



FOR IMMEDIATE RELEASE

New Bill Would Protect Colorado Students Amid Federal Cuts to Civil Rights Enforcement

New legislation would ensure students with disabilities receive the services they need

February 26, 2026

DENVER – A bill introduced in Colorado’s General Assembly this week would create essential state-level infrastructure to protect students with disabilities at a moment when federal protections have been significantly weakened.

The families of 44,040 Colorado students with 504 plans depend on disability rights protections to support their children’s education. But the partial closure of the U.S. Department of Education’s Office for Civil Rights (OCR) has left families without a reliable avenue for complaints and appeals when schools fall short.

By codifying language from Section 504 and the Americans with Disabilities Act (ADA) in state law and providing the Colorado Department of Education with additional resources, Colorado can continue enforcing the civil rights of students with disabilities.

“Colorado cannot afford to wait while federal oversight diminishes,” said Emily Harvey, Co-Legal Director at Disability Law Colorado. “By codifying key protections from Section 504 and the ADA into state law, lawmakers are ensuring that students with disabilities remain protected regardless of shifting federal priorities. Civil rights enforcement must be stable and dependable – not political.”

“This bill protects our most vulnerable students while preventing costly litigation and supporting the education of all students,” said Madeleine Ashour, Director of K-12 Education Policy at the Colorado Children’s Campaign. “When children’s rights aren’t enforced early and consistently, students can go without needed services. Teachers absorb the resulting workload in the short term, so whole classrooms are affected when this happens. Most importantly, students can’t wait – timeliness is key to effective intervention. It’s also key to reducing litigation costs.”

About the bill

Disability Rights Protections in Public Schools (SB26-125):

- Codifies some of the statutory language from Section 504 and the ADA into Colorado law
- Establishes a reasonable complaint procedure families can use at CDE instead of waiting on OCR
- Requires schools to implement annual disability rights training

- Requires schools to ensure school disability rights coordinators are operating according to current state law

The bill does not create new mandates, burdens, or requirements for schools.

Quotes from bill sponsors

This bill is sponsored by Sen. Chris Kolker, Sen. Janice Marchman, Rep. Jennifer Bacon, and Rep. Jacque Phillips.

“The federal government has decimated the oversight and investigation pathways for 504 and ADA complaints. Now, Colorado will step in to protect the rights of our disabled students and staff by enshrining these protections into our state law. This bill is paramount for the protection of those with disabilities in our public education system, and I am proud to be a co-sponsor,” said Sen. Chris Kolker, who represents SD16.

“The U.S. Department of Education Office for Civil Rights, in Denver, significantly reduced their attorney staff. That means legal compliance for students on 504 plans is at risk. If the U.S. Department of Education can’t take care of our students with disabilities, then the Colorado Department of Education will!” said Rep. Jacque Phillips, who represents HD31.

Background: Stepping up where the federal government has stepped back

Colorado has long recognized the importance of supporting students with disabilities in public schools. But the recent dismantling of federal education infrastructure has created a void that the state must now fill.

Two federal laws have protected students with disabilities from discrimination in schools.

- **Section 504** of the Rehabilitation Act provides for student accommodations, like extra time on tests, and protection from discrimination.
- The Americans with Disabilities Act (**ADA**) ensures equal access to learning opportunities and prohibits discrimination.

OCR has historically monitored and enforced Section 504 and the ADA in public school settings. OCR takes complaints, investigates, and supports mediation.

Since May of 2025, half of OCR staff have been terminated, and 7 out of 12 OCR regional offices have closed. As OCR shrinks, its ability to meet caseload demand shrinks. In 2024, OCR issued public decisions on 56 cases. In 2025, it issued 7. When complaints go unresolved, students can face months of bullying, fall behind academically, and experience lasting harm.

Without intervention, districts could face increased litigation and long-term costs to the state could grow significantly. This bill ensures Colorado is not left waiting for a crisis.

Media contacts:

- Jackie Zubrzycki, Vice President of Communications, Colorado Children’s Campaign: Phone 215-208-4693; Email: jackie@coloradokids.org
- Felix Ortiz, Communications Manager, Disability Law Colorado. Phone: 720-202-9871; fortiz@disabilitylawco.org

###

About the Colorado Children’s Campaign

At the Colorado Children’s Campaign, we use data and research to identify what kids across our state need most, then advocate for policies that strengthen their well-being and help them thrive. Our focus is the whole child, working across Early Childhood, K-12 Education, Health, and Economic Security for the greatest long-term impact.

About Disability Law Colorado

Disability Law Colorado organization, authorized discrimination, abuse, make Colorado the best people with disabilities to information, visit disabilitylawco.org



is a nonprofit civil rights by federal law to combat and neglect. We aim to place in America for thrive. For more