

August 12, 2014

Mr. Dan Ruben
Executive Director, Equal Justice America
13540 East Boundary Road, Bldg. 2, Ste. 204
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Executive Director Ruben,

Equal Justice America's summer fellowship award supported my internship this summer at Public Counsel Law Center in Los Angeles, California. At Public Counsel, I had the opportunity to contribute to the work of and learn from lawyers striving for social justice for disadvantaged populations in Los Angeles and throughout California. Having volunteered with Public Counsel six years ago in their Children's Rights Project, I was excited to return to such a wonderful organization, this time as a summer clerk in the Impact Litigation Project. In addition to helping people served by Public Counsel, the practical skills I gained in civil rights lawyering—from collecting declarations to developing community organizing strategies, to legal research, to helping draft legal documents—will serve to make me a better public interest lawyer for my future clients. This summer has been truly transformative, having cemented my commitment to a career in civil rights advocacy and deepened my passion for education as a key lever in social justice.

The clients ILP served this summer were disadvantaged school children located in impoverished, high-needs school districts throughout California. As a former school teacher, I was aware coming in that our nation's public schools on whole fail to keep their promises to children and their families. States promise children the right to an education and to the opportunities of college and employment and leadership that a good education can create. But some states make it impossible for schools to fulfill these obligations to children; such states knowingly permit inadequate and unequal school systems that deprive students of meaningful learning time. This summer, I got to see and hear about the lived realities of students, teachers, and parents for whom the system has not kept its word, and also to be a part of the fight to change that.

Over the summer, I got to go inside schools with our litigation team, work with community coalition members, and meet and interact with parents, students, and school staff. One particularly memorable client was a young man whose success at school was intermittent, but whose potential for success was great. Assisting in declaration collection related to filing our case's initial complaint, I had the opportunity to hear his story and interact with him. He spoke of the violence at his school, lost learning time due to teacher turnover, scheduling errors due to insufficient counselors, and other interruptions. He spoke of the obstacles he faced growing up in a poor community where few expected students to graduate high school, much less attend college. What so impressed me about this young student was when he began to speak of his English class. Hearing him speak about how that class actually inspired him to like reading and take a new interest in school was powerful. It reminded me that every minute in class is vital. And it reminded me that every student needs all the encouragement they can get. Consequently, he and I spoke about college applications, the Advanced Placement exam, and about books, lots of books. On the day of filing of the suit, I felt that I was able to provide encouragement to him

simply by standing behind him as he shared his story confidently with the press. This young man and others like him have stories to tell, and the role of education advocates is sometimes simply to listen, to give clients the confidence to tell their stories, and importantly, to provide them with the legal tools needed to state cognizable claims in a way that galvanizes change.

In addition to working directly with students, parents, and school staff, I had the opportunity to observe brilliant lawyers in action and see civil rights litigation take form. Being a part of the development, filing, and initial litigation of a major equity-adequacy state education case has greatly augmented my skill set as an aspiring public interest attorney. Public Counsel's model involves building coalitions with other civil rights organizations as well as utilizing a full-time community organizer to gain support and input from community groups. Observing and participating in that process as the education litigation took shape was a valuable experience, in particular because I saw how serving clients through impact litigation requires carefully crafting an architecture of a suit that is responsive to real human needs, diverse community interests, and complicated, sometimes competing individual and organizational objectives.

As a result of my experience at Public Counsel this summer, I feel confident that education advocacy is the career path I am meant to pursue. After graduation and a judicial clerkship, I intend to apply for public interest fellowships and continue fighting for the rights of children to have excellent and equal educational opportunities. Equal Justice America enabled me to spend time working on an issue that I care deeply about and to which I intend to devote my career. I am so thankful for having had this opportunity, and I am proud to say that I was a part of a lawsuit that is striving to protect the right of all children to meaningful learning time at school and more broadly to equal and adequate educational opportunities.

Sincerely,

Elizabeth Hadaway
Harvard Law School