



Building Belonging: Engaging Special Education Families in PTA

Training Day June 5 | Chester, VA



Virginia
PTA[®]
everychild.onevoice.[®]

PRESENTATION SPEAKERS



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SPECIAL EDUCATION STUDENTS AT A GLANCE

Understanding scope & distribution · A foundation for inclusive PTA practices

2024–2025 Data

UNITED STATES · 2024

15.2%

8.2 million students with disabilities ages 3–21

VIRGINIA · 2024–25

14.7%

190,120 students with disabilities

NATIONAL TREND

↑ 2.2pts

Up from ~13% a decade ago, and increasing

Chesterfield County Schools

13.1%

Region 1 · Central Virginia

8,649 students

Virginia Beach City Schools

13.8%

Region 2 · Tidewater

9,025 students

King George County Schools

16.6%

Region 3 · Northern Neck

707 students

Fairfax County Schools

17.0%

Region 4 · Northern Virginia

30,843 students

Rockingham County Schools

11.3%

Region 5 · Valley

1,422 students

Roanoke County Schools

17.1%

Region 6 · Western

2,391 students

Washington County Schools

17.5%

Region 7 · Southwest

1,333 students

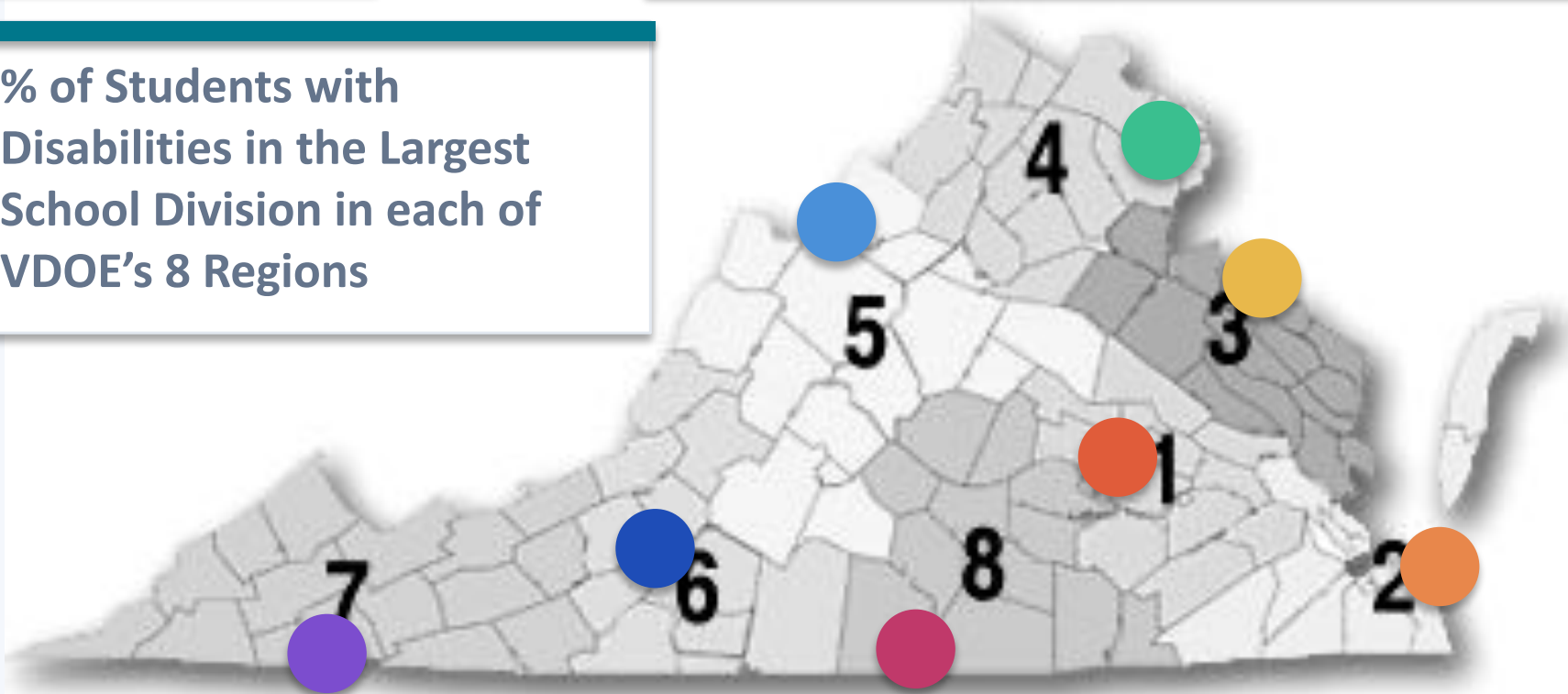
Halifax County Schools

15.7%

Region 8 · Southside

673 students

% of Students with Disabilities in the Largest School Division in each of VDOE’s 8 Regions



• Colored dots = featured districts by VDOE region (locations are approximate)

GET TO KNOW YOUR COMMUNITY

Division School Quality Profiles share the % of students with disabilities in that division under the “Enrollment” section. A rate far below state or national averages may signal students going unidentified. **PTAs can ask: Is our district finding every child who needs help?**

| = VA avg (14.7%) National avg = 15.2%

ARE WE WELCOMING ALL FAMILIES?

Describe their school environment as welcoming

78% of all parents

71% of parents with disabilities

Say their school “makes me feel like I belong”

67% of all parents

59% of parents with disabilities

Say their school brings people together

61% of all parents

52% of parents with disabilities

Say they’ve volunteered at a school event

36% of all parents

29% of parents with disabilities

71% of all parents said that providing accommodations to allow parents & families w/disabilities to access information & engage with school would be helpful. **Only 30% indicate it’s being done in their school.**

Source: National PTA’s 2022 survey “The State of Family-School Partnerships”

WELCOME
ALL FAMILIES

STANDARD 1

UNDERSTAND WHERE YOUR SPECIAL ED FAMILIES ARE

- Navigating IEP meetings/re-evaluations
- Fielding calls re: services, medications, behaviors
- Navigating community services
- Navigating medical & insurance providers
- Accessing therapies (PT/OT/Speech/ABA/Mental Health, etc)
- Ensuring accommodations are in place
- **AND MORE!**



Meet them where they are, and make it as easy as possible to engage with your PTA!

WHAT CAN YOUR PTAs DO?

Ensure your venues are accessible

Provide sensory-friendly rooms at events

Provide interpreters as needed (ASL & language)

Childcare inclusive of children with high-support needs

Ensure presentations are inclusive of SWD

Varied meeting times/formats - including virtual

Support inclusive programming options

Inclusive volunteer opportunities

Budget for accessibility & accommodations

Examine policies, traditions, etc from a disability lens

Scholarships/Awards aimed for students with disabilities

**BE
CURIOUS!**

Include disability voices & intersectionality in your advocacy

Intersectionality Matters!

Race, culture, language, income, identity, and immigration status all shape how families experience special education — and your PTA.

The Disproportionality Problem

Black and Latino boys are significantly overidentified for categories like Emotional Disturbance and Intellectual Disability — often reflecting bias in referral, not student need.

Black and Latino students with disabilities are more likely to be placed in restrictive settings and less likely to be placed in general education classrooms.

Gifted students with disabilities (twice-exceptional) are frequently missed in communities of color, where the disability is seen but the giftedness is not.

Families who don't speak English as a first language face compounded barriers: IEP documents, procedural safeguards, and meeting dynamics that were never designed for them.

What Intersectionality Means for Your PTA

An inclusion effort that doesn't examine intersectionality isn't fully inclusive. Belonging has to reach families who are navigating disability AND discrimination simultaneously.

PTAs should consider whether their advocacy for special education services addresses disproportionate placement — not just services in the abstract.

IEP literacy workshops in multiple languages are a concrete form of inclusion that most PTAs could and should support.

Ask: whose voices are missing from our SEPTA or special ed committee leadership — and why?

Don't Forget the Siblings

Inclusion conversations almost always center the student with the disability. But siblings are also members of your school community — and often invisible in how PTAs think about inclusion.

What siblings carry

Siblings of children with disabilities often take on emotional labor early — managing others' reactions, explaining their sibling's behavior, or feeling their family's stress in ways that aren't named or acknowledged at school.

Where PTAs miss them

Events designed around one child's needs, family nights that don't account for different sibling experiences, and volunteer structures that assume equal parental availability all affect sibling-inclusive families differently.

Opportunities for PTAs

Sibling support groups. Programming that acknowledges the whole family, not just the student with the IEP. Connecting sibling families with each other. These are low-lift, high-impact additions most PTAs have never considered.

■ ***Ask yourself: when your PTA designs for families, does it see the whole family?***

REFLECTION

*Pick one
question, take 3
minutes share.
Talk honestly.*

1. When we are planning meetings and events, do we consider accessibility from the start?
2. If we asked families of students with disabilities whether our PTA feels welcoming and inclusive, what do we think they would honestly say - and why?
3. What would it take for a burned-out special ed parent to be on your executive board? Is your PTA structured to make that realistic?



BEYOND INCLUSION: SEPTAs & LOCAL UNITS

**How do SEPTAs benefit & enhance
local units and/or councils?**

WHAT IS A SEPTA?

SEPTA =
Local PTA Unit +
Disability Focus

Can be chartered at the: school, district, council or state level

Members include: parents, educators, related services staff, community supporters, etc.

Virginia PTA supports: SEPTA formation and can connect you with resources

SEPTAs create: community, education & advocacy opportunities for families and students with disabilities



[SEPTA FAQ & How to Start from National PTA](#)

WHAT LOCAL UNITS & COUNCILS GAIN FROM SEPTAs

Expanded PTA Reach

Families who might not have otherwise joined PTA now have an additional point of entry. Families can be members of more than one PTA - a SEPTA may get them in the door to your local unit as well.

Built-In Expertise

SEPTA members can be a resource for local units in terms of IEP knowledge, accessibility & lived experience. Liaisons between your local unit and a SEPTA can enhance this even more.

Amplified Advocacy Voice

SEPTAs can provide a disability lens to school advocacy issues such as funding, programming, or school board decisions. Local units & SEPTAs advocating together on issues creates a stronger voice.

Myth: "Won't a SEPTA just split our membership and compete for the same families?"

Reality: SEPTAs expand the pie — they don't divide it.

Shared Programming & Resources

SEPTAs often run parent training, IEP workshops, and transition events that would be challenging for a local unit - with a smaller special education population - to host alone.

Leadership Development

SEPTA board roles develop leaders who may never have engaged with PTA otherwise. These parents often become some of your most committed advocates.

WHAT SPECIAL EDUCATION FAMILIES GAIN FROM SEPTAs

COMMUNITY

A SEPTA meeting is one of the few spaces where you don't have to explain what an IEP is, justify your child's needs, or manage others' discomfort with disability.

EDUCATION

SEPTAs can help close the knowledge gap for parents by providing education on various aspects of the IEP process, community resources, transition planning, caregiver support, etc.

ADVOCACY

SEPTA representation on school board or superintendent advisory committees, at board meetings, and in PTA governance gives special education families a seat at the table.

COLLECTIVE VOICE

Special education families often feel isolated in their schools. SEPTAs are an opportunity for a larger collective special education voice to be heard.

**SEPTAs do not
offer individual
family advocacy
services**

WHAT’S THE DIFFERENCE BETWEEN A SEPTA AND A SEAC?

	SEPTA	SEAC
What is it?	A PTA unit focused on disability and special education issues.	A school board-appointed advisory committee.
Accountability	PTA structure (Local → Council → Virginia PTA → National PTA)	School Board and Superintendent
Required by law?	No. It exists only if people organize one.	Yes. Every Virginia school division must have one.
Membership	Open to anyone who joins PTA	Appointed by the School Board; majority must be parents of students with disabilities or individuals with disabilities. Only one official teacher representative.
Primary Role	Family engagement, education, advocacy, community-building, PTA programs.	Advising the school division on special education policies, plans, priorities, and unmet needs
Can advocate publicly?	Yes. Can take positions, lobby through PTA channels, organize advocacy campaigns.	More limited. Advises the division and School Board; generally works within its statutory advisory role.

BUILDING BELONGING: PITFALLS TO AVOID

✗ Treating inclusion as a project with a completion date

✗ Appointing one special ed parent as 'the representative'

✗ Only engaging special ed families when you need something from them

✗ Defining 'inclusion' entirely by physical access and sensory accommodations

✗ Waiting until you 'figure it out' before starting

✓ Inclusion is ongoing. There's no 'done.' Build regular review into your leadership calendar.

✓ You may only have one member at first, but remember that one voice cannot represent a diverse community of families. Seek multiple perspectives, especially across disability types.

✓ Relationship first, ask second. Show up for families before you ask them to show up for you.

✓ Ask whether families with medically complex children, behavioral diagnoses, or non-apparent disabilities feel included too.

✓ Start imperfectly. Families would rather see a PTA that's trying and learning than one that's too cautious to begin.

Dignity Over Deification

In schools and community organizations, it is important to celebrate students with disabilities for their unique talents, interests, and accomplishments—not because they have overcome or live with a disability. Inclusion is about belonging, not inspiration.

Where PTAs do this without realizing it:

✗ Newsletter stories about non-disabled students being 'kind' to a classmate with a disability

✓ The student with the disability is the supporting character in someone else's story. Center disabled students' own achievements instead.

✗ Social media posts about a student with Down syndrome who 'scored a touchdown' — with the implicit message that everyone cheered

✓ If the story only works because of the disability, ask who it's really for. Make sure to ask families before these moments are shared publicly.

✗ Award ceremonies that single out students with disabilities for 'overcoming' their disability

✓ Recognize students with disabilities for the same things you recognize anyone else for — leadership, creativity, citizenship, growth. Not for existing despite a disability.

✗ PTA fundraising that uses students with disabilities as the emotional hook

✓ Ask: are we centering the dignity of these students, or using their image to make other people feel generous? Families notice the difference.

YOUR UNIT'S NEXT STEP

*Choose one
question to focus
on with your unit!*

1. Where is our biggest gap? - Accessibility, Advocacy? Leadership?
2. What is one thing we can start doing right away?
3. Who in our community should be at our table that isn't?
4. What is one thing we're doing that we may need to stop?
5. (Council) What would it take to start a SEPTA?



THANK YOU!
Questions? Email us!

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