

PACER *Path*

Insightful stories and guidance to light the way

2026 PACER

GALA



Saturday, April 25
JW Marriott, Mall of America

presented by:
**Steven C. Simon
& Family**

SPRING 2026 *IN THIS ISSUE*

Helping dreams shine ... 3

Gala preview ... 4

I give because ... 5

Bridging the gap of transition services ... 6

Special education dispute resolution ... 8

2025 Impact snapshot ... 10

PACER Center improves educational opportunities and enhances the quality of life for children and young adults with disabilities and their families.

An Equal Opportunity Employer, PACER is funded by the U.S. Departments of Education and Health & Human Services, Minnesota Department of Education, and by foundations, corporations, individuals, and other sources. Views expressed do not necessarily reflect those of the Departments or other donors. Contributions to PACER are tax-deductible. For information, call PACER Center at (952) 838-9000.

Connect with an advocate

Are you a Minnesota parent seeking support for your child with a disability? PACER parent advocates are available to help. [Contact us today](#)

Share your story

Has PACER made a difference for your family? Your story has the power to help others—please consider sharing it. [Share your story](#)

Follow PACER on social media!

For up-to-date information on all things PACER, find us online [@PACERCenter](#).



Dear Friends,

In January, I announced that I will be retiring at the end of March 2026. Serving as PACER's executive director for the last three years has been a great honor, and I am proud of the work we've accomplished to support thousands of families. The PACER Board of Directors has launched a search with Ballinger | Leafblad for a new executive director who will continue to strengthen PACER as a light for families of children with disabilities.



Tonia Teasley

As a parent of adult children with disabilities myself, I am personally passionate about PACER's mission. November marked the 50th anniversary of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA), a law that lays a firm foundation for the right of students with disabilities to receive a free, appropriate, and public education (FAPE). PACER will continue to champion this right and help families access the resources and support their children need.

PACER will also continue to follow state and federal policy issues that impact students with disabilities. We hosted a successful Day at the Capitol on February 26, where 22 participants learned how to tell their personal story and advocate for positive change. PACER is particularly focused on efforts to ensure students with disabilities are educated in the most inclusive environment possible and that teachers have the supports they need to limit the use of exclusionary discipline practices. In Washington, D.C., we continue to monitor the administration's activities with a goal to maintain strong oversight and implementation of IDEA at the U.S. Department of Education.

Navigating the systems of special education, healthcare, mental health, and assistive technology has always been challenging for families of children with disabilities. This year has been especially difficult with budget and staffing shortages, the closure of organizations due to lack of funding, and, for some, the fear that has come from the increased presence of Immigration and Customs Enforcement in the Twin Cities. Please know that PACER remains committed to serving all families of children and young adults with disabilities and will continue to help them navigate these complex systems. If you are a Minnesota parent of a child with a disability, please [contact us](#) to speak with an advocate.

It has been a privilege to help steward PACER's mission. I will carry with me forever the beautiful moments of discovery, transformation, and joy.

Sincerely,

Tonia Teasley
Executive Director

Helping dreams shine

PACER's programs aim to support children with disabilities and their families so they can achieve their goals and realize their dreams.



Kim and Lee

Advocating with confidence and clarity

Lee is five years old and has some developmental delays related to health challenges at birth. When it came time for him to start preparing for kindergarten, his plan for the services he would receive was based on old information which meant he was not going to be able to attend his preferred school with his friends in the fall. So, his grandma Kim turned to PACER for help. Because of a PACER advocate's guidance, Kim could better understand Lee's paperwork and gained the confidence to ask his special education team to gather new data. Soon their recommendation changed, and Lee was able to go to school with his friends. "PACER saved a little boy's joy and gave my grandson his dreams back," Kim said.



Andy

Connecting creativity and independence

Andy is a middle school student and has Pelizaeus-Merzbacher disease, which makes it harder for him to control the muscles he would use to draw or write. But with the help of a device called Guided Hands, he was able to create a drawing on his own. His school occupational therapist Jennifer borrowed the device from PACER's Simon Technology Center. It uses a sliding system that enables people with limited fine motor skills to write, paint, draw, and access technology. Andy drew a picture of the sky, sun, and trees. Being able to be creative and do something he dreamed of on his own created more autonomy for Andy and connection with his classmates. "They ended up not seeing his disability anymore. They saw what he can do," Jennifer said.

They saw what he can do.

-Jennifer



Rachel

Inspiring kindness and inclusion

Rachel knew PACER's COUNT ME IN® puppet show was where she wanted to spend her time volunteering after she left her job in education. The show first made an impact on her while she was working in the special education program for Minneapolis public schools. She's now officially a puppeteer and presents a creative and fun show that helps young children understand different disabilities and encourages them to be kind and accepting to everyone. She travels to classrooms across the Twin Cities where students frequently share how they relate to the puppets or have family with disabilities. "Understanding differences in others helps young people to be more comfortable and confident in themselves and grow in openness and kindness to the world around them," Rachel said.

2026 PACER GALA

Saturday, April 25 | JW Marriott, Mall of America

pacer.org/gala



presented by:
**Steven C. Simon
& Family**

This April, PACER's Gala will return to the JW Marriott Mall of America for a mission-focused night of generosity and joy. The event will bring together families, educators, businesses, and community leaders to raise critical funds, help us continue our mission, and light the path forward for Minnesota families of children with disabilities.

The theme for this year's fundraiser is **Light the Path: Help Dreams Shine**. PACER's resources and services are a guiding light for families who feel lost in the forest of complex disability systems. Our Gala supporters will enable us to help children realize their dreams of education, independence, and inclusion. "The need for PACER is

significant. The funds raised will help so many families," said Gala Committee Co-Chair Colleen McGough-Wood. *Read more about Colleen's path with PACER on page 5.*

It will be an elegant evening to remember, featuring a cocktail hour, plated dinner, program led by emcee Matt Woods, and a musical performance by Big Toe and the Jam. Our raffle and silent auction will make a return with exciting new items, and auctioneer Kimberly Fladeboe-Anderson will lead an energetic live auction and donation appeal. You're invited to join us to create tangible change that will leave an impact for years to come!



Take a chance with the raffle



Join in the fun and see what you can win! The Gala raffle will feature four incredible prizes to choose from for each raffle ticket purchased. Up to 500 raffle tickets will be sold at \$50 each. See event staff to purchase.

Oura Ring 4 Value: \$419

Level up your health tracking and get insights into your sleep, activity, stress, and more. Includes one Oura Ring 4 in silver, complete with a sizing kit and one-year pre-paid membership.

Amazon Fire TV Value: \$250

Bring your entertainment to life, stream live TV without cable, and get quick access to all your favorite subscriptions. Includes one Amazon Fire TV 40" 2-Series, HD smart TV with Fire TV Alexa Voice Remote.

David Yurman Bracelet Value: \$475

Add to your collection with David Yurman's beautiful cable design that has been a signature of the brand for 30 years. Includes one David Yurman Cable Flex Bracelet in sterling silver with 14-karat yellow gold details and pearl ends, size medium.

Delta Travel Voucher Value: \$1,000

Take to the skies with Delta! Choose your own adventure or visit a lifelong dream destination. Includes one Delta Air Lines travel voucher.



Tickets must be purchased using cash, check, or debit card. Must be 18 years or older to purchase. Raffle winners need not be present to win. Winner responsible for all taxes.

I give to PACER because...

Every child deserves a chance to shine



Brad, Jacob, and Colleen

When Colleen McGough-Wood's grandson Jacob was born with significant disabilities in March of 2002, she knew her family would need extra help to support his needs. His doctor recommended they contact PACER, and later that spring she attended PACER's Benefit (now Gala) for the first time. "Right away we felt like we weren't alone," she said. Her family felt welcomed into the strong community and soon after she was invited to join PACER's advisory board and Benefit committee by then Executive Director and Co-Founder Paula Goldberg.

Colleen was particularly impressed by how PACER strives to touch every aspect of raising a child with a disability, including ensuring special education supports in school, navigating complex health care needs, and advocating for disability rights and inclusion at the state and federal government. PACER's services uniquely aim to address the many areas of need a family might face from early childhood to transition to adulthood and every step in between. "PACER looks at the whole family—that's super unique," she said.

Having a support system like PACER made an impact on how she could advocate for and support Jacob, who is now 23. PACER's resources helped her get a one-on-one paraprofessional to monitor Jacob's seizures at school. When he

was in elementary school, their family also explored assistive technology that could help him live more independently. "I didn't think he could use any technology because of his disability," Colleen said. However, at Paula's suggestion, they visited the Simon Technology Center and were amazed at the possibilities. "I could not believe all of the things he could use, it was amazing," she added.

Over the last two decades, Colleen has channeled her passion for PACER's work by pouring into fundraising efforts that help keep PACER's services free for Minnesota families. Raising a child with a disability can be an expensive journey, and Colleen doesn't want cost to be a barrier for any family to receive the services they need. "Every special needs child deserves to have a good and meaningful life," she said.

As funding has become uncertain for some nonprofits and finding donors has gotten harder, Colleen has become determined to generate support for a cause she holds so close to her heart. "I want PACER to grow and flourish," she said. She will once again help PACER put on a Gala this April which will inspire attendees and create opportunities for them to make a difference. The funds raised through the event will support PACER's programs and touch thousands of families of children with disabilities across Minnesota. "Without Paula and PACER, I don't know where we would be," she said.

PACER looks at the whole family—that's super unique.

-Colleen McGough-Wood

Explore how you can make a difference at this year's event at pacer.org/gala

If you wish to share why you give to PACER, contact development@pacer.org

There's still time to secure your spot!

Purchase your ticket and explore event details at pacer.org/gala

Sales close on April 20



Bridging the gap of transition services

Giving young adults with disabilities the tools they need to succeed in a new way.

PACER Center has embarked on a new partnership with the Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development (DEED) to address potential gaps in services as youth with disabilities in rural Minnesota transition from high school to employment or postsecondary education. “We’ve been trying a long time to solve this barrier that youth with disabilities have to employment and are still encountering,” said PACER Advocate Sue Fager.

The five-year project, called MN WAY (Minnesota Workforce Access for Youth), is funded by a grant from the U.S. Department of Labor and focuses on helping youth with disabilities age 14–24 transition to employment or education in geographic areas where services aren’t easily accessible. MN WAY’s approach is to provide wraparound services through Integrated Resource Teams (see “What is an Integrated Resource Team?”) facilitated by career counselors. The project will enable youth to manage many aspects of the transition to adulthood through one coordinated process instead of having to contact several different agencies or service providers. “No one else is doing it this way,” Sue said.

Facing the transition cliff

The issue that PACER and MN WAY seek to address is commonly referred to as the “transition cliff.” While children with disabilities are still in school, their services are organized through their Individualized Education Program (IEP), and they have a team of school staff, related service providers, and family that supports them as they work toward their goals. When a student graduates, their IEP does not follow them into their postsecondary endeavors, requiring them to access adult disability services through multiple providers with different eligibility qualifications, such as vocational rehabilitation services, Supplemental Security Income, medical assistance, and others.

MN WAY helps create a team of support comprising social workers, case managers, and parents/family members. This team works together to provide youth with the full spectrum of workforce development and education services available to them. The program utilizes a “no wrong door” approach that is individualized to each youth’s needs. “Some will want to go right from high school to a job or to some kind of continuing education,” Sue said. “The beauty of this grant is that the supports and services will be individualized.”

What is an Integrated Resource Team (IRT)?

An IRT is a person-centered collaborative team designed to help youth with disabilities achieve their educational and employment goals through coordinated and individualized services. For youth who have already graduated from high school, it will serve as a continuation of the kind of support they received from their IEP team. IRTs are designed to be unique to an individual’s needs, so each youth’s team may look a little different or change over time. Under the MN WAY program, IRTs are made up of service providers, family, and other support system professionals.

IRTs use the nationally recognized set of best practices known as Guideposts for Success to support youth transition. The Guideposts break down successful youth career development into five areas. This framework also helps professionals identify a youth’s needs so they can be properly addressed within the career planning and management process. “A lot of the work that staff do falls under each of the Guideposts. They just don’t frame it that way yet,” said DEED State Program Administrator Coordinator Cory Schmid.

PACER's involvement

In the previous phase of the MN WAY project, PACER developed materials that are used by workforce development professionals as they incorporate the Guideposts into their work. In the next phase, PACER will hold training sessions for parents to highlight the role that family engagement plays in youth success. "We're going to help families and their young adults connect with the employment supports they need to become gainfully employed," Sue said.

She explained that families are frequently left to put the pieces of adult disability services together on their own. This becomes difficult when they don't have background, understanding, or training in such complex systems. "That's where PACER comes in. We're trying to help families prepare for that shift," Sue said.

The long-term trajectory of the project will focus on developing a workforce system that can provide transition-age youth with extra support and bridge the gap of services by creating a referral process that streamlines different disability service providers together. "PACER is going to be a great resource for staff and parent training," said Cory.

Are you a parent of a transition-age youth with a disability?

- Check out the [upcoming parent trainings sessions](#)
- Explore [WIOA Young Adult Program/Minnesota Department of Employment and Economic Development](#)
- Contact transition@pacer.org for more information

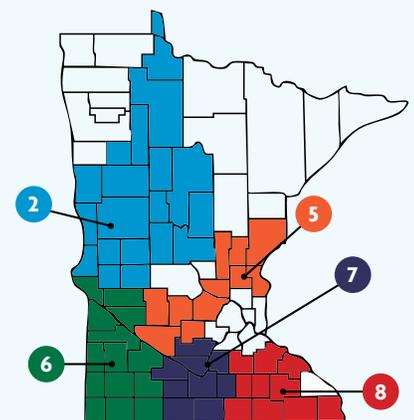
The Guideposts for Success domains are:

1. **School-based preparatory experiences** such as tutoring, study skills training, interest inventories, and field trips.
2. **Career preparation and work-based learning experiences** including career counseling, resume development, internships, and apprenticeship programs.
3. **Youth development and leadership experiences** such as extracurricular activities, mentorship programs, and volunteering.
4. **Connecting activities**, including applying for financial aid, accessing supportive services, and participating in work incentive programs.
5. **Family engagement** like inviting parents to share insights on their child's strengths, brainstorming about natural support for basic needs, and practicing skill development at home.

Local workforce development areas participating in the grant

- 2 Rural Minnesota Concentrated Employment Program
- 5 Central Minnesota Jobs and Training Services
- 6 Southwest Minnesota Private Industry Council

- 7 South Central Workforce Council/Minnesota Valley Action Council
- 8 Workforce Development, Inc.



Voicing concerns and engaging with the school:

Dispute resolution options for Minnesota parents

PACER helps parents work through special education conflicts.

Throughout their child's special education journey, parents may encounter times when they disagree with the school about what their child needs, what services will help, or how they will be provided. PACER helps parents stay on the path of the special education process and informs them of how they can use their rights to advocate for their child.

If parents and the school cannot reach an agreement at an Individualized Education Program (IEP) meeting, there are dispute resolution meeting options parents can pursue to work through a conflict. "Dispute resolution meetings are designed for problem solving and collaboration," said PACER Advocate Rachel Pearson.

These meetings give parents and school staff the opportunity to hear each other's concerns, share in decision making, and find a way forward.

It can be a powerful strategy for parents to engage with the school through these meetings and try to come to a mutual agreement about how to address their child's unique educational needs. PACER advocates can attend these meetings to help parents feel more confident and

find a resolution. "We're there to follow the parent's lead and support them as they communicate their expertise on their child and concerns about their child's IEP," said Rachel. These meetings include:

We're there to follow the parent's lead.

-Rachel Pearson

Conciliation conferences

Parents can request a conciliation conference if they object in writing to a Prior Written Notice (PWN) from the school by the deadline stated in the PWN. This meeting must be held within 10 days of the request and includes the parents and appropriate district staff.

Facilitated team meetings

The goal of facilitated team meetings is to write a new IEP. When parents and the school district cannot agree on an IEP for a child, either can request a facilitated team meeting. At these meetings, an impartial facilitator helps the IEP team work together and write an IEP that everyone can agree on.

Mediation

If the working relationship or communication between the parents and the school has broken down, either can request mediation. At this meeting, an impartial mediator will help both sides communicate their concerns, explore possible compromises, and find common ground. A successful mediation can produce a legally binding written agreement signed by the parents and the school.

Read more about dispute resolution meeting options and view full resource at <https://media.pacer.org/php/php-a60.pdf>

Rachel advises parents to voice their questions and concerns to the school as soon as they arise, engage with their child's IEP team to resolve disagreements as early as possible, and start low in exercising their dispute resolution options so that higher level options remain available to them if needed.

If parents are concerned that the school may have violated their rights or their child's rights under state or federal special education laws, they may consider their options for filing a special education complaint or a due process complaint with the Minnesota Department of Education. In situations where parents have concerns that their child's civil rights may have been violated, they may consider filing a discrimination complaint with their school district, the Minnesota Department of Human Rights, or the U.S. Department of Education's Office for Civil Rights.



Rachel Pearson

Read more about these dispute resolution complaint options at <https://media.pacer.org/php/php-a59.pdf>

PACER advocates help parents prepare for dispute resolution meetings and build their confidence in advocating for their child's educational needs. Here is what some families had to say about the impact of PACER advocates who have assisted them at these meetings:

“The support, assistance, and understanding of our advocate made it possible for us to navigate the mediation process with confidence and clarity. My son's goals and objectives were prioritized and support for his self-advocacy was at the center of all the efforts.”

“I feel more confident about how to go about issues and concerns in the future.”

“Our advocate helped us enter the conciliation conference feeling calm and prepared and helped us understand the steps leading up to and following the meeting.”

“Our PACER advocate showed compassion, was knowledgeable, and had a skill for reframing talking points to help my family clearly state our concerns and our daughter's needs. The mediation was extremely stressful and brought forward big emotions for myself and my husband, but she provided us with great support prior to and during the meeting.”

PACER CENTER IMPACT SNAPSHOT

2025

PACER Center improves educational opportunities and enhances the quality of life for children and young adults with disabilities and their families.

Because of the generous support of individual donors, corporate and foundation partners, and other funders, PACER was able to positively impact the lives of thousands of children and young adults with disabilities through our Parent Training and Advocacy, Assistive Technology, and Social Inclusion programs.



1.1M

Visits were made to PACER's websites



1,200

Assistive technology loans were provided by the STC Lending Library



16,000

People attended PACER's virtual and in-person trainings, presentations, and other events



4,550

Children and school staff were educated through PACER's COUNT ME IN® puppet shows



280

Presentations, trainings, and other informational events were provided by PACER



11,000

Instances of individual assistance were provided by PACER's Parent Training and Advocacy program



97%

Of training participants reported they would use information learned to help improve educational outcomes for their child or students



9,000

Unique families, professionals, and others were served through individual assistance and training across all programs



106

Assistive technology consultations and individual trainings were provided to individuals with disabilities and their families