

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I'm writing to share more about my experiences this summer as an Equal Justice America Fellow at Education Law Center-PA (ELC) in Philadelphia. I greatly appreciate the support of the EJA Fellowship and the opportunities it has made possible for me. I hope this letter can give you a glimpse into what I learned and how I used these lessons to make a difference and further EJA's mission.

During my internship with ELC, I assisted in representing "Jack," a 4-year-old Black child with disabilities. Jack was suspended for behaviors consistent with his disabilities—a violation of his rights to due process and a free appropriate public education. Jack was not receiving his required Early Intervention services, and his preschool teachers lacked training in addressing challenging behaviors. Caught in a paradoxical cycle of preschool pushout instead of receiving the support he was legally entitled to, Jack was excluded from school—the very place he was supposed to receive interventions. While representing Jack, I observed systemic accountability gaps, his parents' desperation, and most glaringly, the exacerbation of his unmet needs through illegal suspension. I attended case meetings, took notes, reviewed settlements, gained insight into specific systemic failures, and explored potential remedies.

Additionally, in another case, I conducted an intake interview with a parent following an ELC helpline call for a high school student with a disability. I successfully recommended to ELC's legal team that we represent "Ashley" to reverse the School District of Philadelphia's denial of her request to use her compensatory education fund to purchase equipment that she needed to develop critical skills, that served a therapeutic purpose, and that allowed her to begin to create a small business that she could pursue after graduation. Ashley received the compensatory education fund through a settlement with the District due to a prior failure to

provide her with a free appropriate public education. The funds could be used for any “legitimate educational expense,” which included expenses for vocational skill development. I reviewed the student’s educational records to understand that the student’s requested expense was squarely within her IEP goal of becoming a small business owner. Under the supervision of an ELC attorney and in consultation with the parent, I drafted a letter appealing the District’s denial of this expense based on the student’s documented vocational skill developmental needs. As a result, the District reversed its previous denial of the expense and the student was able to purchase the equipment.

Rose Wehrman

Columbia Law School