

From the Classroom to the Courtroom

My legal career began in the hallways of two public high schools in Brooklyn, New York. I coordinated a community-based program for high school seniors. My students had fallen through the cracks. They had never left Brooklyn - even to visit Manhattan. They were lost, invisible inner-city youth. I observed teachers who had given up. I saw squalor first-hand - rats in classrooms, exposed asbestos walls, minimal to no classroom lighting, crack viles and needles in the hallways, graffiti covering almost any surface, and raid cages in the stairwells. I lived through two race riots. One required me to lock my office and have my kids crouch behind my desk.

When I was in high school, the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) was scored on two 800-point scales. We all knew that, if you signed your name to the test, you would earn a 200-point score on each scale. I never understood why 900 was the national combined average. After working at Erasmus Hall and Eastern District, I learned why. The high school SAT combined average for these schools was 500 and 540, respectively.

Everything about this time in my life inspired me. It created pain; and from pain, it created unwavering commitment. I was 23-years-old; straight out of graduate school.

These students had never experienced an adult who cared. From the moment I met them, I loved my kids. They were all so trusting and open. They were bright, articulate, and inquisitive. They wanted to be successful in school. In the early morning, evening, and weekend hours when I made home visits, we'd talk about their families, their days, their secrets, their aspirations. Over time, I began to realize how broken the education system really was. I saw college students in front of me; and yet, there



was still so much standing in their way. Nevertheless, I was determined to make a difference; and I did make a difference - sending students to colleges near and far.

I remember when my students graduated. The ceremony was at Brooklyn College. My kids graduated; most with places to go. Some with undefined futures. I cannot describe my feelings. I was present and aware of the enormity of this day. That night, one of my students had a

house party. I was invited. My kids wouldn't let me walk from the subway station alone. (They never did.) Two of my closest waited for me and walked me to the tenement building. When we arrived at the party, the music was blaring; it was dark; and kids were already dancing. The young women were "washing windows" - that's what the dance move was called back then. I sat in a chair in the dark watching them. All I could do was cry.

After only one year, my life was changed forever. My charge became clear. I had to make a difference in the lives of more than just one kid at a time. I didn't know about education law; however, after living through two highly public, televised riots, I saw that the lawyers were front and center. I did well enough on the LSAT and was admitted to law school.

When I finished law school in the early 1990s, jobs were scarce. To get my feet wet, I clerked with the Los Angeles Unified School District Office of General Counsel. After a short stint with an education law firm, I returned to LA Unified as their first special education attorney. I was green. I didn't know the area of law. I just knew that I wanted to make a difference. My time at LA Unified was electrifying. I was in the trenches; and I learned the practice of special education law quickly.

Most people are surprised when I tell them that the body of education law is seemingly endless. And, as I have progressed through my career, I have come to understand that this is so because education law transcends just the law. Today, education and law are converging. Education law is invariably entwined with educational policy - from what happens in the classroom to what happens in the boardroom.

About a little over three years ago, my partners and I founded Fagen Friedman & Fulfroft LLP - an education law firm with an express mission to assist school districts to achieve their missions. Our clients are about kids, families, and communities. So, we're about the same. I am proud, thankful, and blessed to represent public education because it is one of the most important institutions in American society. It is a passion; and I make a difference.



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