

**Commission for Accessibility  
Meeting Minutes  
Monday, November 15, 2023**

Meeting Via Zoom

In Attendance: Christine Santori, Maureen Culhane, Michael Landrigan, Dave Choplinski, Tony Phillips, Don Ciota

**Call to Order:** 5:02 PM

Town of Ridgefield Guidelines Booklet

Hyperlink to Ridgefield Guidelines Booklet:

[https://www.ridgefieldct.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf4916/f/uploads/town\\_of\\_ridgefield\\_bcc\\_handbook\\_-\\_final\\_11.3.22\\_0.pdf](https://www.ridgefieldct.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf4916/f/uploads/town_of_ridgefield_bcc_handbook_-_final_11.3.22_0.pdf)

**Public Comment:**

Christine mentioned a Transition Plan event will be taking place in schools on March 6. Jessica DiValentino, Transition Plan Coordinator Special Education Teacher, Ridgefield Schools has requested our participation in this event.

Transition planning for special needs students is a critical component of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a federal law in the United States that ensures students with disabilities receive a free and appropriate public education. Transition planning is specifically addressed in IDEA's Part B, which pertains to the education of children with disabilities from ages 3 to 21.

Christine suggested we could take a table at this event and print a brochure to help participants understand more about this program and its importance. Don will research other information that may also be pertinent. The Commission does have a budget line which could be used to pay for the printing of such materials.

Further discussion included Michael's comments regarding the long-term effects of the Covid pandemic, and the closing/remote school classes resulting in diminished

testing scores and learning readiness as these students advanced. Maureen related how these disruptions affected her daughter's college studies, which is an indice of a wide-spread fallout of students across a broad spectrum of society.

## **Discussion of Advocacy as it pertains to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).**

At last month we discussed this legislation and the mandates it established for the education of students with disabilities in every state. Tonight's discussion is about the advocacy for such programs, and courses of actions that can be taken to promote compliance, educate the public as to their rights under the law, and provide information that can make such efforts more effective.

As an aside, these suggestions would also pertain to most, if not all, related civil rights laws. The caring for the education of students with disabilities presents an opportunity for parents, school officials, advocates, and other interested parties to come together to discover and share bodies of knowledge that will help insure their loved ones receive an appropriate Individualized Educational Plan (IEP). Parent groups, for example, can facilitate research by new parents by sharing their knowledge and experiences with new parents. The collective influence of a dedicated group is also a way to demonstrate the needs of those students and the resolve of the community to ensure compliance.

## **ADVOCACY**

Parents of children with disabilities can take several steps to ensure compliance with the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and to increase their political profile in advocating for the rights of their children. Here are some strategies they can consider:

### **A) Ensuring Compliance with IDEA:**

1. **Know Your Rights:** Parents should familiarize themselves with IDEA and their child's specific rights under the law. Understanding the law is the first step in advocating effectively.
2. **Maintain Open Communication:** Build and maintain a positive and collaborative relationship with your child's school, teachers, and administrators. Effective communication can help resolve issues before they escalate.

3. **Document Everything:** Keep detailed records of all communications, meetings, and events related to your child's education. This documentation can be valuable if you need to prove non-compliance or advocate for changes.
4. **Participate in IEP Meetings:** Attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings and actively participate in the development of your child's educational plan. Ensure that the IEP is tailored to your child's needs and goals.
5. **Request Mediation or Due Process:** If you believe the school is not complying with IDEA, you can request mediation or due process to resolve disputes. These are legal processes designed to address issues related to your child's education.
6. **Join Parent Support Groups:** Connect with local or online parent support groups for children with disabilities. These groups can provide information, advice, and emotional support.
7. **Advocate for Services:** If your child needs specific services or accommodations, make a compelling case for their necessity, based on your child's individual needs.

#### **B) Increasing Political Profile for Advocacy:**

1. **Build a Support Network:** Connect with other parents of children with disabilities in your community to build a strong support network. Collective advocacy is often more impactful than individual efforts.
2. **Lobby and Advocate:** Join or form advocacy organizations focused on the rights of children with disabilities. These groups can help amplify your voice and lobby for policy changes at the local, state, and national levels.
3. **Educate Your Community:** Raise awareness about the needs and rights of children with disabilities by hosting informational events, workshops, and awareness campaigns in your community.
4. **Engage with Elected Officials:** Contact your local, state, and federal elected officials to discuss the issues facing children with disabilities and advocate for policy changes.
5. **Attend School Board Meetings:** Attend school board meetings to voice concerns and advocate for better support for children with disabilities within the school district.
6. **Utilize Social Media and Online Platforms:** Use social media and online platforms to share your experiences, connect with other parents, and raise awareness about the challenges and successes of children with disabilities.
7. **Participate in Disability Rights Movements:** Join or support broader disability rights movements and organizations that work to promote and protect the rights of individuals with disabilities.

8. **Collaborate with Disability Advocacy Groups:** Partner with established disability advocacy organizations to leverage their resources and expertise in your advocacy efforts.

Remember that advocating for the rights of children with disabilities can be a long and challenging process, but with persistence and collaboration, parents can make a significant impact on their children's education and the broader community.

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## **Ridgefield Commission for Accessibility -Legislative Milestones**

This is a list highlighting key legislative milestones pertaining to Disability Rights Laws. It is not an exhausted list and amendments may not be included.

**Rehabilitation Act of 1973:** Section 504 of this act prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in programs receiving federal financial assistance.

**Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) of 1990:** This landmark legislation prohibits discrimination against individuals with disabilities in various areas, including employment, public services, public accommodations, and telecommunications.

**Telecommunications Act of 1996:** This act includes provisions to ensure that telecommunications services and equipment are accessible to people with disabilities.

**Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990:** This law ensures that children with disabilities receive a free, appropriate public education and special education services.

**Fair Housing Amendments Act of 1988:** This amendment prohibits discrimination in housing against individuals with disabilities and requires that new multifamily housing with four or more units be accessible.

**Air Carrier Access Act of 1986:** This act prohibits discrimination on the basis of disability in air travel and requires air carriers to accommodate the needs of passengers with disabilities.

**ADA Amendments Act of 2008:** This amendment expands the definition of disability under the ADA, providing broader protections for individuals with disabilities.

**21st Century Communications and Video Accessibility Act of 2010:** This act addresses accessibility of advanced communications services and equipment, as well as video programming.

**Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA) of 2014:** WIOA includes provisions to improve access to workforce services for individuals with disabilities.

**Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015:** ESSA includes provisions to ensure that students with disabilities have access to a quality education.

**21st Century Integrated Digital Experience Act (IDEA) of 2018:** This act aims to improve the digital experience for government services, making them more accessible to individuals with disabilities.

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### **Are these considered Civil Rights Laws?**

Yes, the laws mentioned, including the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA), the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and others, are generally considered to be part of the framework of civil rights laws. These laws aim to protect the rights of individuals with disabilities and prevent discrimination based on disability. While not all of them are explicitly labeled as "civil rights acts," they operate within the broader context of civil rights legislation by addressing and prohibiting discriminatory practices against people with disabilities.

In essence, these laws contribute to the broader civil rights movement by ensuring equal opportunities, access, and protection for individuals with disabilities, thereby promoting the principles of nondiscrimination and equal treatment under the law.

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### **Adjourn: 6:10 PM**

2023 Meeting Dates: (Mondays at 5:00PM)

Dec 11

Until further notice these meetings will continue via Zoom.

Minutes prepared by Don Ciota, Chairman