

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Road  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben:

I spent my summer internship at Equip for Equality and am very grateful to share my experiences as an Equal Justice America Fellow. At Equip for Equality, I worked within the Special Education Clinic. Many of my assignments this summer were related to EFE's Education Justice Project. This project provides legal assistance to students with disabilities who are court-involved, court-diverted, or at-risk of court involvement.

Since my start, I have had the opportunity to attend Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings, review student records, draft mitigation letters, assist with due process complaints, and so much more. During my third week of the internship, I got the chance to visit Juvenile Court and I observed in real-time how EFE attorneys collaborate with public defenders to explain the impact of a client's disability and make arguments for their release. Over the course of the summer, I saw various unique and powerful collaborations between EFE attorneys and other lawyers that were truly inspiring. As a former special education teacher, myself, I understand just how intersectional the legal needs of students with disabilities can be. Another important experience of my summer was a due process complaint regarding a student with autism who was not receiving the proper learning support from school. Once Equip for Equality became involved, the student's grandmother was able to better advocate for her grandson.

In June, I had a unique opportunity to witness Equip for Equality's community outreach. I accompanied another EFE attorney to participate in a community fair hosted by the City of Chicago Mayor's Office for People with Disabilities. Around 30 individuals visited the EFE table to learn more about our two main legal groups - the Special Education Clinic and the Civil Rights Team. In just a few weeks, I gained so much insight into the vast umbrella of work special education law attorneys handle daily. In July, I attended a mediation for a student who was unfairly expelled from school for an incident that was a direct result of his disability. During this meeting, EFE attorneys negotiated with the school district attorneys to secure an outcome for the client that would allow him to attend a new school without the expulsion on his record. I also began working on a case for a student who, due to housing insecurity, needed school transportation to attend his therapeutic day school. I am happy to report this student is back attending school and in a more stable housing situation than at the start of the summer. This experience allowed me to learn more about the intersection of education law and housing law.

In August, I began working directly on special education cases with an EFE attorney who works with the Redeploy program. The program, called Redeploy Illinois, has been active in Winnebago County since January 2014 and uses aggressive counseling, cognitive therapy, and crisis intervention to keep kids in school and out of trouble. Through my work with this program, I conducted thorough record reviews to understand the educational history and experiences of these youth. From there, I developed educational plans that detail ways in which EFE's special education advocacy might be beneficial for the youth. I also accompanied an EFE attorney to Rockford to attend one of these meetings. It was a tremendous environment to witness - probation officers, social workers, program managers, and Equip for Equality come together to discuss the successes and struggles they are seeing with students. Following one of my education plans, EFE offered legal representation to ensure that the school conducts a thorough and robust reevaluation of his learning needs so that his IEP can be revised to include increased academic, social-emotional, and transition/career supports that were missing from his last evaluation.

Interning with Equip for Equality this summer was the perfect way to enter my final year of law school. Without the support of Equal Justice America, my internship experience might not have been possible for me. As a first-generation student of color, I have consistently seen how public interest law spaces often lack racial and socio-economic diversity. Thanks to the support of the Equal Justice America fellowship award, I was able to pursue an internship that aligns with my past experiences and my future aspirations. Equip for Equality is a leader of education law in Illinois and the country, and I am honored that I have gotten the chance to launch my public interest career amongst such dedicated, driven, and passionate attorneys.

Best,  
Nneka Ugwu  
J.D. Candidate, 2024  
Loyola University Chicago School of Law