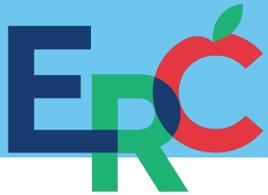


**Education  
Rights  
Council**

Legal Services & Solutions  
for Students & Families

**2018-2019** ANNUAL REPORT



## Board of Directors

Debora Wisneski, *Chair*  
David Pedersen, *Secretary & Treasurer*  
George Achola  
Denise Gehringer  
Christine Tran  
Katie Weitz



## Our Mission

Through advocacy, representation and community collaboration, ERC closes the access-to-justice gap and decreases the school-to-prison pipeline for Nebraska's under-resourced PK-12 public school children and families.

## Our Mission will be fulfilled when:

- Every family knows their rights and how to advocate for them.
- Every teacher and social worker recognizes when services are needed and knows how to appropriately obtain them.
- Every lay-advocate knows how to help families through special education processes and student discipline matters.
- Every lawyer recognizes her client's educational rights and knows how to incorporate them into whatever case is before her.
- Every judge knows when education representation for a child is necessary and appoints that representation.

## Dear Friends

What a year this has been! In the fall of 2017, Education Rights Counsel opened its doors with you, your family and friends, and all our children in mind.

Since our inception, we have had the honor and privilege of assisting many low-income families across the state, creating pathways for Nebraska public PK-12 children to obtain educational services. Our educational system can be difficult to navigate. Many children become marginalized or find their voices silenced when needed legal help is financially inaccessible. We have helped Nebraska families understand their rights, and have provided the means for claiming them.

It has been our joy in 2018-2019 also to work with educators, the advocacy community, the legal community, and our state legislators, collaborating to educate and present accurate information on student rights and responsibilities.

Throughout 2018-2019, you are sustaining our mission. Thanks to you, Education Rights Counsel is becoming a trusted and familiar organization, bridging the divides between families, school districts, and support agencies. Together, we have worked across Nebraska to create better understanding and more equitable access to advocacy.

In 2018, our volunteer Board of Directors also affirmed Education Rights Counsel's unwavering commitment to ethics, accountability, transparency and organizational effectiveness through its adoption of the Non-Profit Association of the Midland's Guidelines & Principles.

We thank our Board, staff and all of you for your resiliency, your interest, and your extraordinary efforts. You have helped us build our capacity for representation, training, and growing a community of advocates who work for our most vulnerable children.

Looking toward 2020 and beyond, we will educate more families, lay advocates, lawyers and stakeholders on education law and student's rights. We will increase the number of cases we undertake while we continue building bridges across Nebraska's social justice and educational communities.

You are directly responsible for helping us with so many individual success stories. You give us the means to make sure families have someone by their side. Thank you so much for your continued support.

With gratitude,



Debora Wisneski  
Chair, Board of Directors



Lauren Micek Vargas  
Executive Director

## Our Story

Education Rights Counsel was created from a desire to make education better for students and families and families.

Co-founders, Lauren Micek Vargas & Elizabeth Eynon-Kokrda, each with extensive experience working with youth and education, faced daily dilemmas in their professional work. They were seeing hundreds of children without any supports to access educational services they had a right to under law. They also determined that no non-profit in Nebraska focused specifically on serving under resourced public PK-12 school kids. This means that every day, a child with a disability may be struggling, or a youth in the juvenile justice system is being left out of the schooling that can change her trajectory. In fact, in Nebraska, nearly 47% of students live in low-income families and more than 50% of Nebraska children with special needs live in poverty. Equally troubling is that Nebraska has a higher rate of suspensions and expulsions than average across the United States, and this discipline arc has a disparate impact on children of color and children with special needs.

While access to public PK-12 education is a legal right, the laws governing education are nuanced, layered and complex. Difficulties with access are exacerbated when parents do not have the resources to speak confidently about what they think is best for their children. Parents and children who don't accurately and adequately understand the educational system are far more likely to go without services, be removed from school and be denied legal rights. The resulting harm can last a lifetime.

Lauren and Elizabeth reached out to community advocates, educators, lawyers, judges, and others about the problem. It quickly became clear that there is an extensive knowledge gap in Nebraska about educational rights and responsibilities across all communities, neighbors and stakeholders. And so Education Rights Counsel came into being.

We began with the basic premise that under-resourced families requiring special education support or facing student discipline charges needed assistance sorting through the nuanced, layered and complex laws governing educational access.

Over the last 18 months, we have grown in our understanding that equity under the law requires systemic change for Nebraska schools and families. Our programs adjusted to encompass:

### Individual Advocacy & Representation



Affording advocacy and legal representation in limited engagements for low-income public school families needing help with special education and student discipline

### Research & Support



Obtaining data, and informing the public, elected officials, and other community organizations about the access-to-justice gap in Nebraska and its impact on Nebraska students

### Education for Families



Providing interactive programming to teach special education and student discipline rights, and providing community education to collaborators to effectively advocate for children and families in the educational context

### Community Collaboration



Working with educational entities and existing social services to create and connect families to appropriate supports

### Consulting Services



Offering legal services to public and private entities, lawyers, and non-counsel advocates who are representing or working with low-income families involved in special education and student discipline procedures

## Meet the Team

### Board of Directors



Dr. Debora Wisneski, Chair



David Pedersen, JD  
Secretary & Treasurer



Christine Tran, DNP-APRN-  
NP



Denise Gehringer



George Achola, JD



Katie Weitz, PhD

### Leadership Team



Lauren Micek Vargas,  
Executive Director



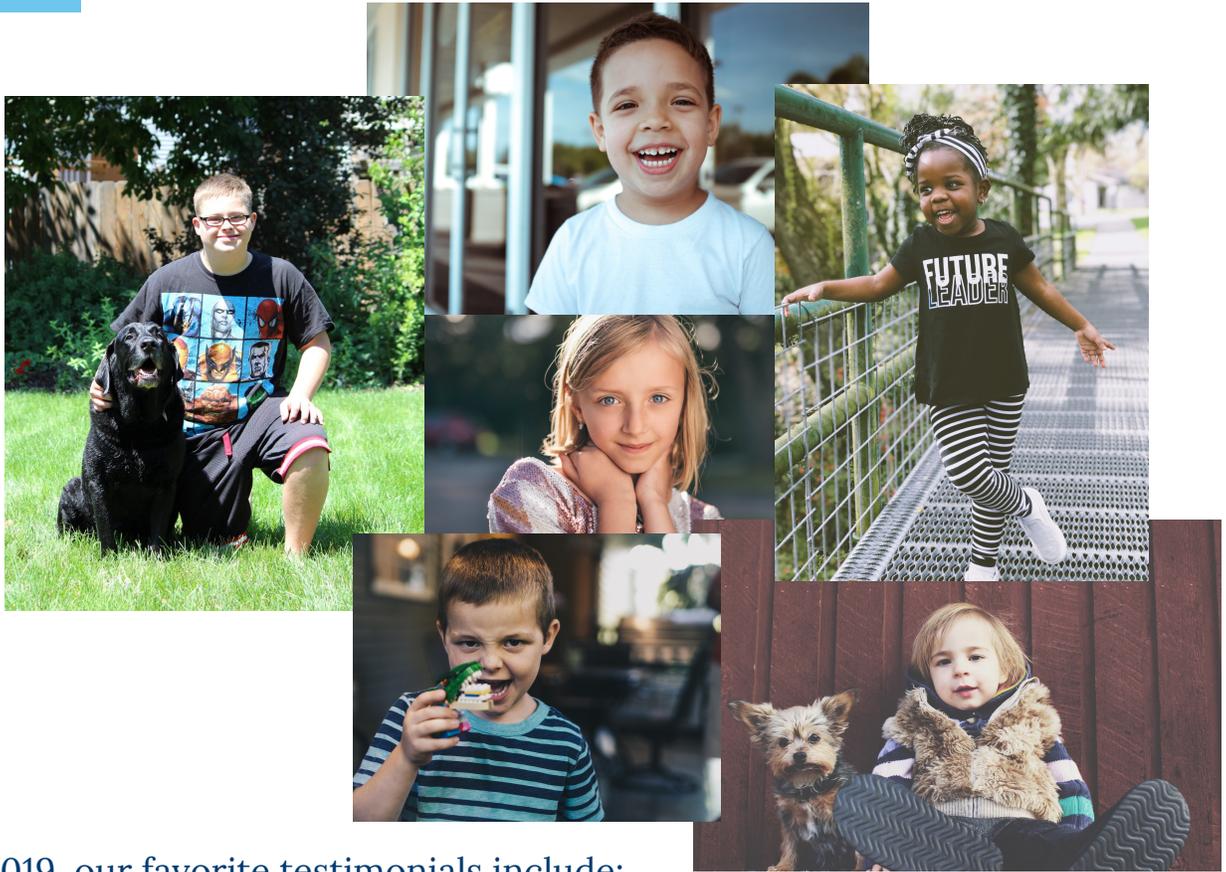
Elizabeth Eynon-Kokrda,  
Managing Attorney



Amy Bonn, Attorney

# People

Representing children is beyond rewarding.



In 2018-2019, our favorite testimonials include:

"Before, we felt ignored. Because of your participation, the school was finally willing to write a formal IEP."



"We've been able to get rid of meds for anxiety! We no longer medicate [our son] to be able to go to school...I am just astounded at how successful we have ended up. You were ...very instrumental...in getting the district to realize he needed help! THANK YOU!"

We are so happy to be a part of your community and share our daughter's creativity with you.

thank you  
thank you  
thank you

## Projects 2018-19



Working in conjunction with UNO's School of Social Work to infuse an understanding of children's educational rights and opportunities for those who work daily with families, schools, and kids.

### Disability Rights Nebraska

Protection and Advocacy for People with Disabilities



Collaborating with Disability Rights Nebraska through a joint grant from Nebraska Civic Engagement Table to offer forums to families, lay advocates and lawyers to expand civic discourse around the rights of children with special needs



Nebraska Civic Engagement Table

Assisting within the juvenile courts to help assure all those representing students have access to the information they need concerning student education.

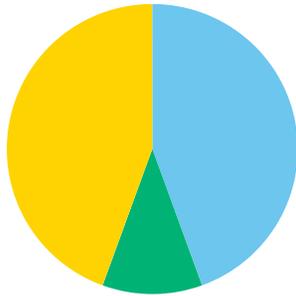


Also providing facilitation to MPS Clarke Community Initiative to develop an autism screening protocol, and contracting with Little Leaf to develop self-advocacy skills for parents and families.

## 2018 Advocacy Statistics

ERC proudly served over 50 individuals and families in 2018

### Location

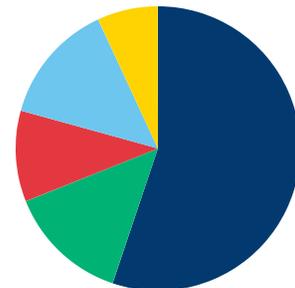


● Omaha ● Lincoln  
● Greater Nebraska

In 2018, the number of families served in Omaha and west of Lincoln represented the majority of our clients.

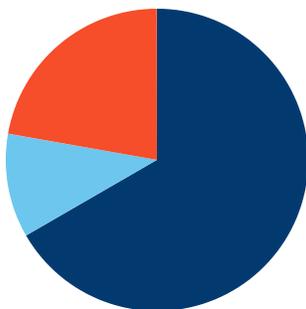
The majority of our time was spent representing children & families.

### Programs



● Individual Representation  
● Education for Families  
● Research & Support  
● Community Collaboration  
● Consulting Services

### Individual Representation

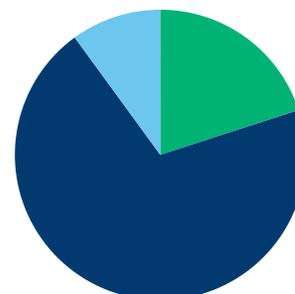


● Special Education  
● Student Discipline ● Both Categories

Nearly 80% of student representation involved special education services.

The majority of families served had incomes of less than 150% of the federal poverty level.

### Family Income



● <100% ● 100-150% ● 150-200%



## INDIVIDUAL DONORS

Carolyn Owen Anderson  
Amy Bonn  
Mimi Boswell  
Danielle Conrad  
Sandra Day  
Cecilia Dimasi  
John & Pam Dunning  
Mary Dvorak  
Marian Fey  
Hannah Frey  
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Anthony Vargas  
Lidia Vargas  
Kate & Roger Weitz  
Katie Weitz  
Debora Wisneski  
Aron Wisneski  
Kim Yeager  
Callie Williams Yrkoski

## FINANCIALS

### Education Rights Counsel

#### PROFIT AND LOSS

January - December 2018

	TOTAL
Income	
Client Fee	1,400.00
Client Retainer	195.00
Donation	8,929.35
Grant Funds	15,000.00
In-kind Revenue	51,112.00
<b>Total Income</b>	<b>\$76,636.35</b>
GROSS PROFIT	<b>\$76,636.35</b>
Expenses	
Advertising & Marketing	12,216.24
Client Representation	14,378.67
Contract Service - Accounting	341.25
Contract Service - General Counsel	15,066.67
Contract Service - Web	119.88
Insurance	1,864.90
Interest Paid	0.01
Office Supplies & Software	761.26
Other Business Expenses	634.00
Payroll Expenses	10,666.66
<b>Total Expenses</b>	<b>\$56,049.54</b>
NET OPERATING INCOME	<b>\$20,586.81</b>
NET INCOME	<b>\$20,586.81</b>

## PARTNERS

The Weitz Family Foundation  
Disability Rights Nebraska  
Nebraska Civic Engagement Table  
MPS Clarke Community Initiative  
Little Leaf



## THANK YOU

Your gifts directly and positively impact the lives of Nebraska's most vulnerable children. We are forever grateful.



## Support Education Rights Counsel

Your contribution helps us provide vital programs and services to students, families and our community

 [DONATE NOW](#)



Education Rights Counsel is a 501(c)(3) Public Charity

YOUR CONTRIBUTION IS TAX DEDUCTIBLE

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