

The Education Law Center’s (ELC) mission is to ensure access to a quality public education for all children in Pennsylvania by focusing on the most underserved students, including children living in poverty, children of color, children with disabilities, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children experiencing homelessness, multilingual learners, LGBTQ and gender expansive youth, pregnant and parenting students, and children at the intersection of these identities. Throughout Pennsylvania and nationally, ELC is a known community resource and leader in public education advocacy. Over the past 47 years, our Pittsburgh and Philadelphia offices have worked to provide both immediate relief to individual students and advance systems-level reforms that benefit hundreds of thousands of underserved students throughout Pennsylvania. Our three priority areas are:

- 1) *Ensuring Equal Access to quality public schools*: ELC works to remove educational barriers through direct representation and advocacy and the provision of rights-based information, self-advocacy tools, and other resources.
- 2) *Advocating for Fair Education Funding*: ELC uses a multi-pronged approach to push for the changes needed to address Pennsylvania’s school funding crisis. We are currently engaged in a lawsuit against the state for failure to fund public education under the state constitution.
- 3) *Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*: ELC works to eliminate exclusionary discipline practices that disproportionately harm Black and Brown youth, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ and gender expansive youth, including a strong focus on supporting Black girls.

Our principal strategies for advancing each of our priority areas include direct representation, impact litigation, community engagement, policy advocacy at the local, state, and federal levels, and strategic communications. We aim both to help individual families and to create lasting systemic reforms to impact hundreds of thousands of students in Pennsylvania. For example, we operate the Education Helpline—providing information, referrals, legal consultation, and/or direct representation to help over 1,200 students annually. This is the only free legal service solely focused on helping students access a quality public education in Pennsylvania.

ELC supports and partners with community advocates, pushes for policy changes to make Pennsylvania schools welcoming and affirming places for all students, and advocates on behalf of students who are denied their educational rights. For example, we represent children like “TR,” a student with a disability who was deprived of a free appropriate public education when she was inappropriately placed in her school district’s cyber program as a response to misbehavior. The district failed to determine whether her behaviors were a manifestation of her disability and also failed to convene an IEP meeting to determine whether the cyber program was an appropriate school placement and to seek the parent’s consent. After ELC advocated on her behalf during multiple meetings with the school district, the school district agreed to welcome TR back into the general education classroom with her peers and with needed supports.

We also file systemic complaints to bring about larger reforms. For example, ELC has engaged in systemic advocacy to ensure that children with disabilities can access the services they need to thrive in school and to which they are legally entitled.

The disproportionate impact of the COVID-19 pandemic on school districts in communities that do not have access to socioeconomic privilege and in communities of color can in part be attributed to Pennsylvania's inadequate, inequitable, and unconstitutional funding of schools and to other systems that reinforce systemic racism, which deeply impact education quality and education access for students living in poverty and students of color. During the pandemic, severely underfunded school districts in Pennsylvania, which disproportionately serve Black and Latinx students, lacked adequate resources to ensure that students could access a quality education via remote or hybrid models. While other school districts were able to quickly reopen in person because they could ensure safe, ventilated spaces, underfunded districts had to remain largely virtual. ELC has remained steadfast in addressing these issues through direct representation and systemic and policy advocacy.

This has been an historic year for ELC. After seven years of work, our legal team has just concluded a four-month trial in Commonwealth Court in Harrisburg in our landmark fair funding litigation. *William Penn School District et al. v. PA Dept. of Ed. et al.*, challenges Pennsylvania's failure to provide a "thorough and efficient system of public education." The goals of our lawsuit are to have the court declare Pennsylvania's current school funding system unconstitutional and to order the state legislature to create and maintain a funding system that provides students with the resources they need to meet state academic standards, and that prepares them for life after graduation. We assembled a powerful case challenging a school funding system where the students who need the most get the least because of where they live. The case has generated extensive media coverage, bringing attention to the grave consequences of underfunded schools. We now await a decision and anticipate an appeal to Pennsylvania's Supreme Court by the losing party. More information can be found here: www.FundOurSchoolsPa.org.

While we advance this landmark litigation that could impact generations of students in Pennsylvania, we continue to focus on students' day-to-day access to public education. Our [2021 Back to School Guide](#) includes new publications on various education topics to help families successfully navigate the education system, and [new self-advocacy tools](#) that prioritize families' top concerns, which we learned about through our community engagement. Our free self-advocacy tools include fillable forms and templates that families can easily access and use, such as: Request for Attendance Record Correction; Request for Evaluation to Determine Eligibility for Special Education; Request for Translation Services; and others.

Thank you again for your interest in supporting the Education Law Center. If you have any questions about our work, or would like more information, please contact Deborah Gordon Klehr, Executive Director, at dklehr@elc-pa.org or 215-346-6920.