

August 16, 2013

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

Dear Mr. Ruben:

Equip for Equality is a non-profit legal agency that seeks to advance the human and civil rights of adults and children with disabilities. I worked in the Special Education Clinic, which provides a helpline, individual self-advocacy, training, and legal representation for people with disabilities and their families in securing an appropriate education and related services. The Clinic's goal is to empower families to self-advocate for their disabled children within the school setting.

As an intern in the Special Education Clinic, I was able to directly assist with cases. With attorney supervision, I generally managed between six and eight cases at a time. As children's educational experiences are quite varied depending on their school district and disability, each case that I worked on was different. I handled cases regarding disciplinary incidents, placement decisions, abuse, and compensatory education. Regardless of the legal issue of a case, the supervising attorney and I would approach the same way: complete an intake call, discuss the case and its legal issues, provide the family with educational resources, provide varying levels of legal assistance, and – in some cases – legal representation.

First, I would complete an intake call. During an intake, I would ask the client basic demographic questions, and then I would proceed to ask questions that were more particular to their child's case. After I had collected and summarized this information, I would present the case to a supervising attorney. We would discuss the merits of the case and what available resources EFE could offer. At the very least, EFE would provide educational resources that informed the family about special education law, which is quite complex. However, in many cases I would review the child's educational record and begin legal research to assess the legal issues further. Once I reviewed the records, the managing attorney and I would assist the family in writing a record request letter, a "letter to a stranger," and other legal documents that were applicable to the case. If we believed that the case had merit and was in our priorities, we would present the case at the organization's case acceptance meeting (CAM) and ask whether anyone was willing to represent the family. If we did not have any available attorneys, we would submit the case to pro-bono.

One of my greatest successes this summer was working with a client named John Smith. When John's mother called our helpline, John had recently been expelled from his charter

school. Although John's mother had requested that the school complete a case study evaluation on her son and find him eligible for special education and related services, the school had not done so. As a result, John struggled with behavioral difficulties due to his impulsive behavior and inability to stay focused. His behaviors adversely affected his school performance, leading to him receiving failing grades and various disciplinary measures, including his expulsion.

EFE quickly acted. After I reviewed what John's educational records, my mentor attorney I discussed the legal issues and presented the case at the weekly case acceptance meeting. My mentor attorney and I then prepared John's mother for the Appeals Decision Meeting. We discussed with John's mom what the legal issues of John's case were and what to focus on in the meeting. We also presented John's mother with a formal letter, which used case law to argue against John's expulsion. As a result of our combined efforts, John's expulsion was reversed!

Once John's expulsion was reversed, we then sought to have John provided with Special Education and related services. Although John's mother had verbally requested that her son be evaluated for services, she had not provided the school with written documentation of this request. I drafted a ghost letter, which requested that the school complete a domain meeting, which is the first step for receiving Special Education services. The school complied with this request and a domain meeting was held. Both the school and John's mother agreed that John should be evaluated and John's mother signed her consent for John to be evaluated. Although John's mother had a legal right to have him evaluated during the summer, she chose to wait until the start of school. John is now being evaluated for Special Education and related services.

It meant a great deal to me to work on this case this summer. In law school, you study cases from a distance and do not fully understand the impact that your education can have on those you serve. For the first time in my life, I was able to truly change the circumstances of someone else. It was wonderful to hear John's mother change over the course of the summer: she came to me utterly discouraged and I left her feeling triumphant. I am thankful that I was able to assist in this case so that I could remember why I want to work in the public sector.

Sincerely,

Christine Guymon  
University of Illinois, College of Law  
Juris Doctor Candidate, Class of 2015