

A COOL(EY) WIN FOR ZEKE AND HIS EDUCATION

Window. Teacher. Textbook. Window. Teacher. Textbook. Tiny Zeke's eyes darted around his classroom as he struggled—and failed—to concentrate.

Zeke was diagnosed with a disability and ADHD years before. Though he started kindergarten on track, by 3rd grade his speech impairments made it difficult for his teachers to understand him. Zeke was also acting out and often sent home or to the “computer room” instead of staying in class, learning.

Despite Zeke's challenges, his school refused to conduct a language, speech or behavioral evaluation.

Cooley attorneys Megan Browdie and Julia Renehan met Zeke's mom, Rachel Higgins, through CLC's pro bono program and joined her fight for Zeke's education.

“Our client raised all of these issues with the educators for years and was doing everything she could,” Browdie remembers. “The school was pushing Zeke out of the classroom anyway. He wasn't learning, his grades were dropping.”

Browdie and Renehan partnered to represent Ms. Higgins and ensure that Zeke was getting the education he deserved.

While the lawyer duo had already handled custody and child welfare pro bono cases, this was their first education case. CLC attorney and pro bono mentor D.D. Davis counseled the team along the way.

“Our robust mentorship program includes trainings, an overview on working with clients, practice kits and of course a CLC mentor,” Davis shares. “I've mentored everyone from first year attorneys to partners. What many lawyers don't realize is that they don't need any experience with family or education law to succeed. We offer beginner, intermediate and advanced cases.”

The Cooley attorneys wasted no time getting started. They knew that being sent home not only kept Zeke from learning, it was also illegal—thanks to a law CLC helped draft and get passed.

The team ensured the school stopped the unofficial suspensions.

The lawyers then focused on securing an up-to-date individualized education program (IEP) for Zeke. When the school again refused to provide the evaluations, Browdie and Renehan obtained a comprehensive assessment—one that demonstrated Zeke's language disorder, ADHD, and need for a strong education plan.

“D.D. was a great mentor to us,” Renehan recalls. “Any time we had a strategic question, we reached out. We called, we emailed, we texted. She pointed us toward the right resources, read all of our pleadings and more.”

When it became clear that Zeke needed to transfer schools, the Cooley team helped Ms. Higgins navigate DC's school lottery system. Now Zeke is at a school that meets his educational needs, and he's thriving.

Renehan and Browdie didn't stop there. Zeke had lost years of education. The two filed a complaint against DCPS seeking compensatory education. In the settlement, Zeke was offered nearly 140 mentoring and tutoring hours.

“DCPS failed this little boy,” Renehan said. “When I last spoke with Ms. Higgins, she shared how well things were going at his new school with the right services. His report card has already improved. He's staying in school and finally learning.”

Zeke is no longer overwhelmed or losing critical class time, thanks to the Cooley team.

Making sure children like Zeke are given a chance to thrive is what our pro bono program is all about.



Cooley attorneys Julia Renehan (left) and Megan Browdie (right).

Children's Law Center works hard to protect our clients' confidentiality. The clients' names have been changed. All other details are true.