

May 31, 2014

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Midlothian, VA 23112  
[Dan@EqualJusticeAmerica.org](mailto:Dan@EqualJusticeAmerica.org)

Dear Mr. Ruben,

This spring I had the honor of working with the JustChildren program of Legal Aid Justice Center in Petersburg. I learned so much and my deep passion for working for children's rights grew once I started truly working for actual clients who desperately needed an advocate. I helped advocate for their education rights, which is so important to each child's future.

I only sat on an interview of one student. He had threatened suicide and told one of his teachers. The teacher had done nothing to protect him and instead sent a letter home. His mother, rightfully concerned, removed him from school and requested a safety plan so that if at any point he threatened suicide again she and other adults would be immediately notified. It had been months without any substantive education before his mother came into the the LAJC office. My supervising attorney and I sat down with him, his mother and his aid and began the interview. At the end when we told him that we would try to get him back to school his smile lit up the room; his mom said that was the first real smile she had seen in months. That smile meant the world to me. It made everything I did real. Writing memos and doing legal research can become tedious but when I remember that smile I remember the meaning of it all, helping others.

Another student I helped advocate for was in first grade. He and his family were transitioning out of homelessness. At the time they were living out of bags and boxes in a hotel room. He grabbed the wrong backpack, which had the families cutlery. He was suspended for bringing a knife to school. Although the principal and teachers wrote statements explaining that neither they nor the other students ever felt threatened or believed bringing the knife was anything other than a mistake, he was facing expulsion by the school board. After reading the facts of the case I was so frustrated that rather than understanding the child's situation the school district was insisting on pursuing expulsion. Writing his demand letter to the school board was invaluable practice in channeling my frustration into zealous advocacy.

Finally, one child exemplified what a lack of early identification for learning disabilities can lead to. Since kindergarten he showed symptoms of hyperactivity and a learning disability. He had difficulties paying attention and was performing below the level of his peers. He began exhibiting defiant behaviors and so the school implemented a behavioral improvement plan. During the meeting he explained how much he wanted to learn but that no one would help him. Despite this plea for help the school never implemented any plan to help him learn. Instead, despite failing grades and falling further and further behind his peers they advanced him again and again. He finally gave up trying and would do the specific behavior he knew would get him suspended. His mother requested help from the LAJC office when he was in the 8<sup>th</sup> grade. He had gone years without any true opportunity to learn. He should have been helped years ago; at the very least when he asked for help. Instead he had been passed on and labeled a problem child.

It's a problem that plagued the school district he was from as well as others throughout the country. Instead of identifying our children who need us the most – we label them as obstinate or juvenile delinquents and brush them aside. I began working on a memo and how to address systemic issues of child find. Having this and other examples of children who are tossed aside, I have tried to fuel that passion into a memo on how to impact real change for these children through litigation. That memo has been my greatest challenge to date. Without any real skills in legal writing I have struggled to create something that accurately reflects my passions in concise powerful words.

Thank you for the funding that you granted me, which enabled me to have this incredible experience.

Christina K. Sorenson  
University of Richmond  
T.C. Williams School of Law  
Juris Doctor Candidate 2015