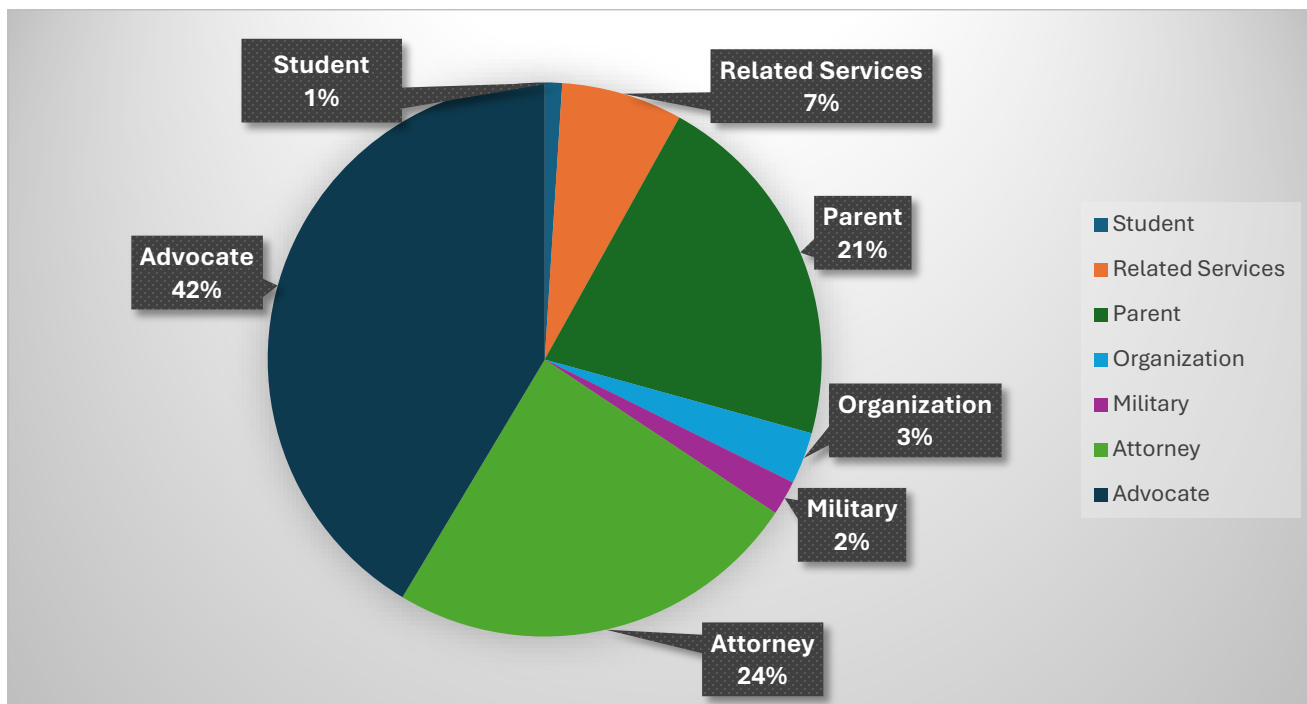
Stand Up for Student and Family Rights – COPAA Helps You Navigate a Difficult Journey

At COPAA, the focus is on protecting and advancing the legal and civil rights of students with disabilities and their parents. The mission is to equip parents, attorneys, advocates, and related professionals with the necessary knowledge and resources to navigate the education system's complexities. The aim is to ensure every student with a disability receives the education they require to learn, grow, and thrive.

Over the past year, we have continued to make significant progress toward this goal. With more than 3,500 active members across all 50 states and several U.S. territories, COPAA's reach and impact continue to expand. This **2024-25 Annual Report** highlights key accomplishments from the past year and outlines our strategic vision for the future—one that strengthens our foundation while broadening our advocacy footprint.

COPAA remains proudly independent, empowering us to be bold, relentless, and effective in our systemic advocacy. Our independence ensures that we are not constrained by external funders, allowing us to take strong, uncompromising action where it matters most. We sustain our efforts through our initiatives and the generous support of our members and those directly impacted by our work. The income from those efforts, along with minimal reliance on grants and carefully selected foundations that align with our mission, we ensure our advocacy remains solely driven by our mission and the needs of the students and parents we serve.

COPAA Dues Paying Members = 3548



Diversity of the COPAA Membership

COPAA aims to foster diversity and inclusivity within its community. Currently, 71% of our members identify as Caucasian, while 29% are BIPOC members. Additionally, 18% of members chose not to state their racial identity. Members who reported more than two ethnic backgrounds are categorized as multi-racial. There are significant differences in culture, ethnicity, geographic location, and experiences within these broad categories. One of COPAA's strategic priorities for the next three years is to increase engagement with historically underserved populations. At present, 28% of our members come from culturally and racially diverse backgrounds, and we aim to increase that percentage through outreach, advocacy, and community-building efforts.



Advocacy Tools for COPAA Membership

COPAA offers up-to-date information on advocating for students' rights. Parents, attorneys, and advocates can prepare for the school year with resources to navigate Individualized Education Programs (IEPs) and 504 Plans. COPAA members provide tools and support to ensure every student receives individualized programs and assistance.

Tools for Parents

Parent Essentials: Resources for parents' advocacy efforts, including COPAA's IEP and IEE checklists and sample letters.

Monthly Parent Meetings: Monthly meetings led by experienced parents/advocates.

On-Demand Learning: COPAA's Learning Center offers over ten free webinars and learning paths, covering topics like Section 504 rights, assistive technology, reducing the use of restraint and seclusion, and the IEP process.

Special Education Advocate Training (SEAT) 1.0: A ten-session course for parents or new advocates.

Tools for Advocates

Advocate Starter Kit: A series of documents including COPAA's Advocates and IDEA fact sheet, a sample client agreement, client intake form, client log, and parent authorization / release of information.

On-Demand Learning: Over twenty free and reduced-rate on-demand learning opportunities for members on topics like discipline, post-secondary transition, reading, evaluations, IEEs, school avoidance, legislative advocacy, and more!

Advocate Late Nite: A weekly Advocate discussion with experienced advocates led by COPAA's Advocate Committee.

Special Education Advocate Training (SEAT) 2.0 course: A 27-session course with 13 assignments personally graded by an experienced advocate.

Business of Special Education course: A five-session course with an experienced advocate assigned to review and provide feedback on your business plan.

Tools for Attorneys

Attorney Tool Kit: This toolkit includes white papers and slide decks on various topics such as attorney fees, trial tactics, mediation, pre-hearing preparation, issue spotting, compensatory education, settlement agreements, Section 504, the *Andrew F.* Standard, and practical implications of the *Perez v. Sturgis* case. It also features an eligibility checklist.

Attorney Round Table Discussion: Attorney members can join this discussion to receive mentorship and advice on navigating issues with school districts.

Attorney Class: A 12-session class designed for attorneys or law students new to special education law, which is taught by COPAA's Legal Director, Selene Almazan (and features guest speakers). The class offers up to 24 hours of CLE credit units.



Training, Support and Mentorship

As the only organization of its kind in the nation, we provide training, support, and mentorship to parents, advocates, attorneys, students and related professionals. COPAA fights for legal and civil rights for students.

We offer **knowledge exchange, research, training, mentoring, and community building.**

Trained 2,893 people this year through SEAT classes, attorney classes, the Annual Conference, and the Learning Center

Provided 192 scholarships for training, conferences, or memberships to support inclusion and equity

Expert Legal Arguments Through Amicus Briefs

Navigating the educational system can be daunting, especially when a child's well-being is at stake. Our goal is to empower parents, advocates, and attorneys to navigate this complex journey confidently. Our members work hard to achieve success in individual cases and to shape laws that protect students and parents. Last year, COPAA submitted 17 amicus briefs to persuade courts, expand opportunities for students and parents, and help shape and enforce laws protecting children with disabilities. For example, COPAA supported plaintiffs in *CP v. New Jersey Department of Education*, leading to a settlement for over 5000 children with disabilities, providing parents recourse for violations.

Also as featured in Special Ed Connection this year, COPAA was involved in the Top 5 Cases for Effective Communication under the ADA.

Le Pape v. Lower Merion Sch. Dist., 2024 103 F. 4th 966 (3d Cir. 2024) The Third Circuit reversed a district court's dismissal of a parent's ADA claim, stating that the American with Disabilities Act (ADA)'s effective communication rule imposes requirements beyond the free appropriate public education (FAPE) obligation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act ("IDEA"). COPAA member Nichole M. Reimann (Batchis Nestle & Reimann LLC) represented the family. COPAA's Legal Director Selene Almazan and Catherine Merino Reisman wrote an amicus brief in support of the family.

Lartigue v. Northside Indep. Sch. Dist., 100 F.4th 510 (5th Cir. 2024) The Fifth Circuit reversed a district court's dismissal of a family's case where a school district did not adequately accommodate their child's hearing impairment under the ADA, ruling that the lower court misinterpreted the IDEA's exhaustion requirement. COPAA member Martin J. Cirkiel (Cirkiel & Associates, P.C.) represented the family, along with Roman Martinez and Blake E. Stafford (Latham & Watkins, LLP). COPAA's Legal Director Selene Almazan and board member Ellen Saideman wrote an amicus brief in support of the family.

K.M. v. Tustin Unified Sch. Dist., 725 F.3d 1088 (9th Cir. 2013) The Ninth Circuit reversed the district court's decision against the parents of students with hearing disabilities, holding that a court's finding that a school district has not violated the IDEA does not preclude a valid ADA claim under the effective communication rule. COPAA member David Martin Grey (Grey & Grey) represented the family. COPAA submitted an amicus brief in support of the family.

D.H. v. Poway Unified Sch. Dist., 2013 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 179116 (S.D. Cal. 2013) The U.S. District Court for the Southern District of California found that a child's school district likely violated the ADA's effective communications rule and ordered the district to provide Communication Access Real-time Translation services throughout the litigation. COPAA member David Martin Grey (Grey & Grey) represented the family.

J.G. v. Los Angeles Unified Sch. Dist., 2023 U.S. Dist. LEXIS 29741 (C.D. Cal. 2023) The U.S. District Court for the Central District of California determined that a student's school district violated the ADA by unlawfully segregating him at a special education center, but concluded the district had not failed to provide an appropriate AAC device to comply with the effective communication rule of the ADA, despite delays in providing a device preferred by his parents. The family was represented by Surisa E. Rivers, Caroleen Karoun Torossian (Rivers Law Inc. APC), and Wilmer J. Harris (Schonbrun Seplow Harris Hoffman and Zeldes, LLP).

End the Isolation and Abuse

Robbie, an eleven-year-old with Down syndrome, feared school. His behavior showed his distress by throwing items, trying to leave, and getting suspended. One day, Robbie's mom Claire discovered he was isolated in a room separate from classmates, which wasn't mentioned in his IEP. With the help of an advocate, she acted quickly, writing to the IEP team and district administrator, stopping the isolation.

Isolation of students with disabilities is a widespread issue across the U.S., often punishing them instead of providing necessary support.

We aim to strengthen state protection and pass a federal law, the Keeping All Students Safe Act to safeguard students.

COPAA has been fighting to ban isolation (seclusion) in public schools since 2009.



Robbie was placed in a separate enclosure within the classroom, with a small opening and limited view of the classroom.

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- [Winston Preparatory School Programs](#)
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We sincerely appreciate all of our partners, [view our website](#) to view a complete list.

Oak Foundation Grant: Supporting educational advocacy for students with learning differences

COPAA is committed to building a more equitable educational landscape by supporting parents striving for meaningful improvements in their children's educational experiences. However, the journey to securing these rights can be overwhelming—especially for parents facing financial, geographic, or systemic barriers. At COPAA, we recognize the challenges parents endure when advocating for their child's well-being and education.

This project, supported through a grant from The Oak Foundation, adopts a multipronged approach to ensure students, parents, advocates, attorneys, and key educational personnel are equipped with the knowledge and tools needed to shape educational planning and outcomes effectively. The initiative comprises four interconnected elements: Advocacy Training, Legal Fellowships, Membership and Advocacy Network Integration, and the development of the Key Indicators for Educational Opportunity Tool.

These strategies aim to promote ongoing engagement, improve equitable outcomes, and amplify the voices of students and parents in the special education system. The multi-faceted program model, which includes supporting students, parents, and legal advocates—has shown effectiveness, although engagement is not always straightforward. Fellows are developing expertise and contributing to both individual impact and systemic change.

New Orleans Metro Area

The recent training course in the New Orleans Metro Region, led by Shemica Allen and Chris Roe, successfully engaged 27 parents from 17 cities. 54% of participants were people of color, with most being parents of children with IEPs (69%), and others serving as advocates or parents of children with 504 plans.

A youth-specific course also launched, enrolling 20 students, some of whom are children of adult course participants. Events included a kickoff event and online training.

The Loyola Law Clinic experienced a notable increase in special education case intakes. The Fellowship has expanded the clinic's capacity to represent parents in expulsion appeals, IEP and 504 plan advocacy, bullying-related issues, OCR complaints and due process filings. This has resulted in more direct representation, expanded caseloads, and improved systemic support through an established intake process.



Oregon



Grounded Roots Initiative: *Creating Grassroots Advocacy to support families of children with disabilities that weaves in cultural community wisdom*

Umatilla Tribe – Grounded Roots Initiative

The January training included a handful of participants, all of whom were Native American. Engagement faced challenges due to systemic barriers, fear of retaliation, and trust issues within Tribal communities. Efforts are focused on improving services for a 16-year-old student with dyslexia while maintaining the school's cultural emphasis. The Confederated Tribes of Warm Springs Initiative is currently underway to include training addressing educational rights violations in local districts, which is scheduled for May 2025 due to strong community interest.

Statewide Advocacy and Collateral Benefits

The Disability Rights Oregon Fellowship program supported 63 parents across the state by providing legal coaching, document support, and direct participation in IEP meetings. As a result, parents reported increased empowerment and advocacy knowledge. Additionally, a Special Education Advocate was hired to expand direct services, and a Summer Law Clerk was recruited to enhance Oregon's capacity in special education law. Abuse investigations began in two schools, with follow-ups planned, and training sessions are being organized for 30 juvenile law attorneys on education rights.

COPAA Committees

Parent Committee: Presentation on IDEA Rights and Responsibilities: covering an IDEA Overview, Parental Rights, Child's Rights, Parental Involvement, IEP Preparation, Navigating Conflicts, and Resources. Practice

and advocacy tips shared at monthly meetings and group listserv. The Parent Committee meets monthly on topics of interest to the community.

Advocate Committee: Year-round discussions held twice weekly with over 300 advocates participating. A resource has been developed to support advocates' participation in schools, focusing on Advocacy and IEPs. Guide for parents/advocates: <https://www.copaa.org/blogpost/895540/503274/School-Districts-That-Exclude-Advocates-from-the-IEP-Process-May-Run-Afoul-of-the-Law>

Attorney Committee: Monthly roundtables discussing topics such as Discipline and Child Find, with over 40 participants per session. Attorneys provide peer-to-peer sessions offering guidance, legal strategy, and resources to assist their peers in cases.

Conference Committee: Each year this active committee is responsible for many activities and subcommittees required to put on a successful conference. Tasks include, but are not limited to, proposal selection, location selection, the Beth Goodman Silent Auction, and more! There were over 790 participants this year at the conference held in Irvine, CA.

Amicus Committee: Providing technical assistance to members, conducting Moot Courts for trial preparation, and drafting amicus briefs on significant cases. One important case this year involves OCR Section 504 proceedings in Michigan, where the OCR holds that Michigan has supervisory responsibility for Section 504 over local school districts. Activities include practicing moot courts, writing briefs, setting precedents, and recently drafting an amicus brief for Michigan.

Government Relations: Over 50 individuals nationwide engaged in grassroots lobbying on issues such as IDEA full funding, eliminating the use of seclusion, and reducing restraint in schools. These efforts are supported by a network of over 120 advocates across all states and Washington D.C.



Notable activities include:

- **50+ members participated in Hill Days** on issues like IDEA full funding and Ending Seclusion in schools
- **120 advocates** held policy briefings and conducted local advocacy
- **H.R.3470 / S. 1750 - Keeping All Students Safe Act Introduced** with 106 bi-partisan co-signers
- **State and Local Advocacy Network** serves as a place for COPAA members currently active or hoping to become more active in policy advocacy to learn, share and increase their effectiveness as change makers in their local community and state.

Social Racial Equity Committee: This committee is dedicated to COPAA's commitment to fully consider the intersectionality of disability, race, national origin, ethnic, cultural and/or religious identity, sex/gender identity/sexual orientation, and socioeconomic status. Our goal is to protect and enforce the legal and civil

rights of students with disabilities and their parents.

COPAA also has many **Operational Committees**, such as Awards, Development, Membership, Scholarships, and Nominations. Special Interest Groups include the Disabled Members Community and Vong Tay Cha Me Viet.

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Financial Summary 2024

Revenue		
Donated services	\$ 549,368	25.4%
Conference, membership fees & trainings	\$ 1,282,872	59.4%
Grants & contracts	\$ 217,690	10.1%
Contributions	\$ 42,051	1.9%
Interest, gains/losses & other	\$ 55,023	2.5%
Net assets released from restriction	\$ 12,610	0.6%
Total Support & Revenue	\$ 2,159,614	
Expenses		
Program services	\$ 2,068,265	92.9%
Management & general	\$ 141,623	6.4%
Fundraising	\$ 15,309	0.7%
Total Expenses	\$ 2,225,197	

DO YOU HAVE EXPERIENCE WITH SECTION 504 OF THE REHAB ACT?

What is our purpose?

- We are interested in learning from students with disabilities and families of students with disabilities about their experiences with Section 504 in schools

Who can participate?

- Students (aged 14 or older) who applied for or currently receive Section 504 supports from your school
- Family caregivers of a student who applied for or currently receives Section 504 supports from school

What will you do?

- Complete a short demographic survey
- Participate in a Zoom interview for 1-1.5 hours
- Check your interview summary

HOW CAN YOU ENROLL?

Contact Meghan Burke @
 meghan.burke@vanderbilt.edu
 or 615-585-1420

Understanding and Improving Access to Section 504 Among Students with Disabilities

A five-year grant from the Administration on Community Living, National Institute on Disability, Independent Living, and Rehabilitation Research (NIDILRR) being conducted in collaboration by Vanderbilt University and The Council of Parent Attorneys and Advocates.

Data on students with Section 504 plans is limited. Students often struggle to access Section 504, and even when eligible, receiving services can be challenging. Marginalized individuals face additional barriers to accessing Section 504. We are conducting three studies aiming to: (1) identify access disparities, (2) explore experiences of individuals with disabilities and their parents, and (3) develop and test an intervention based on the findings.



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