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## **Education Law Center Overview**

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The Education Law Center's (ELC) mission is to ensure access to a quality public education for all children in Pennsylvania. The principal strategies to achieve our mission include direct representation, impact litigation, community engagement, policy advocacy at local, state, and federal levels, and strategic communications. Over the past 48 years, ELC has been a known resource for parents, child-serving professionals, and advocates in Pennsylvania to call for right-based information and advice regarding public education matters. We are also a leader in public education advocacy for the policy changes we have helped secure alongside our local and statewide partners.

With offices in Philadelphia and Pittsburgh, we work statewide to provide both immediate relief to individual students and advance systems-level reforms that benefit thousands of underserved students, focusing on our three priority areas:

- 1) *Ensuring Equal Access to quality public schools*: ELC addresses real-time educational barriers and systemic concerns impacting the educational experiences of underserved student populations. We focus on improving education access for children living in poverty, children with disabilities, children of color, children in the foster care and juvenile justice systems, children experiencing homelessness, linguistically and culturally diverse students and their families, LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth, and children at the intersection of multiple underserved identities, ages 0-21. Our Education Helpline is the only free legal service solely focused on helping students access a quality public education in Pennsylvania, providing information, advice, referrals, legal consultation, and/or direct representation. We also produce publications and conduct trainings to help parents, caregivers, and child-serving professionals advocate on behalf of the children in their care.
- 2) *Advocating for Fair Education Funding*: ELC works with statewide and local partners to push for the changes needed to address Pennsylvania's school funding crisis. We filed a lawsuit against the Commonwealth nearly a decade ago for failure to fund public education under the state constitution. We won this case in a decisive victory in Commonwealth Court, in an order and opinion finding education is a fundamental right and deeming the state's current funding system unconstitutional and discriminatory. Now, we are focusing on a remedy. Our litigation is complemented by policy advocacy, including budget advocacy with our PA Schools Work partners, as well as educating policymakers on the state's education funding system, our lawsuit, and needed funding increases to make sure the state is adequately and equitably funding public education.
- 3) *Dismantling the School-to-Prison Pipeline*: ELC aims to end school pushout by eliminating exclusionary discipline policies that disproportionately harm Black and Brown youth, students with disabilities, and LGBTQ+ and gender expansive youth, with a focus on advancing the rights of Black girls. In addition to confronting discriminatory policies, we advocate for schools to adopt research-based interventions that will improve school climates and build inclusive, antiracist, and affirming schools. In the juvenile justice system, we aim to ensure that children can access the full range of public education programs, in part by advocating for the structures necessary to improve oversight of education in residential facilities. We also provide individual representation when students are inappropriately excluded from the classroom without due process.

**Ensuring that all of Pennsylvania's children have equal access to a quality public education.**

## IMPACT

ELC removes educational barriers at the intersection of race, gender, and disability, including enrollment and credit transfer barriers, gaps in education services, and other real-time barriers, so that all students can thrive in school. Through the Helpline, we provide approximately 875-900 families and child-serving professionals with information, advice, and referral services tailored to their questions and needs, with most also receiving legal consultation to advocate for a child's rights.

If a family needs more extensive services, we may provide further advocacy through direct representation to secure relief for the student and/or systemic remedies when an issue may impact multiple students. As an example of the outcomes of direct representation, ELC recently secured a robust settlement proposal on behalf of two elementary siblings, both Black girls, who were denied a free appropriate public education at the charter school they attended. Prior to ELC's intervention, neither child was appropriately identified as needing an Individualized Education Program (IEP), despite experiencing significant academic barriers and behavioral challenges at school. As a result of the settlement agreement we reached, each child will receive significant compensatory education awards, have necessary services included in their IEPs, and be afforded an Independent Educational Evaluation provided by an outside school psychologist to verify that the supports currently in the children's IEPs will continue to fully meet their needs. In addition to important individual relief, the settlement agreement will require the charter school to educate staff about the harmful effects that adultification bias has on Black girls, and the way this bias results in discrimination.

ELC's systemic advocacy includes participating in stakeholder groups to discuss systemic issues and raise the community's concerns to education agencies. We recommend solutions to education agencies through meetings, testimony, calls, and letters. As a last resort, we file complaints aiming for an investigation and corrective action, including relief for all impacted students and reform measures. For example, during the pandemic, we received calls to the Helpline from families of children with disabilities in Philadelphia preschools who were experiencing gaps in required educational services. We filed a complaint with the state's Office of Child Development and Early Learning to address service disruptions and deprivations of a quality education caused by Philadelphia's Preschool Early Intervention provider. After the office's investigation found that 626 children did not receive services for at least 90 days, the provider was ordered to provide compensatory services, or make-up services, to all eligible young children who experienced service gaps. ELC's direct representation and systemic advocacy in this case improved access to critical early learning opportunities for hundreds of children.

In 2022 and 2023, we saw monumental wins for students across Pennsylvania as a result of ELC's impact litigation and policy advocacy. In January 2022, Act 1 of 2022 – a result of 10 years of advocacy by ELC and youth partners – was signed into law to remedy credit transfer and graduation barriers experienced by children in the juvenile justice or foster care systems or experiencing homelessness, who go through one or more school changes in a year. In addition, after years of working to address one of the largest structural barriers to education equity, the state's unconstitutional funding scheme in which low wealth communities and Black and Brown families suffer the most, we finally received a historic victory from Commonwealth Court, declaring the system unconstitutional and ordering the legislature to fix the funding scheme. Meanwhile, we had a significant development in our class action lawsuit challenging the education and treatment of students who attended the now closed juvenile justice facility Glen Mills Schools, when we reached a \$3 million settlement agreement with one of four defendants in the case.

Learn more: [www.elc-pa.org](http://www.elc-pa.org)