



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2022 EJA Fellow:



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**Update 1:** This week (or rather Tuesday) makes two weeks that I've been with the EdLaw Project and what a whirlwind these past two weeks have been! My work thus far has been centered around sitting in on client intakes, conducting legal research on special education requirements and prior case law for client cases, and analyzing educational data to inform advocacy efforts to support students involved in foster care. Having worked in both direct representation for students with special education needs this past year in law school as well as with foster care cases before law school, adjusting to the caseload at EdLaw has felt like hopping back onto a well-loved bike—natural and enjoyable. Although I certainly miss being able to interface with clients, watching the attorneys balance both advocacy efforts to support at-risk youth with more traditional legal work—such as representing clients during special education appeals—is a welcome affirmation that education advocacy is not only something that I love but what I am meant to do. Additionally, due to the EdLaw's connection to the Committee for Public Counsel Services (CPCS)—Massachusetts' Public Defenders' office—the other intern in the office and I are able to attend CPCS learning sessions with summer interns across the greater Boston area. Last week, we had a professor from Cornell Law School speak to us about the importance of movement lawyering and brainstormed the ways that we as public interest attorneys could work with our clients and their communities to dismantle the systems of oppression that impact our clients and our work. Being able to converse with like-minded law students about these all-too-important topics is especially refreshing and I'm excited to see what the rest of the summer holds for me!!!

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**Update 2:** I am now one month and some odd days into my internship with the EdLaw Project and my growing understanding of my role as an advocate has certainly deepened. However, I have also become aware of the limitations associated with legal services work—namely the inability to provide support to all persons seeking services due to income restrictions. Like many other legal services organizations, EdLaw provides a helpline for parents, families, and others aware of the educational needs of Massachusetts students to seek help for an education-related issue. As an intern, I help to conduct intakes of those calling into the hotline to assess whether or not the staff attorneys can provide support to these students. This past week, I was able to conduct my first solo client intake. Unfortunately, however due to criteria on the grants that EdLaw and the Youth Advocacy Foundation receive, we were unable to provide support to the parent who called in. Being unable to



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provide support to this parent, despite the clear need that she and her son needed was emotionally difficult for me for several reasons. For one, their case was a clear example of inequity within the education system—the cause behind my desire to attend law school. Secondly, despite my understanding as to why EdLaw and its grantors sought to focus efforts on lower-income families and children when determining the clientele that would be served, I realized that families whose incomes were right at the cutoff, educational inequity was just as difficult to achieve as their lower-income yet eligible counterparts. As I look towards my future as an educational attorney and someone focused on public interest work, I know that I will have to grapple with similarly difficult scenarios, and having had this experience allows me to have a better sense of how to navigate these limitations of my work.

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**Update 3:** While I have definitely enjoyed my time at EdLaw thus far, the past two weeks have been especially exciting! Last week, our team had a day of fun—a day to destress and reflect on the work that we’ve done and the clients that EdLaw has served. Not only was it exciting to meet all the staff attorneys in person for the first time this summer, but it was also wonderful to hear from each of them about how and why they choose educational advocacy as their field of law to go into. Also, during the day of fun, I had the opportunity to join one of the staff attorneys and the pro bono attorneys that EdLaw works with for an IEP meeting. While I have attended IEP meetings in the past as a Guardian ad Litem, never before had I done so as an attorney, much less the opposing council to the largest school system in the state, Boston Public Schools! What’s more, at this particular IEP meeting, I was able to witness how EdLaw collaborates with our pro bono attorneys! One of the main reasons that the EdLaw Project has been so successful and influential in education advocacy within the greater Boston area is because of the support that it receives from pro bono attorneys at large, elite law firms like Kirkland & Ellis. Thus, having had the opportunity to watch as my senior attorney as well as the pro bono attorneys deftly argued for the desires of our client—weaving in legal precedents as well as emotive appeals—was nothing short of awe inspiring. This week, I got the opportunity to see our pro bono and staff attorneys in action again as I attended the follow up meeting to the IEP meeting from last week. Listening as the attorney as discussed legal strategy and next steps in our case not only gave me further insight into how legal advocacy can manifest within my chosen field, but the necessary collaboration that it entails.

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**Update 4:** This week at my internship was a bit shorter due to my surgical procedure. Nevertheless, it presented great opportunities to explore the policy/legislative advocacy initiatives that EdLaw collaborates on with other local advocacy organizations. Specifically, over the past week and a half, I conducted extensive research into the different responsibilities of a school district with regard to students on 504 Plans versus those on IEPs. I also got the opportunity to delve into a common gray area of special education—the transition assessment for students on an IEP plan. Through this research, coupled with another research assignment I was asked to complete regarding the necessary protocols to support English Language Learner (ELL) students, I was able to explore the ways in which local advocates, such as the EdLaw project, can work within less traditional avenues of client advocacy (i.e., direct representation) to advocate for change. Moreover, these opportunities to reexamine the status quo either by urging for the creation of a more robust definition of a ‘sufficient transition assessment in an adolescent student’s IEP,’ and whether the state’s policies for bilingual education are constructed in a way that honors the needs and linguistic challenges of limited/non-English proficient students and families allow me



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to see where Massachusetts as a state can improve itself to be the champion of education that it purports itself to be. Coming from a background where certain rights to education were severely unmet, being about to talk to attorneys and pick their brains about the ways they envision Massachusetts becoming an even better leader in the public education system gives me hope that all of the necessary changes that families are pushing for are all that closer to becoming a reality.

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**Update 5:** Now one week out from the completion of my internship with the EdLaw Project I am able to reflect on the way my goals for a career in educational advocacy have shifted and been refined. At the beginning of my summer, I relied on previous clinical and work experience to guide my understandings and goals for the summer by completing more traditional forms of legal advocacy work as well as building up understanding within the legal community regarding educational rights (i.e. connecting one-on-one with clients, participating in training opportunities for attorneys representing juvenile clients). While I was able to tap into the knowledge that I gained working in my clinic and in my work as a Kenan Community Impact Fellow when assisting the staff attorneys in their representation of our clients, I was seldom able to interface with the clients themselves save for when I was able to conduct client intakes. Instead, a significant portion of my work this summer focused on the different advocacy efforts that the EdLaw Project and its staff attorneys are involved with such as bilingual education for undocumented students, transparency in outcomes for foster care youth, transitional services for students with IEPs, ensuring educational rights for students within the carceral system, and providing resources within the community in relation to these rights. I was able to lend support to these efforts by researching past and current state educational agency reports, comparing current MA regulations to those of peer states, and reviewing current U.S. law on special education and bilingual education. Having formerly interned at the MA Department of Elementary and Secondary Education, I had often done similar work to ensure that the state was in compliance with U.S. regulations and reflective of current practices within other states, however, at EdLaw, I was able to not only reflect on the compliance of the state but also how the state could improve the way it supported its most vulnerable student populations. In being able to build upon the work that I completed last summer in such as way this summer has allowed be to recognize policy work—i.e. proposing legislative amendments—as a key area of work that I would like to work post-grad. Specifically, after having completed work on bilingual education and the rights of undocumented students, I am especially called to work towards improving language access for immigrant students and their families with respect to special education. While legal services work is a vital component of ensuring equity—especially on a smaller, individual scale—I am learning that policy work and legal services work need not be an all or nothing: I can continue provide support to families by working within a legal services organization by using the lessons learned from the representation of clients as a means of identifying current issues within educational equity and access. As I prepare to return to school in a few short weeks, and as a co-president at BC Law’s Public Interest Law Foundation (PILF), I am excited to expand PILF’s opportunities for learning and celebration of public service and public interest law to encompass less traditional forms of legal advocacy such as policymaking.