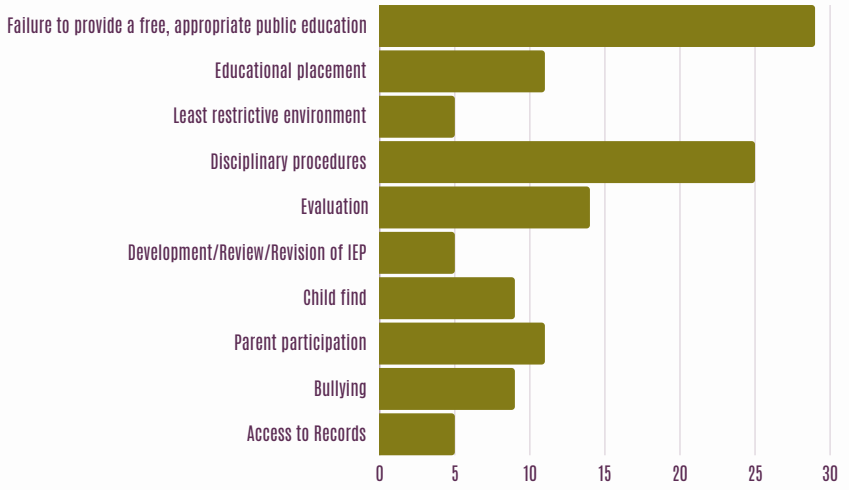
SPECIAL EDUCATION IN MISSISSIPPI

Mississippi has been designated as **"needs assistance"** in implementing Part B of the IDEA, which covers children ages 3-21, since 2016. In its most recent performance assessment, the federal Office of Special Education Programs determined Mississippi **"need[ed] intervention"** in the state's implementation of Part C, which serves infants and toddlers birth through age 2.

To help address the poor outcomes for Mississippi's students with disabilities, MCJ's Education Project formally launched in September 2023. Since then, we have fielded more than seventy-five phone calls from community members seeking help with education matters. We have conducted 67 formal intakes and provided direct legal or advocacy services to 42 parents. For those we are unable to assist, we provide brief advice and counsel letters, referrals to partner organizations, and online resources.

INTAKE DATA

Through our intake process, we are able to determine in which areas school districts are failing to meet their legal obligations. The following chart summarizes the most common issue areas:



Mississippi's special education students are among the state's most vulnerable: more than half are black and almost 80% are economically disadvantaged.

OUR WORK

Since September, we have made strides in advancing the rights and opportunities for children with disabilities in Mississippi. Below are some program highlights from the Education Project's work thus far:

Community outreach and education:
We have conducted Know-Your-Rights Presentations in several school districts in the Mississippi Delta, including:

- Sunflower County Consolidated School District
- West Bolivar Consolidated School District
- Hollandale School District
- Greenville Public School District

Systemic litigation:
In partnership with the Southern Poverty Law Center, MCJ is involved in two federal lawsuits.

1. A due process appeal in Greenville Public School District, seeking services for a student with dyslexia.
2. A lawsuit against the Mississippi Department of Education for failing to adequately investigate and resolve state complaints.

Direct services: We provide legal assistance and advocacy to families facing challenges in accessing appropriate special education services for their children. These services include:

- Brief legal advice
- Parent coaching for IEP or other school meetings
- Representation of your child at IEP or other special education meetings
- Representation of your child in dispute resolution or administrative proceedings against the school district
- Representation at school discipline proceedings, including manifestation determination reviews, suspension hearings, and expulsion hearings

Policy advocacy: MCJ's Education Project team has been actively involved in advocating for more transparency in special education funding at the state and local levels. We are also actively involved in several coalitions that monitor and advocate for policy changes at the state level.

WHAT'S NEXT?

Community outreach and education

- Partnering with the Mississippi Parent Training Information Center, the state's parent center, to provide training to parents
- Upcoming clinics in Shaw, Leland, and Greenville
- Developing a teacher curriculum and providing trainings to special education and general education teachers

Systemic litigation

- Continuing to monitor intakes and referrals for potential systemic actions, including litigation and systemic state complaints

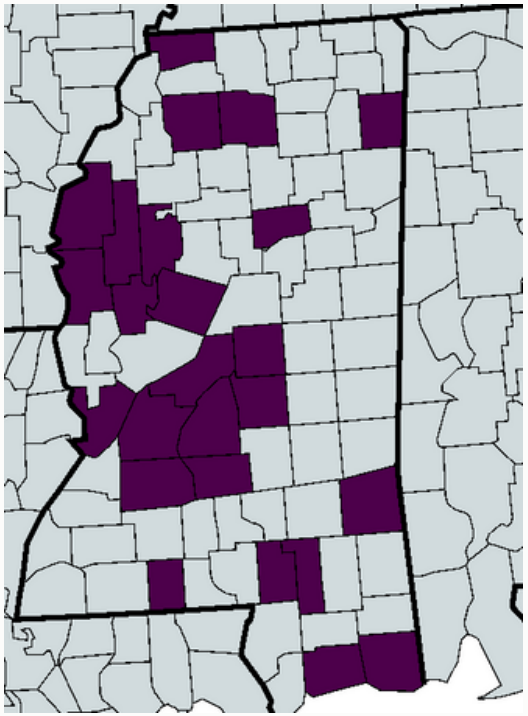
Direct services

- Expanding the geographic scope of our services beyond the Mississippi Delta

Policy advocacy

- Advocating for legislation that permits non-attorney advocates to represent parents and students at due process hearings
- Advocating for an expansion of diploma options for all students, including students with disabilities

OUR OUTREACH



WHO WE ARE

At MCJ's Education Project, We believe all students are entitled to an education that meets their needs.

We represent students with disabilities, both in school to get the services they deserve, and when they have been removed from the classroom.

MCJ's Education Project staff includes:

- Dr. Kim Wiley - Education Policy Analyst & Project Coordinator
- Lily Moens, Esq. - Equal Justice Works Legal Fellow
- Jacqueline Smith, Esq. - Attorney
- Betty Petty - Parent Advocate