



EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

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EJA FELLOWSHIP RECIPIENT



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Final Reflection: This summer, I worked at the Education Law Center of Pennsylvania, located in Center City Philadelphia. As a Philadelphia resident for the last four years (and someone who plans to remain in Philly for the foreseeable future) I was grateful to have a chance to work on educational issues that would have an impact on the city that I call home. Before living in Philadelphia and beginning law school, I was a special education teacher in Los Angeles. That experience exposed me to the harsh realities faced by so many students in this country, especially those in marginalized communities. Working at the Education Law Center represented an opportunity to follow-through on the promises I made to my students to continue to advocate for their rights to access quality education no matter what.

I was already aware of ELC's work through a Local Government Law class that I took during my 2L Fall. There, we learned about ELC's historic victory in *William Penn School District et al. v. Pa. Dept. of Education et al.*, 294 A.3d 537, 962 (Pa. Commonw. Ct. 2023), in which the court ruled that education was a fundamental right under the Education Clause of PA's constitution. I knew that ELC would be a place where I could learn how to advocate for educational rights in a way that could have an immense impact on the landscape of the law.

During my time at ELC, my work was split fairly equally between three categories of matters: direct client services, policy advocacy, and litigation. Coming into the summer, I already knew that I planned to make my career in civil rights litigation, so I was most excited to get some more hands-on experience in the litigation process. I did not anticipate how much I would enjoy the direct client services work, and I am now looking for ways to incorporate that into my future career plans.

Each week, I was assigned 2-3 cases that came through ELC's legal intake hotline. I was responsible for conducting the initial intake interview via phone and following up with the client about the next steps for their case. Each intake interview lasted about an hour, during which I gathered the full facts of their case. I would then discuss the facts with my supervising attorney as well as any legal theories I had and what next steps I thought we should take. While I had already done similar work during my time as an advocate with the Custody and Protection Project at Penn (assisting pro se litigants in custody and protection from abuse matters), I really enjoyed the chance



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to use my background in education to achieve quick and useful resolutions for many of my clients at ELC.

In one instance, I helped a mother develop a plan to better advocate for her child with disabilities during her child's upcoming IEP meetings. I informed her about the laws governing IEPs, including her right to parent involvement and certain disclosures from the school. I provided suggested alterations to the IEP to address her concerns about her child's development and wellbeing and gave her various resources to use and share with fellow parents in similar situations.

Regarding parent resources, my direct client service work with ELC included a component not present in my previous client-facing experience: developing and improving ELC's bank of "fact sheets" and advocacy tools. ELC maintains a robust library of quick reference guides for parents on issues ranging from dealing with bullying to the rights of students experiencing homelessness and more. Having these resources available to share with parents was a great way to round out our advocacy. I was impressed by the all-hands-on-deck approach that ELC took to making sure the resources were up-to-date and useful to parents. Each attorney (and associate group of interns) at ELC was assigned a chunk of fact sheets to review for accuracy (i.e. if the law had changed) as well as to ensure that ELC was using contemporary, inclusive, and accessible language that was helpful to all types of parents and students. I spent many hours researching the current landscape of the law and checking each sheet against ELC's regularly updated language guide.

I also spent a significant amount of time developing a new advocacy tool for parents whose children were participating in Manifestation Determination Review meetings (MDRs). An MDR is required whenever a school proposes to "change the placement" of a child with a disability in response to a behavioral incident (e.g. suspension/expulsion) to determine whether the behavior at issue was a manifestation of the child's disability. The tool I created guided parents through what they could expect at their child's MDR, as well as what sort of information they should gather before attending the meeting. It reminded them that the team conducting the review was required to consider parent input and gave them a framework for developing input that would be influential. In my professional experience as a teacher and legal advocate, schools try their best to comply with the law and help children with significant needs, but they often fall short. Lack of staffing, funding, and information makes it challenging for schools to consistently provide students with everything they need for success. Parents are crucial in holding schools accountable and ensuring their children's legal rights are respected.

By empowering parents to advocate for their children, I feel that I accomplished my goal of making a meaningful impact on Philadelphia education. Each parent that stands up for their child gets us closer to schools implementing better practices that increase access for all children. EJA's support was valuable to me both for the financial security it provided, but also because of the validation I felt with EJA behind me. Committing to a public interest law career has meant facing hurdle after hurdle from day one. EJA's funding meant that I didn't have to do things like second guess joining my fellow interns for a lunch when we were in the office. It also was a potent reminder that this work is worthwhile and valued outside of my small circle. I am as excited as ever to embark on a public interest law career because of the experiences and support I have been so fortunate to have thus far.