



# SCHOOL JUSTICE PROJECT

Access to Justice. Access to Education.

## 2020 Metrics

### *Client Demographics*

The average age of SJP clients when beginning representation is 19 years old. SJP clients are Black (97%) or Latinx (3%). 89% of clients identify as male and 11% identify as female. 100% of clients are eligible for free legal representation, thus meeting the court indigency requirements. Ward 8 has the largest SJP client representation (31%), followed by clients experiencing homelessness (17%). About 25% of clients are from Wards 7 and 5.

We have received nearly 300 referrals since opening doors and have represented approximately 190 individual clients. Referrals come from a variety of sources, though the majority come from defense attorneys (30%) and clients and former clients (25%). About 8% of our cases come from judicial court appointments. Other referrals come from civil legal service providers, education attorneys, community-based organizations, and social workers.

### *Education and Employment*

In 2020, 83% of SJP clients were enrolled in an education program, including 3 new clients who had dropped out of high school prior to working with SJP. 88% of clients released from incarceration in 2020 re-enrolled in school within 60 days of release.

In 2020, SJP attorneys added 23.5 lost credits and 232 lost hours of community service to clients' transcripts.

81% of SJP clients were connected to an enrichment activity during their first year working with SJP. and 72% of SJP clients were connected to a social service during their first year working with SJP. Of those able, 53% of SJP clients were employed after working with SJP for a year.

### *Empowerment, Leadership, and Community*

SJP's model aims to promote empowerment and self-advocacy. 84% of SJP clients reported increased empowerment, as measured by self-expressions of feeling comfortable speaking at meetings and initiating ways for their individual voice to be heard. Clients also demonstrated increased initiative, undertaking major tasks such as securing vital documents, enrolling in school, or touring programs without an attorney for the first time. 94% of SJP clients demonstrated increased knowledge or understanding of education rights. 51% of clients began showing civic engagement via voter registration, community service participation, or initiation of efforts to obtain vital documents and city services.

### *Justice and Court Outcomes*

In 2020, SJP's education advocacy during sentencing and disposition hearings resulted in mitigation in 100% of cases. SJP successfully used education arguments to secure release to the community or to keep clients in the community in 83% of hearings where detention was at issue.

### *Direct Representation Program*

In 2020, SJP received 24 referrals and opened 21 new cases. SJP attorneys participated in 460 client-related meetings in 2020, including school meetings, meetings with agency personnel, and meetings with community-based providers, and advocated for clients during 46 court hearings.

SJP's day-to-day work looks drastically different with the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, but the crux of our work remains the same, and we continue to represent our clients as zealously as ever. SJP exists because schools do not provide equitable access to special education services. The pandemic has only underscored this and has illustrated the need for creative lawyering to ensure that young people can access education and support remotely. With the closures of schools, District agencies, courts, service providers, and facilities/jails, we are no longer spending our days visiting our clients, attending school meetings, and assisting our clients in-person. But, we have adapted to the new virtual world. Initially, we focused our efforts on ensuring that our clients had access to food and communication. We worked diligently to get our clients access to computers and the internet so that they could participate in distance learning. Now, we are shifting our focus to improving the quality and quantity of the virtual educational services that our clients are receiving. This has included filing multiple due process complaints to ensure that students who are incarcerated are receiving special education and related services during the pandemic.

Through federal litigation, SJP secured for a long-time client relief including tuition to a vocational program, tutoring, job coaching, books and supplies, and a vocational assessment. After spending two years without any education, SJP's client is looking forward to pursuing his post-secondary goals.

### *Systemic Advocacy and Policy Program*

SJP continues to advocate for systems reforms to DC's education system and criminal legal system. This year, SJP staff members testified multiple times in front of DC Council, advocating for passage of legislation. Specific testimony focused on support for legislation that would ensure young people who transition in and out of District facility would receive full academic credit for the class work they complete. Testimony also focused on the lack of education for students incarcerated during the COVID-19 pandemic. SJP worked in coalition to pass the Second Look Amendment Act that allows for young people who entered the adult criminal legal system to have a second chance at resentencing based on demonstration of rehabilitation.

SJP is part of a variety of coalitions or collaboratives: Thrive Under 25, Every Student Every Day, Youth Justice Project, Special Education Attorney Roundtable, Special Education Advocacy Coalition, Secondary Transition Community of Practice, Interagency Council on Homelessness, DC Family Court Training Committee, DC Superior Court's Juvenile Justice Subcommittee of the Court Education Work Group, and the Students in the Care of DC COVID-19 Working Group. SJP attorneys serve as co-chairs for 4 of those coalitions, including the Juvenile Justice Subcommittee of the Court Education Work Group.

### *Community Outreach & Legal Trainings Program*

SJP set up a monthly Education Legal Intake Clinic with Covenant House in February 2020. Though the in-person clinic was put on hold due to the pandemic, we are working on ways to communicate the same information with young people in the new virtual setting. During 2020, SJP staff conducted seven legal trainings in both DC and in Louisville, Kentucky, where we had been

providing some technical assistance and training. We also conducted three virtual trainings covering the changing education landscape due to the pandemic.