



# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Update 1:** I'm so grateful for the funding I've received through Equal Justice America for my 1L summer work. As a rising 2L, my top priority for this summer was to explore the area that pushed me to attend law school. After three years of teaching high school special education in Chicago, I sought to attend law school to become a stronger legal advocate for students with disabilities and their families. In my work at Equip for Equality this summer, I have been doing just that. This is the first EJA Fellow Update of five I will make throughout the summer chronicling what I'm learning and the work I'm doing.

Special Education Law is unique in the fact that all disputes are focused on (1) what is best for the student and (2) utilizing conflict resolution methods to make sure the student is set up for success in the future. Oftentimes, the members of the adverse party (schools and school districts) will continue serving the student after any case is completed. So far, I have spent a lot of time learning about these conflict resolution methods and the types of solutions that are available. EFE focuses on equipping students and families with the skills to continue advocating for themselves outside of our support as they continue to navigate this complex system. I have thoroughly enjoyed completing intakes for families and drafting advice for them.

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**Update 2:** During my time as an educator, I witnessed the school-to-prison pipeline in full force with my students in South Chicago. Students would return from periods of detention spanning from 1 day to 3 months with no support plan to help them reintegrate into the school system. For students with disabilities, this cycle of removal and re-enrollment to school results in severe learning loss. Detention centers often lack the resources and staff necessary to serve students with disabilities, so my students often returned to school having received no concrete instruction during the time they were detained. Further, students on my caseload released from detention were often by electronic monitoring. Due to this type of confinement, students were often not permitted to attend after school tutoring that would provide them the resources to catch up with their peers on what they missed.



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In my work at Equip for Equality as an Equal Justice America Fellow, I have been able to explore the school-to-prison pipeline as it applies to special education specifically. I am currently working on cases within the prison system in Illinois where students are unable to access free, adequate, public education (FAPE) to meet their needs. Without a high school diploma, opportunities for people once they are released from detention are severely limited and can affect every aspect of their lives. I look forward to sharing more in my next EJA Fellow Update.

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**Update 3:** For my third EJA Fellow Update, I'd like to explore the specific outcomes of the work I've been doing. As a teacher, I was fascinated by the ways service-related disputes are handled and how solutions come about. Like many other areas of law, the work of education lawyers often takes place outside of the courtroom. This process makes sense because after a dispute between a student and their school, that student will most likely still attend! In my work as an @EqualJusticeAm fellow, I have been learning how difficult it is to balance the needs of students with how much a school is willing to give. Further, it has shown me how important it is to have a legal advocate when dealing with special education matters.

The IEP meetings I have attended as an intern have been much more thorough and schools are open to finding creative solutions to meet the needs of their students. While teaching, when I advocated for my students, I was often met with hostility by my own coworkers. Being able to witness families empowered during these meetings has been wonderful. Many of the cases I support are limited advocacy, where we give advice for the parent to empower themselves. This level of support serves two important functions: (1) providing immediate support and (2) giving parents the tools to have a lasting working relationship with their child's school.

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**Update 4:** When thinking about what I'd like to cover in my fourth #EJAFellowUpdate, my experience as a disabled person working in this space came to the front of my mind. As a child, my parents had concerns about my development; so much so that my mom consulted my pediatrician when I was around 3 years old. This doctor told my mom that her concerns about me being autistic were misguided since "girls don't get autism." School was tough for me. While I thrived academically, I struggled with social communication and peer relationships, all of which impacted my mental health. However, since I was never a "problem child" and always the quiet one in class, I fell under the radar. Instead, I suffered in silence from a host of mental health issues, many of which were compounded by my undiagnosed neurodivergence. At 25 years old, after years of struggle, I received my official ASD diagnosis. While this diagnosis was not a magic wand, it has allowed me to begin navigating the world in a way that works for me.

During my time as an educator and as an @EqualJusticeAm fellow this summer, I have frequently encountered students who were either undiagnosed or misdiagnosed in school. A student's IEP often focuses on what's needed for the student to produce work but omits their social-emotional needs outside of behaviors that affect others. As I continue this work, I am eager to advocate for the systemic change needed to not only prepare



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students to perform in the classroom, but to ensure students who fall under the radar don't suffer in silence for a lifetime.

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**Update 5:** As I reflect on the work I've done this past summer, I continue to be thankful for the support of Equal Justice America, without which I could not have gotten this experience. In addition to getting a more comprehensive knowledge of special education law, I gained skills in (1) communicating with clients; (2) conducting legal research; (3) understanding juvenile justice and adult student educational justice; (4) drafting legal advice and (5) advocating for systemic change.

Client communication was something that I was nervous about, mostly because I wanted to be able to help everyone I came into contact with. As a teacher, this is something I struggled with; often dropping everything to help parents rather than equip them with the tools to advocate for themselves. By conducting client intakes and forming relationships with parents as they navigate their concerns, I was able to hone my communication skills.

My favorite class during my 1L year was legal research and writing, so I was thrilled to be able to further develop those skills in drafting memos for novel legal issues this summer. Special education law research is challenging because mediation is so common. Further, while researching issues of education in juvenile justice facilities, I was tasked with analyzing vague legislation that often neglects to include incarcerated students.

In my work supporting incarcerated students with disabilities in accessing quality education, I also learned a lot about the juvenile and adult criminal justice systems, notably the barriers for advocates to address client needs. In exploring these topics, I have found a new area of interest in the law.

All of the client interactions I had this summer included some kind of legal advice. I enjoyed being able to give parents the tools necessary to advocate not only now, but in the future.

Finally, I have a better understanding of what systemic change can look like within the scope of special education law. There are countless opportunities for systemic litigation to ensure that advocacy efforts reach all students, rather than just one individual. I look forward to exploring these possibilities further as I continue with Equip for Equality as an extern following this final EJA Fellow Update.