

Dan Ruben, Executive Director
Equal Justice America
Building II - Suite 204
13540 East Boundary Road
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

In part because of the Equal Justice America Fellowship, I had the opportunity to spend the summer after my first year of law school at the New York Legal Assistance Group (“NYLAG”) Special Education Unit (“SEU”). NYLAG provides legal assistance to low-income New Yorkers, and the Special Education Unit assists children with disabilities and their families navigate special education services in the New York City school system.

Through my work with the SEU, I was able to work on the cases of dozens of students. These students and their families had had negative experiences with their schooling—the students had not been receiving the free and appropriate public education that they are legally entitled to, their parents had been denied their procedural rights guaranteed by the Individuals with Disabilities in Education Act, and the families were often frustrated and disillusioned by special education systems.

Most of the special education processes and procedures are supposed to happen without a lawyer. In New York City, families are to work directly with their schools, their teachers, and their local Committees on Special Education to determine an appropriate education plan for their child, including classes, services, and goals. Lawyers typically only become involved if the meetings are completely inadequate or if there is something wrong with the education plan that has been created, such that the student does not make meaningful growth from year to year. As such, families often feel like they have been ignored or steam-rolled by the time they find an attorney to assist them.

One such student was seventeen-years old and learning disabled. At seventeen, he was in the tenth grade and read at a first-grade level. He was quiet, polite, and well-behaved. He would sit in the back of the classroom and fall asleep when asked to complete a reading assignment. Like many quiet kids, he was passed up through elementary, middle, and high school without being able to meet grade benchmarks. The first time I met him, he was slouched in a chair in our waiting area, looking like a moody but quiet teenager. As someone who has taught in a classroom before, I was sympathetic to teachers’ tendency to ignore the quiet ones, but a few minutes talking to him showed me that he was an eager student who had simply never had the resources he needed to learn and had developed a lot of school anxiety as a result.

His mother was likewise eager for him to learn, and eager to find someone to help her make that happen. Like many of the parents we met, she had been unable to ensure her child an adequate education, but not for lack of trying. I met many parents who wrote near-weekly letters to schools, asking for explanations of why their child with autism was being severely disciplined or shuffled from classroom to classroom. Some parents had previously sought help from private attorneys that friends had recommended, but were unable to afford the consultation fees of three-hundred dollars or more.

Still many more parents, though they loved their children dearly, had done very little to help acquire appropriate educational services. They did not know the extensive procedural rights

they had. They did not know that their child was entitled to more services and to the opportunity to make meaningful educational growth. One such parent had a child with a degenerative muscular disorder. The student had not been receiving physical therapy for three years and was unable to use the restroom at school. His mother was kind, passionate, and loved her son, but did not know that she could ask for more.

Whether performing a simple task like being persistent about receiving certain records or engaging in more complicated legal research, I was able to take some of the weight off of these parents, who had been fighting for their children for so long. I was also able to ensure that these students had at least some of the opportunity to learn [what] their typical peers have.

I was able to perform this work in part because of the Equal Justice America Fellowship, and for that I am grateful.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Meaghan E Brennan". The signature is fluid and cursive, with the first name being the most prominent.

Meaghan E Brennan
Columbia University School of Law