



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



Name: Patrick Wigent

Law School: Columbia Law School

Organization: Legal Aid Society - Education Law Practice

Update 1: I am grateful to receive summer funding through my fellowship with Equal Justice America to support my work with the Legal Aid Society's Education Law Practice over the summer.

In this internship, I will be working with LAS lawyers to advocate for children with special needs and their parents through impartial hearings, policy research, and state and federal litigation. I look forward to the direct client engagement, listening to families' stories, and learning the ins and outs of the complex system that is NYC schools.

Equal Justice America is a nonprofit that supports law students who work directly with people experiencing poverty. They have graciously contributed funding to my work this summer.

Update 2: I am grateful that the Education Law Practice at the Legal Aid Society has given me the opportunity not only to witness but also participate in hearings so early in the summer. I have been able to lead manifestation determination review meetings and conduct cross examination during impartial hearings, both of which are so valuable for developing my practice as I prepare for graduation and my legal career.

One thing I was thrilled to learn is that intern work in our unit eligible for attorney's fees at education due process hearings. All the money comes back to the education unit and helps fund their incredible work. It is gratifying to know my work this summer is able to contribute to the unit in more ways than one.

Update 3: One of the most difficult aspects of education law in New York City is the sheer quantity of public, non-public, and private schools. People who have been doing this work for years have a wealth of knowledge to share when clients come to us looking for help with school placement. One of the ways to build that knowledge base as an intern is to go on school visits. In the last few weeks, I have had the opportunity to visit a variety of community, specialized, and private schools with and without parents to see their facilities and programs in action.



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Similarly, when it comes to building the knowledge base necessary for a legal practice in education, experience is the best teacher. This is why I am so grateful to the wonderful team at the Education Law Project for affording me the autonomy to conduct intakes, brainstorm with clients, and drive cases forward. With their guidance and support, this internship (funded in part by Equal Justice America) has increased the units' capacity to help families in New York City and my potential as an education attorney. I am extremely proud to have accepted their offer to stay on as a Fall intern.

Update 4: As my time with the Education Law Project comes to a close, I want to reflect on the generosity of the attorneys at their Harlem Community Law Office. The housing unit in particular has been so welcoming and willing to show us education interns the ropes in the housing parts at Manhattan Civil Court. It was a privilege to see what the implementation of universal access to counsel in eviction cases looks like, learn about LAS' intake process, and see the positive effects NYC's One Shot Deal have had for tenants. Lawyers who are willing to share their experiences, perspectives, and time with law students make the space more accessible and demystify the process of applying for jobs.

As we inch towards housing truly being considered a human right, effective collaboration between NYC, HRA, and our legal service providers will be vital to keep more New Yorker's in their homes. Education, mental health, employment, and community all flow from our homes. I am excited to continue to apply this holistic approach to my legal practice as I enter the 3L hiring season!

Update 5: Grateful to have had the support of Equal Justice America for the duration of my summer internship with the Legal Aid Society's Education Law Practice. As my summer has come to a close and I am now transitioning back to law school, I am also grateful for the opportunity to reflect on my many observations from the summer.

Observation 1: Unions have helped legal services, especially in NYC, come so far in recruiting and maintaining talent. The days of a new lawyer making \$45-50k are a fresh memory for most of the lawyers I met and spoke with. Between student loans and salary pressure from all the different high-paying legal jobs out there, this simply wasn't sustainable. We are nowhere near paying out public servants (including support staff and paralegals) what they deserve, but I got the sense during the summer of the progress we have made in the last 10 years.

Observation 2: Legal aid organizations are still drastically underfunded. Especially in the tenant defense space, there is simply not enough money for enough lawyers to offer representation to everyone who needs it and do a rigorous job. Something needs to give, whether it be turning folks away or assigning unmanageable caseloads. This comes down to state and city funding priorities, which must shift towards the working-poor.

Observation 3: There are so many wonderful people in these fields who, for little pay and little recognition, have been grinding it out for YEARS to the benefit of thousands of New Yorkers. And this is because the work is so darn rewarding. Once again grateful for the opportunity to have this experience and, hopefully, join a service org after graduation to continue my work in the field.