



EDUCATION SOLUTIONS, LLC

True *North*

The Education Solutions newsletter for special education leaders and families.

ISSUE NO. 003 • COMPLIANCE • CLASSROOM PRACTICE

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N 000° THE SIGNAL

Complaints are up nearly fifty percent

A briefing, not a bulletin board

Written state complaints in special education rose sharply during the 2025 to 2026 school year, climbing 46 percent from 7,907 to 11,523 complaints across the 31 states that reported data, according to survey findings from the Council for Exceptional Children and the National Association of State Directors of Special Education, as reported by K-12 Dive. Due process hearing requests and mediation requests rose as well, though by smaller margins.

Three pressures appear to be driving the increase. Families have lost confidence in the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights following significant staff reductions and the closure of seven of its twelve regional offices, leaving many with the sense that federal recourse is slower and less certain than it used to be. Chronic underfunding, heavy caseloads, and ongoing personnel shortages are straining the state and district staff responsible for resolving concerns before they escalate. Some experts also note that parents are increasingly using artificial intelligence tools to draft formal complaint letters, which lowers the effort required to file and may be inflating the numbers independent of any real change in the underlying rate of disputes.

For district leaders, the useful reading of this data is not that families have become more litigious. It is that the informal safety valve, the phone call, the early meeting, the relationship that resolves a concern before it becomes a formal filing, is under more strain at exactly the moment filing a complaint has gotten easier. Districts that treat this only as a legal or procedural risk will keep watching the numbers climb. The ones that get ahead of it are reinforcing the systems and relationships that used to prevent most of these complaints from reaching this stage in the first place.

SOURCES K-12 Dive; Council for Exceptional Children; National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE); Hartford Courant; The Day; California School News. Figures reflect self-reported survey data from 31 state education agencies for the 2025 to 2026 school year.

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By the time a complaint reaches my desk, something upstream already failed. The complaint isn't the problem. It's the smoke alarm.

SPECIAL EDUCATION DIRECTOR, PARTNER SCHOOL DISTRICT

E 090° THE PLAYBOOK

Get ahead of the complaint, not behind it

Something to actually use, not file away

Three things worth doing this week, in order of priority:

1. Audit your local complaint and concern response process now, not after the first one lands. Confirm families know exactly who to call, that call gets returned within a defined window, and that the person answering has the authority to actually resolve the issue rather than just escalate it.
2. Train case managers and related service providers on de-escalation and responsive communication specifically, not just IEP compliance. A concern handled well at the classroom or case manager level rarely turns into a formal complaint.
3. Do not lean on federal OCR timelines as your safety net. With regional office closures and reduced staffing, state-level and internal complaint processes will carry more weight this year. Make sure yours are fast, clear, and genuinely responsive.

SOURCES Council of Administrators of Special Education (CASE); National Association of State Directors of Special Education (NASDSE).

S 180° THE STANDARD

Prevention starts long before a complaint

Compliant is the floor, not the goal

Most formal complaints do not start as legal disputes. They start with a parent who felt unheard, an IEP that was implemented inconsistently, or a service that was promised but not delivered as written. By the time a complaint is filed, the relationship has usually already broken down.

The quality of the IEP itself matters here more than it gets credit for. A vague or generic IEP gives families little to hold onto and little confidence that the plan reflects their child's actual needs. A clear IEP, with specially designed instruction tied to real goals and progress data shared consistently, gives families evidence that the team is doing what it said it would do, and gives staff something concrete to point to when a concern comes up.

Exceptional practice treats complaint prevention as a byproduct of good IEP implementation, not a separate compliance workstream. Teams that document consistently, communicate proactively, and follow through

on what is written rarely need to explain themselves after the fact.

SOURCES Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), 34 CFR § 300.39; Council for Exceptional Children (CEC).

W 270° THE FOUNDER'S TAKE

A candid note from the field

Unfiltered, on purpose



A 46 percent jump in complaints in a single year is not a number I can read as noise. When I talk with directors right now, most of them already sense it. The calls feel different. Families arrive at meetings with more documentation, more prior research, and less patience for a plan that sounds like a template.

I do not think the answer is to get more defensive. Every complaint is information, even the ones that feel unfair. The question worth sitting with is not just whether the district technically complied, but why the family did not trust that it would without putting something in writing.

The districts I have seen weather a period like this well are not the ones with the cleanest paperwork. They are the ones that kept talking to families even when the news was not good, and that treated a rising complaint number as a signal to check their own systems rather than a reason to tighten up communication.

"A complaint is rarely the actual problem. It is what happens when every earlier chance to solve the problem quietly has already been missed."

DR. CRISTA GRIMWOOD, FOUNDER

GET IN TOUCH

Have a question or a topic for next week?

If you have questions or comments about this issue, or an idea for a topic you'd like to see covered in a future edition, leave a comment or send a note to cgrimwood11@gmail.com. Dr. Grimwood reads every message and is happy to address them directly.