



ORGANIZATIONAL DESCRIPTION

Mission and Vision

Massachusetts Advocates for Children (formerly Massachusetts Advocacy Center) is a private non-profit organization dedicated to being an effective voice for children who face significant barriers to equal educational and life opportunities. MAC works to overcome these barriers by changing conditions for many children, while also helping one child at a time.

MAC's vision is that all children, especially the most vulnerable, have the opportunity to reach their fullest potential. Central to this vision is that all children receive the high quality education to which they are entitled and which will enable them to succeed.

MAC's Approach

MAC uses a broad range of strategies to get results and change the conditions which limit children's opportunities. These strategies include building coalitions, helping empower parents and community leaders, providing technical assistance and training, conducting case advocacy, advocating at the administrative and legislative levels, writing reports and, when necessary, litigating.

MAC acts to hold public institutions accountable and prioritizes systems change in order to have the greatest impact affecting the most children. But through its intake, case advocacy and trainings, MAC also works to assure that the needs of individual children are met.

MAC's History

Founded by Hubie Jones in 1969 as the Task Force on Children Out of School, MAC's first investigative report in 1970 on the exclusion of children from public schools in Boston led to the 1972 enactment of Chapter 766, Massachusetts' ground-breaking law guaranteeing education for children with disabilities. It also led to the Bilingual Education Act, the first such law in the nation. During the next two decades, MAC's legislative and administrative advocacy led to reforms in child mental health, vocational education, lead poisoning prevention, student retention policies and child nutrition. MAC sued successfully to force the Boston Public Schools to live up to its special education obligations.

In 1992, MAC became part of the network of civil legal aid agencies in Massachusetts, and through that network, began the Children's Law Support Project, identifying emerging children's needs and providing back-up legal support to legal service agencies around the state. During the 1990s, MAC added community outreach and coalition-building components to work with parent and community organizations for educational equity in Boston and to protect Chapter 766 statewide.

Current MAC Projects

- a) *Children's Law Support Project*, which coordinates a statewide legal and legislative agenda on behalf of vulnerable low income children, including those who are homeless, at risk of school expulsion, with disabilities, or suffering the traumatic effects of exposure to family violence;
- b) *Statewide Inclusion Project*, which ensures that special education laws enable children with disabilities to obtain the services and accommodations that lead to a high quality and inclusive education. Focus areas include autism, Somerville and Boston;
- c) *Boston School Reform Project*, which advocates for education equity and excellence in the Boston Public Schools, through administrative advocacy and through community outreach and technical assistance with parent groups and the black and Latino communities.

2004 Accomplishments – MAC Gets Results

Changing conditions for many

- Worked with legislators, led by Rep. Alice Wolf, to amend the Education Reform Act to establish a grant program for schools to create trauma-sensitive environments and address the needs of children in the regular classroom whose behavior and learning ability has been compromised by exposure to violence.
- Prevailed in a case before the Bureau of Special Education Appeals affirming the rights of parents and IEP Teams to determine the specific placement for a child with disabilities.
- Increased dramatically the percentage of BPS students with Individual Student Success Plans, which provide those who fail MCAS with the individualized attention needed to help them succeed.
- Helped preserve the opportunity for parents in Boston to choose the best school available for their children rather than be limited to a neighborhood school.
- Identified promising policy areas for systemic change that will help families secure services for their children on the autism disorder spectrum (ADS).
- Organized parents and community groups in Somerville to press the school department to correct violations of the special education law, including translations/interpreters for non-English speaking residents.

Helping one at a time

- Responded to 498 families calling MAC's intake line to receive help for their children who were disabled, exposed to violence, homeless, or excluded from school. Legal representation by MAC's staff, pro-bono private attorneys, or through the state network of legal services was provided to 71 of the families.
- Provided training to nearly 1,400 parents and professionals around special education legal rights, especially in the fields of autism and trauma and learning. 88 attorneys and advocates received training and support from MAC so they could educate parents or provide them with representation and case advocacy for their children.
- Distributed 7,000 sets of brochures in English and Spanish about the educational options for high school students with disabilities who failed the high-stakes MCAS exam.

Looking Forward in 2005

- MAC is fighting for the rights of parents and children with disabilities as the state Department of Education attempts to remove key rights and protections from its special education regulations.
- MAC is helping to secure the educational rights of children who have been exposed to family violence, through the upcoming publication of its report, *Helping Traumatized Children Learn*, and through its leadership role with the Governor's Commission on Domestic Violence and Sexual Assault.
- MAC is convening mental health professionals to write guidelines on trauma-sensitive special education evaluations.
- MAC is spearheading efforts to make improvements in BPS by providing community input into hiring of top administrators, strengthening the parent engagement function and activities, and building coalitions of Latino activists in three neighborhoods
- MAC is advocating to assure that children with autism will receive needed intensive in-home services.
- MAC will train and assist Latino families regarding their special education rights, in conjunction with Boston Parents Organizing Network.
- MAC will provide specialized training for parents in domestic violence shelters on their children's educational rights, for parents and professionals regarding special education rights for children with autism, and for advocates about the educational rights of homeless children.
- MAC and the Special Education Collaborative it convenes will improve transition planning for high school students with disabilities
- MAC will build its case advocacy capacity for children in Somerville, for children with autism, through pro-bono recruitment and through its partnership with Harvard Legal Services Center.
- MAC will produce a report and create a website documenting the crisis in education for boys.