

The Ari Advocacy Center

FAMILY ADVOCATES ~ POST-SECONDARY SUPPORT SPECIALISTS ~ SPECIAL EDUCATION EXPERTS ~ MASTER FACILITATORS

Profiles in Education Equity: Nicole Jimerson

Nicole Jimerson, Ed.S., is the founder of The Ari Advocacy Center, which helps North Carolina families of children with disabilities or special needs. As the mother of a child who lives with autism, she understands the challenges faced by parents as they pursue educational supports for their children. She is also an advisory member of the Ed Trust Family Fellowship, in which she helps other parent advocates learn more about education policy and activism in their communities.



What motivates you to advocate for education equity?

Families. Hands down, there is no greater personal joy than working with a family member to secure the supports that their child needs. And, it's working with families that allows us to become more engaged with communities. The notion that a quality education is not important to various communities is contrary to my personal beliefs and to the testimonies of families that we have the privilege of serving.

What's your favorite quote? Why?

More often, I hear myself quoting Shirley Chisholm: "You don't make progress by standing on the sidelines, whimpering, and complaining. You make progress by implementing ideas." Family and community members are well aware of the necessity of evidence-based practices in schools, so much so that they tend to negate and devalue their ideas about what may work for their community. We work to let them know that there is value in what they have to offer. They don't have to be bystanders but can and should be an integral part of the process. Their (OUR) lived experiences count and our ideas deserve consideration. Who knows? The successful implementation of their ideas may become the very evidence-based practices that are needed.

What do you think are the most pressing education equity issues right now? How can advocates address this challenge?

What I believe will be a significant issue is that students with the greatest needs will remain underserved or not served at all. While funding, teacher and principal pay, charters, etc. dominate state-level discussions, the reality is many districts and schools may place more focused attention on students who will “move the needle” — those students who are on the cusp of making sufficient gains. Advocates, family, and community members will have to not only participate in school events, but stand confidently in their right to ask questions, insist upon receiving answers, and engage in solution focused activities to ensure that all students acquire skills and make academic gains. To me, it has become blatantly obvious that real change must begin locally and cannot happen without the intentional engagement of family and community members. It simply won't happen otherwise.

What's next in regard to your work?

Though our work is grounded in special education advocacy, we've come to realize that many children with special needs — which includes gifted students who need advocacy support for more challenging academic programs — are doubly impacted. Not only do they have unique learning needs, but many live in underserved, under-resourced, and under-supported communities. For systemic change, our work must continue to focus on helping family members understand how their needs intersect with the needs of a much larger community and support community conversations that develop education equity advocates across special interest boundaries.

I'm also excited about being a part of the Ed Trust Family Fellowship. As these family members from different backgrounds start learning from one another, they begin to understand the connection to the work. That can't be done on a national level. You have to get into the community. You want families to be involved. That's so important. All of our work is in regard to the ESSA plan. This is the first time that families can see and understand what should be happening in their local schools, but also at the district level, and what the state had said they would do. That is a turning point for parents.

Personally, above all else, I am the parent of three absolutely amazing children. Even on their worst day, they're the best ever and I have learned so much from them. One of my children happens to live with autism and our organization bears his name. And the more I engage in this work and encounter children, who lack family support or have unstable living environments or are experiencing homelessness, I wonder what they could achieve if they had the supports and opportunities that my son had. I'm overwhelmed by the thoughts of who these children can grow to become and how we can help as an organization.