

The Ari Advocacy Center

We began our work in communities as **The North Carolina Center for a Special Education** (The NCCSE) and learned value lessons about family engagement, such as how to connect, the value of lived experiences, and how preparation, personal interactions, and action planning contributes to the building of relationships. We increasingly found ourselves bringing communities together across backgrounds, localities, and professions to contribute their perspectives to the discussions. This year **The Ari Advocacy Center ('The Ari Center')** is celebrating **TEN YEARS** of convening community meetings across our state! **Our work is about shared lived-experiences and building relationships to transform the way we work with Black families of school-aged children and effect change across communities.**



Highlights of the work of The Ari Center include:

LOCAL COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Anita McAuley, Autism Specialist, guided community members through **NC's State Standards & Students with Special Needs** with an in-depth follow-up of **Progress Monitoring**. The gatherings provided multiple opportunities to engage with one another and ample time to express understanding of or needs around an issue. In response to feedback provided regarding the various special education and learning intervention topics, such as, "an expansion of this topic (somehow) would be beneficial," "thanks for taking time to answer questions and walk us thru terms and processes," and "I would love to have different support groups for families of children with disabilities come together and network" The Ari Center developed a nine-module series entitled: ***The Special Education Puzzle: Putting Pieces Together™***.

In collaboration with Advocates for Children's Services of Legal Aid of NC, The Ari Center hosted **Excellent Education for ALL Students: Legal Tools and Strategies to Support the Success of NC Public School Students**. Attorney Peggy Nicholson guided discussions about special education eligibility, identification and eligibility, discipline rights, suspension rights and alternatives. Our community **Principal Roundtable** events, at local churches and public libraries, allowed family members across communities to have open conversations about topics of their choosing, for example, literacy initiatives and charter schools.

We recognized that the topics of special education and mental health services are highly stigmatized inside and outside of the Black community. Degrading and micro aggressive actions, along with implicit biases may be recognizable only to family members. These interactions can lead to prolonged suffering, isolation, and reluctance in coming forth for support. However, in the intimate settings of The Ari Center convenings, family members feel safe to express their desire to learn more about access to early supports and interventions in schools and in the community, mental health services, and their rights and entitlements. To address these needs, The Ari Center hosted a series of community gatherings featuring parent leaders and professionals to increase behavioral and mental health literacy, to explore Medicaid services beyond general health care and to share various support networks, all while allowing us to explore the intersection of systems and Black parents, caregivers, and family members, who may have been seeking services for the very first time.

We were fortunate to have **Terry Ames, I/DD Care Coordinator Supervisor**, guide family members in **Assessing Services via Innovations – The Medicaid Waiver Program** and **Timothy Simmons, Consumer Affairs Specialist I/DD, Cardinal Innovations Healthcare Solutions**, share valuable information about **Mental Health Supports & Services**.

The work of The Ari Center not only bridges the family – service knowledge gap but also supports care givers as they take action in exploring and obtaining services that will improve the quality of life for their children and their families.

Our community gatherings are a safe space. A space where individuals can show up and be their full selves without leaving any part of themselves or their experiences outside, which lends itself to intimate conversations even in settings with many participants. For example, parenting a child with special needs can be emotionally and physically exhausting and socially isolating. Recognizing the lack of support for Black mothers of children with special needs, The Ari Center invited **Kathy Lewis**, Author, Leading Self-Advocacy Expert, and Mother of a special needs child, to emphasize the importance of not neglecting themselves or their dreams. Kathy shared her experiences and reminded attendees that although they were care providers, teachers, and advocates for their children, they were still women with dreams and desires. Kathy's session shared advice and encouraged women to take care of themselves emotionally and physically and not to bury their dreams because **What May Seem Impossible – Isn't!**



Our attendees shared:

"I feel much better about myself and my life then when I came in. I am happy and feel very uplifted. It's a good feeling to know I can reach my goals and they aren't as much of a mountain when you break them down." and "It was very beneficial to see what I thought was impossible to me – I really enjoyed Ms. Kathy."

Our community convenings are specially designed and allow us to continually identify family – service gaps. However, we have been able to move beyond monthly engagement forums to building a new community of practice around the development of North Carolina's Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) plan.

STATEWIDE ENGAGEMENT

Count on NC! – Including More Voices in Education Equity Conversations, introduced the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) to the community. The ESSA plan, in part, would specifically address ways to improve the academic success of Black students, students with disabilities, students in foster care and those who were transient. The plan would also identify supports for low-performing schools. Count on NC! provided a platform for community input in the development of NC's plan and included a consortium of the following organizations: EveryChild Solutions, Advocates for Inclusive Education, Blue Ribbon Youth Leadership Institute, Council for Children's Rights, The Learning Disabilities Association of NC, Family Resource Center South Atlantic, Hannah Ruth Foundation, Coalition of Concerned Citizens for African-American Children, Education Justice Alliance, and the NAACP – Chapel Hill Carrboro.



This community of practice brought together state policymakers, implementation leaders, and community members during *Fireside Chats* with Mark Jewell, the former President of the NC Association of Educators, Eric Hall, the former Deputy Superintendent of Innovation from the Office of the State

Superintendent, Erika Wilson, Attorney and Professor, UNC-Chapel Hill School of Law, and Matt Ellingwood, Director, Education & Law Project, NC Justice Center.

Count on NC! Provided a space for those affected by the issues to bring their drive for change into a learning partnership based on research, data, and diverse perspectives. Community members and organizations contributed to the development of plan recommendations, which were presented to Mark Johnson, NC's State Superintendent of Public Schools.

The Ari Center participated in a series of ESSA Implementation Workshops in partnership with the **National Alliance of Black School Educators** under the direction of Dr. Betty Howell Gray and NC Affiliates ABSE at UNC-Charlotte, the Greater Charlotte ABSE and Wayne County ABSE, including **Empowering Males to Meet High Standards of Academic Achievement** – Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) / My Brother's Keeper Conference for Males of Color and in community forums hosted by **Teachers Advocating to lead Great change (T.A.G.)**, an extension of the Delta Teacher Efficacy Campaign (DTEC). T.A.G. worked to advocate for equity and a quality education for all students in Alamance, Granville, Mecklenburg, and Pitt counties (NC).

Much like The Ari Center continues to evolve so does our North Carolina home.

As more and more Fortune 500 companies find their way to North Carolina, attention is drawn to the Triangle (Raleigh, Durham, Chapel Hill) and Research Triangle Park, the Triad (Greensboro, Winston-Salem, High Point), Asheville (one of the top real estate markets in the state), Charlotte, (the 2nd largest financial industry city in the US), and our university and health care systems.

However, these are highly concentrated areas, and it escapes most that 80% of our North Carolina counties are classified as rural with 76% of our public schools located in rural districts.

The Ari Center participated in the **Public School Forum of NC Study Group XVII: Addressing the Unique Needs of NC's Rural Students**. We studied four key domains: teacher recruitment and retention, broadband (internet), postsecondary attainment and workforce alignment, and school funding. Additionally, in 2019, The Ari Center was invited to and participated in the **Governor's DRIVE Summit**. During the Summit, Governor Roy Cooper announced the establishment of the DRIVE Task Force, which was charged to develop recommendations to create a more diverse and inclusive educator workforce in North Carolina.



NATIONAL ENGAGEMENT

Our national engagement has included a broad range of opportunities with the goal of placing the Black family voice at the forefront of conversations addressing improving educational outcomes for Black children. The Ari Center was fortunate to be a part of the panel discussion **Black Parents in Action: Improving Education for Black Children** at the 47th Conference of the National Black Child Development Institute (NBCDI) in Atlanta, GA. We also received and accepted an invitation by Council of Parent Advocates and Attorneys – Social and Racial Equity Committee to lead a national tele-conference on the topic of **Helping Parents Transcend Walls, Find Their Voices, and Education Equity** and a webinar hosted by The Education Trust entitled **Will NC's New Education Plan Provide Opportunities for All Children to Succeed in School and in Life?**

The Ari Center would like to **THANK the North Carolina families**, who have trusted us to lead and guide critical and necessary conversations in your communities and **THANK our State and National Partners** for allowing us to share space to **AMPLIFY the FAMILY VOICE**. We're celebrating the first decade and looking forward to the next!