

August 12, 2013

Dan Ruben  
Executive Director  
Equal Justice America  
13540 East Boundary Rd.  
Bldg II, Suite 204  
Midlothian, VA 23112

Dear Mr. Ruben,

I spent this summer, thanks to an EJA fellowship, working with the Public Interest Law Center of Philadelphia on a special education advocacy project. My purpose was to set the groundwork for a larger legislative advocacy project to take place over the next few years, of which I hope to remain a part.

The IDEA mandates that children with disabilities receive transition planning and services in high school to enable them to exit the public school system with the skills, resources, and preparation necessary to allow them to access all available opportunities for employment, post-secondary education, and independent living. Unfortunately, courts all across the United States enforce this mandate inconsistently, and often weakly. The Law Center is invested in shaping and advocating for legislative solutions to this under-enforcement, and committed to securing the best possible educational outcomes for children with disabilities.

I began my fellowship by researching the scope of the issue, which included meeting or speaking with local and national special education and disability rights activists. In Philadelphia particularly, the state of special education for high school students is often appalling--young people rarely receive the individualized services to which they are entitled, and as a result, employment and post-secondary education statistics are abysmal. I also researched and tracked proposed legislation that would alter the landscape for youth with disabilities, and met and spoke with federal legislative staff to discuss the Law Center's concerns and ideas for improvement. I learned how to draft statutes, and spent time carefully researching and trying to emulate the language of state education statutes that has proven enforceable in court and resulted in improved services for youth. My writing, and my knowledge of federal legislative process, has improved immensely.

I taught history for four years in the Bronx before coming to law school, and I chose to attend law school in the hopes of finding a way to improve the lives of the communities and children with whom I worked. The Law Center's project allowed me to contribute to exactly that--the IDEA is an incredible law, meant to ensure access to an equitable and inclusive education for all children. Sadly, many schools and districts are able to deny children with disabilities the services they desperately need to succeed as adults. Students with autism, in particular, often leave high school without a job or the hopes of one, without access to higher education, and without a continued entitlement to services they need. My project this summer allowed me to work with others in the disability rights community to explore legislative solutions to the problem, in the hopes of eventually helping countless children access the education to which they are entitled by law.

Before beginning this fellowship, I had never seriously contemplated legislative advocacy as a means for real change. However, in my work with the Law Center, I have gained a knowledge of systems advocacy, and an appreciation for how high impact litigation and legislative work, as well as direct client services, may lead to improved outcomes across a community. I was inspired not only by the work with which I was directly involved this summer, but also by the Law Center's other work spanning voting rights, racial inequity in education, land justice, and disability rights generally. I hope to continue working with the Law Center in the future, and am looking forward to my eventual career in public interest law more now than ever.

Sincerely,

Heather Crimmins  
University of Pennsylvania Law School, 2014