

# Education and Transition for Students With Disabilities in American Juvenile Correctional Facilities

Theresa A. Ochoa, PhD<sup>1</sup>, Corinne C. Datchi, PhD<sup>2</sup>, Nicole M. Weller, PhD<sup>3</sup>,  
Miriam Northcutt Bohmert, PhD<sup>1</sup> , and Derek Grubbs, EdS<sup>4</sup>

## Abstract

National rates of juvenile incarceration show that about 33% of the population in correctional confinement has disabilities such as behavioral disorders or specific learning disabilities. All students identified under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA) as having a disability are entitled to special education and transition services when they are incarcerated if they need specialized services. Despite the requirements for education and transition, research shows that rates of recidivism increase from about 55% for the general population of incarcerated youth to approximately 85% for youth with disabilities. This article addresses three related questions: (a) What educational and transitional services does IDEIA require schools to offer students in juvenile correctional facilities in the United States? (b) How are parents involved with the education and rehabilitation of their children with disabilities in correctional confinement? (c) What are the challenges associated with parental involvement and transition to and from incarceration for students with disabilities?

## Keywords

juvenile justice, disability, correctional education, transition from confinement, reentry

Annually about 112,000 American youth younger than 18 years are ordered to residential correctional confinement to serve a criminal sentence for breaking the law (Sickmund & Puzanchera, 2014). On average, 33% of these incarcerated youth have disabilities. It is well known that detention has little deterrent effect on juvenile delinquency (Ochoa, 2016). The average rate of recidivism is 55.5% for all offending youth and 85.5% for youth with disabilities (Snyder & Sickmund, 2006). It is critical to understand the transition and educational needs of students with disabilities in correctional confinement because transition services improve the outcomes of youth with disabilities when they return to their communities (Clark et al., 2011).

The Juvenile Justice Reform Act (JJRA, 2018) and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act (IDEIA, 2004) provide legal frameworks for education and transition services in juvenile detention facilities. The JJRA makes funding available to develop state-level programs that offer alternatives to incarceration and aim to reduce the number of justice-involved youth. Specific to education, JJRA aims to improve the quality and availability of education services for justice-involved youth by

facilitating the transfer of education credits across school systems and by calling for individualized case plans with educational, employment, and reentry goals. The IDEA provides additional guidelines for the provision of education and transition services to incarcerated youth with disabilities.

This article addresses questions that relate to the educational and transition needs of incarcerated youth with disabilities.

1. Which students with disabilities are in correctional confinement and what educational and transition services does IDEIA require schools in juvenile

<sup>1</sup>Indiana University, Bloomington, IN, USA

<sup>2</sup>William Paterson University, Wayne, NJ, USA

<sup>3</sup>Indiana University Kokomo, Kokomo, IN, USA

<sup>4</sup>Indiana Department of Correction, Indianapolis, IN, USA

## Corresponding Author:

Theresa A. Ochoa, Indiana University, 201 North Rose Avenue,  
Bloomington, IN 47405, USA.

Email: [tochoa@indiana.edu](mailto:tochoa@indiana.edu)

correctional facilities to provide to students with disabilities?

2. How are parents involved with the education and rehabilitation of children with disabilities in juvenile correctional facilities?
3. What are the challenges associated with parental involvement and transition to and from incarceration for students with disabilities?

The term “disabilities” refers to IDEIA’s classification system, which includes 13 categories.

A discussion of the complex factors (e.g., the vulnerability of students of color and students with disabilities, inappropriate responses by schools to behavioral and emotional difficulties of students) that lead to student incarceration is beyond the scope of this article. Such discussion is left to researchers who have investigated this important social problem (e.g., Annamma et al., 2014; Curtis, 2014; Erevelles & Minear, 2010; Losen, 2011; Wolf & Kupchik, 2017). However, the concern remains that students with disabilities make up a disproportionate number of incarcerated youth (i.e., up to 85%) and that Black students are suspended or expelled from school three times more often than White students for offenses such as insubordination or willful defiance. This article summarizes empirical knowledge about the needs of students with disabilities and discusses how this knowledge can be used to improve special education and transition services for incarcerated youth.

### Students With Disabilities in Correctional Confinement

Research suggests that most students (i.e., 47.7%) with disabilities who are incarcerated have a diagnosis of emotional behavioral disorder (EBD), followed by students with a specific learning disability (LD) at 38.6%. By comparison, 5% of students with disabilities in public schools are students with EBD and 34% are students with LD (National Center for Education Statistics, 2019). Typically, students with EBD and LD experience low academic success, have social skills deficits, and present behavior inhibition challenges that can result in conflict with law enforcement when left unattended (Ochoa & Rome, 2009). Thus, students with disabilities who do not receive special education services are at greater risk for incarceration.

### Required Services

Since 1975, children and youth with disabilities have had special protections under the federal special education law. In 1997 and 2004, the name of the law changed to

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and then to Individuals with Disabilities Education Improvement Act, respectively. Today, the federal special education law is most commonly referred to as IDEIA. The IDEIA governs how American educational institutions implement special education and related services to youth who have disabilities (Gagnon et al., 2015; Porter, 2015). The IDEA ensures that educational institutions and service providers have the personnel and technical assistance necessary to meet the unique educational and behavioral needs of youth with disabilities (Gagnon et al., 2015; Porter, 2015). Four major provisions within the IDEIA are important to discuss in this article.

The Child Find provision (§1412) of IDEIA mandates educational agencies to locate, identify, and evaluate all children with disabilities to determine if the disability impedes learning and requires special education and related services. The *zero-reject* principle of IDEIA prohibits schools from denying services to any students who need specialized education because of their disability. Thus, the zero-reject principle and Child Find provisions make schools responsible for determining whether IDEA-eligible youth require educational (and related) services. The Free Appropriate Public Education (FAPE) provision (§1412) of IDEA requires schools to write an individualized education program (IEP) with educational and/or behavioral goals tailored to the unique needs of each student. Under IDEIA, the IEP is a legally binding agreement between the school and the parents of the student with disabilities in which parents agree to accept special education services from the school for their child with a disability. The requirement for IEP transition goals is particularly important for incarcerated youth with disabilities. After the IEP is written, the school is directed to make every effort to implement the services articulated in the IEP in the least restrictive environment (*LRE*). Notably, the LRE provision is intended to ensure that, to the extent possible, youth with disabilities are educated in the same classrooms as their peers without disabilities (Gagnon et al., 2015; IDEIA, §1412; Porter, 2015). Thus, IDEA emphasizes assessing the needs of the student and selecting alternative placements and services that will enhance learning for students with disabilities. Finally, the Procedural Safeguards provision of IDEIA (§1414) gives due process rights to students with disabilities and their parents and school personnel. Under the Procedural Safeguards provision, arbitration rights are provided to parents and to schools if there is disagreement at any phase of the special education identification or service delivery process. All the benefits of IDEIA that are available to students with disabilities in community schools apply to schools within juvenile correctional facilities. There are key provisions that are particularly important to youth with disabilities who are incarcerated.

## Transition Planning

Transition planning for justice-involved youth has been outlined in several federal laws such as Title VI of the Civil Rights Act of 1964, Title IX of the Education Amendments of 1972, Title II of the Americans with Disabilities Act, Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973, and Title I, Part D of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act as amended by Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA). The ESSA, for example, provides financial assistance for provision of education services for students who have interacted with both child welfare system and the justice system. The ESSA also seeks to improve the educational continuity for youth by requiring that students' records be transferred between local schools and correctional schools. Of primary interest for this article are the transition requirements outlined in IDEA.

The IDEA requires schools to be deliberate about transition planning for students with disabilities. The IEP of every student who has a qualifying disability must include goals and provide services to implement the transition goal no later than when a student turns 16 years of age (34 C.F.R. § 300.320(b)). Some states begin such transition services at age 14 years. However, staff in correctional facilities often confuse IDEA's requirement to plan for "youth's transition to adulthood" with the youth's transition to the community after incarceration (i.e., reentry). According to Osher et al. (2012), transition services in the juvenile justice system include support provided when a juvenile is moved (a) from his or her community to a correctional facility, (b) from one facility to another, as well as (c) from the correctional facility back to the community. Special education services are essential for incarcerated youth with disabilities to help them develop the social-emotional, educational, and occupational skills needed to succeed as adults in their communities when they return home (Office of Special Education and Rehabilitative Services, 2014).

## Parent Involvement

Parental participation and family engagement are core concepts and requirements of IDEA. The IDEA calls for school-family partnerships that emphasize reciprocal communication and collaborative decision-making. Specifically, parents and legal guardians must receive information about their rights under IDEA. Schools must make efforts to obtain a parent's or legal guardian's informed consent before evaluating the child and a parent or guardian must approve the special education services if the student is found eligible. Schools must also include parents or legal guardians in decisions about the child's educational placement and provide them with the opportunity to participate in the IEP team and the decision-making

process. In addition, the law grants parental access to the child's educational records.

Family involvement in education has been the focus of extensive research, and there is ample evidence that it promotes children's academic success (Harris & Robinson, 2016; Kaplan Toren & Seginer, 2015). In general, studies have operationalized the concept of family involvement in terms of expectations, communication about and with the school (e.g., talking with children about school; school-family conferencing), and participation in school-related activities in the school or at home (Burke, 2012). Serving in the Parent Teacher Association and helping with fundraising are examples of school-based involvement. Family-based activities create conditions that are supportive of children's learning; they include providing access to educational materials and going to the library.

Six types of family involvement are identified (Burke, 2012): parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and collaborating with the community. These also correspond to categories of practices or interventions that may facilitate school-family interactions and the development of educational partnerships. For example, schools may email newsletters or offer parent training; teachers may recommend home-based learning activities that match the developmental needs of children; and both schools and parents may work with community-based agencies to garner resources for the student.

Epstein (2011) has also developed a model of school-family partnerships that describes the reciprocal influence of school-family and parent-teacher interactions and the effects of teachers' philosophies and practices on parents' attitudes and behaviors. While some teachers emphasize the creation of collaborative relationships with parents, others maintain a separation between school and home and are less likely to view parents as partners in their children's education. There is also an inverse relation between students' age and teachers' use of parental involvement techniques (Epstein, 2011), that is, "the older the students, the less often teachers deliberately ask parents to assist in their children's learning." In special education, school-family partnerships extend to the IEP team. Although IDEA requires parental representation on the IEP team, it does not specify the conditions for developing effective school-family collaboration, and in many cases, parents and legal guardians are treated as recipients of services rather than active participants in the delivery of special education services to their children (Burke, 2012).

## Educational and Transition Challenges

A quality education based on individual students' needs is the cornerstone of special education law (Gagnon et al., 2015). However, the National Technical Assistance Center for the

Education of Neglected and Delinquent Children and Youth (2015) indicates that youth with disabilities in correctional confinement do not always have access to the specialized services they need. Facilities often prioritize the security and safety of inmates and staff above educational goals. Even when education is a top goal, correctional facilities struggle to attract and retain staff trained in special education. Facilities are often geographically removed from youth's families complicating staff's ability to obtain parental consent for evaluating and developing disability planning for youth. Finally, because facilities are often understaffed, it is difficult to provide space and supervision for students with disabilities to have individualized attention.

### Individualization in Secure Care Settings

As previously stated, all students with disabilities who are incarcerated must have an IEP. In some states, students with disabilities may have two personalized plans. In addition to the IEP, youth in correctional confinement also may have an individual learning plan (ILP). The ILP is based on both court-ordered treatment plans as well as careful evaluations of students' school transcripts. Collectively these inform youths' placements into courses in the juvenile correctional facility (Ochoa, 2016). Separate from the ILP, which is part of the juvenile justice reform law, the IEP specifies any and all educational and behavioral plans that come under the purview of IDEA. The IEP of a student with disabilities is developed during an IEP case conference and is distributed to classroom teachers who implement the IEP. To develop and implement the academic and functional/behavioral goals in the IEPs, it is critical that personnel in juvenile correctional facilities have specialized training in special education; it is also important that personnel utilize appropriate resources and materials in implementing the goals. Some juvenile correctional facilities require all teachers to obtain special education certification. However, many teachers in juvenile correctional facilities have turned to emergency special education credentialing to comply with the policy. Like many of their counterparts in community schools, many lack the knowledge and skills necessary to positively manage challenging classroom behaviors.

Some juvenile correctional facilities are shifting toward adopting a framework known as positive behavioral interventions and supports (PBIS). The Center on PBIS provides information about how the principles of PBIS that have proven effective at improving the climate of schools in the community can be applied to correctional settings. Despite the fact that some juvenile correctional facilities are shifting away from punitive and reactive practices, by and large, the culture in some juvenile correctional facilities remains harsh and impersonal (Ochoa et al., 2013). For example, some juvenile correctional facilities use last names instead of first

names when addressing youth. This practice inhibits real and genuine social connections between youth and correctional facility personnel. Similarly, uniforms are required and serve to anonymize and routinize students' daily interactions as they move through scheduled and regulated daily procedures.

Correctional facilities seek to reduce social closeness between both youths as well as between youth and staff to avoid manipulation or inappropriate contact. They impose rules on clothing to discourage the expression of gang-related affiliations. They also enforce routines that allow security personnel to manage and control behavior and thus maintain safety. However, students with disabilities have difficulties monitoring and adhering to strict routines (Ochoa et al., 2013). As a result, they may experience more removals from the classrooms for perceived behavioral infractions and have more *change of placements* compared with peers without disabilities (Welch, 2019). In juvenile detention facilities, punishment is the primary strategy to manage youth's externalizing behaviors and is often ineffective (Nelson et al., 2008).

Complying with the LRE provision of IDEA poses significant challenges in secure settings. By and large, students with disabilities in correctional confinement receive educational services in the same classrooms as do youth without disabilities. This occurs unless a change of placement is necessary due to disciplinary infractions. Schools in juvenile correctional facilities, like schools in the community, are required to follow the manifestation determination (MD) procedures. Under IDEA, the MD requires that schools determine whether misbehavior was a direct manifestation of a student's disability. If the multidisciplinary team determines the misbehavior was the result of the student's disability and deems it necessary to remove the student from his or her current placement, the school may do so but still needs to provide education services. The school must also write and implement a positive behavioral plan to teach students adaptive behaviors. According to Katsiyannis and Maag (2001), the MD requirement in IDEA erroneously presumes that the multidisciplinary team has the knowledge or skills to determine whether the behavior in question was a function of the student's disability.

### Challenges in School–Family Partnerships

In both community and correctional settings, families of youth with disabilities experience similar barriers to educational involvement. A family's perception of power differences in their relationship with school personnel may deter them from exercising their rights under IDEA for fear that it may have adverse consequences. As a result, parents may assume a passive role in the IEP team, which is then reinforced by professionals' view that IEP meetings are an opportunity to inform the family rather than to involve them in decision-making. Other factors that hinder family

participation include language barriers (e.g., use of technical terminology), communication of information (e.g., sharing information during, as opposed to prior to, the IEP meeting), educators' view of parents and their abilities to develop collaborative partnerships, families' past school experiences (e.g., history of negative interactions), and beliefs about disability and education.

Some challenges to family involvement in education are specific to the juvenile justice system and incarceration in particular. Many justice-involved youths have parents who have also been involved in the criminal justice system and who perceive the school as a surveilling institution. As a result, they may believe that participation in school-related activities will lead to more legal trouble (Brayne, 2014). In addition, under the legal doctrine of *parens patriae*, youth involved in the U.S. juvenile justice system are under the direct control of the state, where the juvenile court assumes responsibility for the care of the delinquent child, and parental rights and authority are restricted (Pennington, 2013). Power differences between families and justice professionals, such as parents' limited ability to influence legal decisions about their child, contribute to distrust, frustration, and fear, hindering the development of collaborative relationships. When families try to voice their opinion to contribute information about their child and to seek opportunities for meaningful participation, they often feel ignored and blamed for their youth's delinquent behaviors (Cusworth Walker et al., 2015). Collectively, experiencing exclusion, blame, shame, and other negative interactions deters efforts to engage families as partners in the treatment and education of youth with disabilities in the juvenile justice system (National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, n.d.).

Juvenile correctional facilities are highly structured environments that seek to limit contact between youths and their families; they therefore restrict many forms of family participation. Their restrictive nature, as well as the geographical location of correctional settings far from the youth's home communities, further complicates the implementation of IDEIA's legal requirements for parental involvement. Research has identified several justice system barriers to school-family partnerships in schools. Practical factors such as financial strain and lack of transportation and childcare may prevent parents or legal guardians from participating in IEP meetings during regular school hours (National Alliance for Secondary Education and Transition, n.d.). Correctional facilities use staff and/or locked doors, gates, and fences to control youth's movement and interaction with the outside world. Visitation policies regulate youth-family contact in the facility, which takes place on phones or in visitation rooms, within established visitation hours. Family visits are monitored and time limited (visits

often last 1–1.5 hr) but may be terminated if the youth's or/and the visitor's behaviors are viewed as disruptive; personal items are not authorized in secure areas. These conditions are not supportive of family educational involvement: They limit families' ability to talk with youth about their school experiences and to engage in learning activities. In addition, youth and families may not talk about school during their visits, to avoid conflict and negativity between them and thus protect a relational bond that has already been strained by delinquency and incarceration.

In addition to the institutional barriers, families often do not understand or have misconceptions about the purpose of the juvenile justice system and the role of the counselors and educators they encounter (Luckenbill, 2012). Even among families that have previous experience with the justice system, a variety of sociocultural factors exist to impede the school-family partnership. Language barriers are one such example. Parents who do not speak English may find interactions with the juvenile justice system taxing or outright impossible and opt out of engaging with system all together. Lack of clearly defined roles for families in the school-family partnership as well as inadequate knowledge or resources available to families result in perceived imbalance of power and increase the likelihood that families will not fully participate in the justice system (Rozzell, 2013). Finally, a narrow definition of the family can restrict the involvement of extended family members and thus impede the school-family partnership (Arya, 2013).

Low family participation in school-related activities during juvenile detention reduces the likelihood of youth's successful transition back to their home communities (Leone & Weinberg, 2012). When youth return to their home communities, they must adapt to a less structured environment where they will be exposed to the same risks that led to their involvement with the juvenile justice system in the first place, including peer, familial, and community factors such as poverty, lack of access to mental health services, criminal activities in their neighborhood, and lack of monitoring (Ochoa, 2016). Family involvement in juvenile reentry is consistent with the legal requirements of IDEIA, begins when the youth enters the detention facility, and is an opportunity to engage family members as partners in the education and treatment of justice-involved adolescents with special needs. It is also an opportunity to build family competencies and resilience and to foster positive youth-family bonds to reduce the likelihood of recidivism, to improve youth's access to educational and mental health services, and to enhance their academic and vocational outcomes. Therefore, family involvement during incarceration is a necessary component for reducing recidivism upon the youth's release and return to the community.

## Improving Transition and Family Participation

A multidisciplinary approach to academic and behavioral decisions on behalf of students with disabilities, as exemplified in the identification and MD processes, is required. Transition services for students with disabilities also necessitate a group-based approach. According to Ochoa (2016), best practice recommendations include (a) prompt transmittal of community school records (particularly the IEP) when the youth enters correctional confinement; (b) a child-centered individualized academic and behavioral plan that begins as soon as the youth enters confinement and is monitored and adjusted during every phase of rehabilitation to maximize the acquisition of adaptive behaviors; and (c) communication with security, education, and mental health personnel during confinement and with community counterparts well before and after the youth is released ensuring that any and all progress the student made during rehabilitation is recorded and stored in a portfolio to be readily available for sharing when the youth returns to his or her community. Involving the family throughout the education and rehabilitation process requires special attention, as discussed below.

Strategies for family educational involvement fall into three interconnected domains: communication, relationship, and training. Communication refers to mechanisms for sharing critical information about the youth's education and the rules and expectations of the juvenile justice system in a language that families can understand. Communication is a critical element of school–family partnerships; it is the means by which teachers and other practitioners who provide educational and transition services to youth with disabilities in juvenile correctional facilities establish credibility, show commitment and respect, and promote trust with families (Burke, 2012). It is also a reciprocal process where families are an important source of information about their child and where they are active participants whose feedback influences educational and treatment decisions during the rehabilitation process. First, it is important that teachers and transition personnel, including case managers and counselors involved in reentry planning, demonstrate empathy and openness to communication. For example, correctional personnel may send personalized invitations to parents or legal guardians to both demonstrate interest in the youth as a person and also to encourage the family to share information about the youth's academic, leisure, and vocational interests, strengths, and challenges. Basic attending and listening skills can be used by correctional staff to convey close attention to what the family is saying, to create a nonjudgmental atmosphere, and to acknowledge the family's concerns and affirm their resilience (Murphy & Dillon, 2015). Teachers and other key personnel should also consider utilizing motivational interviewing techniques to engage families, improve their own ability to develop an

educational partnership in collaboration with parents and legal guardians, and actively counter their ambivalence or doubts about the intent and effectiveness of correctional and educational interventions. For a detailed description of motivational interviewing with offenders, see Stinson and Clark (2017).

Effective and regular communication depends on correctional staff's ability to build rapport with the youth's families and to engage them in the development of a collaborative partnership based on mutual respect. To achieve this goal, it is essential to educate staff and increase their understanding of the role of family involvement in the youth's academic and vocational outcomes. Given the disproportionate representation of African American, Hispanic, and Native American youth in correctional confinement, it is equally important to foster staff's multicultural competencies with a focus on cross-cultural communication to promote the development of collaborative relationships with diverse families (Kapoor et al., 2013). For example, staff training may involve context-specific and culturally sensitive strategies to facilitate the youth's contact with their families and vice versa. Staff may also learn how to make the facility hospitable to culturally diverse families, how to build trust with families who have a history of negative interactions with school and justice systems, and how to manage power differences when involving parents in IEP teams.

Efforts must be made to reduce the stress of visiting the correctional facility, which may involve increasing flexibility in scheduling meetings with the family and using new communication technology for remote meetings. Incarcerated youth experience disproportionately more challenges and vulnerabilities such as trauma, cognitive distortions, emotional, and learning disabilities (Boesky, 2011). It is essential that the juvenile justice staff consider these challenges along with early identification of sociocultural factors like race/ethnicity, age, gender, and sexual orientation. In doing so, the staff are more culturally competent to support the youth they encounter (Boesky, 2011).

These recommended trainings would be primarily directed toward correctional educators but would also necessitate training general prison staff. Most correctional facilities do not require a college degree to be employed at a correctional institution, pay often is low, and working conditions can be less than desirable. Regular trainings are already provided to correctional staff in a variety of arenas such as risk assessment administration or identifying and preventing contraband. The trainings recommended here could be included into other staff trainings.

The families of justice-involved youth with disabilities also need support and resources to develop the knowledge and skills necessary to become effective partners in their child's educational planning. Parent training is an essential component of treatment for juvenile delinquency. The success of an incarcerated youth during transition depends on

the creation of conditions that foster connectedness between the youth and at least one caring adult in his or her family environment (Osher et al., 2012). Family is here defined broadly to include members of the youth's extended kin system such as aunts, uncles, and cousins. This caring adult should participate in transition planning with the youth and receive support to mentor the youth and advocate for his or her rights in the community. Services for families of incarcerated youth should also focus on building behavioral competencies for effective communication, decision-making, and planning. Family involvement in correctional settings prepares parents, legal guardians, and/or adult mentors to assume their familial roles when the youth returns home; it is the opportunity to develop and practice important skills and strategies for enhancing the youth's likelihood of successful reentry.

## Conclusion

The same legal framework (i.e., IDEA) provides special education services to youth with disabilities in the community and in detention. Its goals are to improve society, the community, and the lives of students with disabilities and to reduce the rate of juvenile incarceration and recidivism. The IDEA is also an aspirational law. As such, there are many challenges associated with its translation into school practices because its legal mandates are not always implemented completely in the spirit of helping both the family and the student. Furthermore, the culture of many correctional institutions is shaped by the belief that punishment is a deterrent for undesirable behavior despite criminological research showing punishment is not an effective deterrent. Furthermore, punitive attitudes and culture work against efforts to reduce recidivism. Recidivism is best achieved by fostering and improving communication and prosocial skills in incarcerated youth, their families, and even correctional staff. While IDEA is a great step in improving the lives of youth with disabilities and their families, to be effective, the law requires that correctional administrators be willing to reconsider their beliefs about punishment, adopt a positive approach to juvenile justice that emphasizes behavioral support, and secure funding and personnel to carefully and properly implement all the mandates of the law including family educational involvement.

## Declaration of Conflicting Interests

The author(s) declared no potential conflicts of interest with respect to the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## Funding

The author(s) received no financial support for the research, authorship, and/or publication of this article.

## ORCID iD

Miriam Northcutt Bohmert  <https://orcid.org/0000-0002-6673-5937>

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