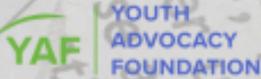


The Advocate

A YAF & EdLaw Newsletter

FY2026, 2nd Quarter
(October - December 2025)



Hello YAF friends and supporters -

Happy New Year! In our 2Q Newsletter, we look back at the last quarter of calendar year 2025. Much was accomplished that we are happy to share with you. As we look forward to the second half of our fiscal year, we are cognizant of the challenges facing our clients, especially those who are from families who have immigrated to this country. This year will see us celebrate 25 years of standing up with students. We hope you will consider joining us at our annual event on May 15th from 5:30 to 9 pm (see YAF Happenings below for more details). And that you will join us in cheering on our 5-person Boston Marathon team thanks to the generosity of the B.A.A. Charitable Program.

Stay warm!
Sincerely,

Duci Goncalves
Chair of the Board

Marlies Spanjaard
YAF President & CEO

Michele Scavongelli
YAF Executive Director

Initiative Updates

[Reflecting on Identity and Authenticity in Client Advocacy](#)

On December 23, 2025, Roxbury PDD Attorney-in-Charge Cristina Rodrigues invited **EdLaw Social Service Advocate, Richie Torres**, to lead a one-hour training for newly appointed PDD attorneys. The session focused on a critical theme: the role of identity and authenticity in building meaningful relationships with clients. The discussion explored thought-provoking questions, such as:

1. How can attorneys remain authentic while appropriately decentering themselves in client advocacy?

2. Is it ever appropriate to conceal aspects of one's identity—and if so, what impact might that have on the attorney-client relationship?
3. In what ways do privilege and power dynamics influence representation, and how can attorneys leverage privilege to strengthen trust and advocacy?

These questions served as the foundation for a reflective conversation centered on honesty and authenticity—particularly when working with emerging adult clients. Richie shared insights from a recent case in collaboration with Cristina, highlighting how his identity informs and strengthens his advocacy efforts. This exchange underscored the importance of self-awareness and intentionality in fostering trust and achieving equitable outcomes for clients.



[YAF V.O.I.C.E.S.](#) [Voices of Impacted Communities Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline](#)

The VOICES program takes a break during the summer months but internal team met recently to discuss the program's future direction. They will reconvene in January with comprehensive data and outcomes from the previous cohort in order to identify opportunities for improvement and areas of success to build upon. Stay tuned—exciting developments are on the horizon!

[Learn More About V.O.I.C.E.S.](#)

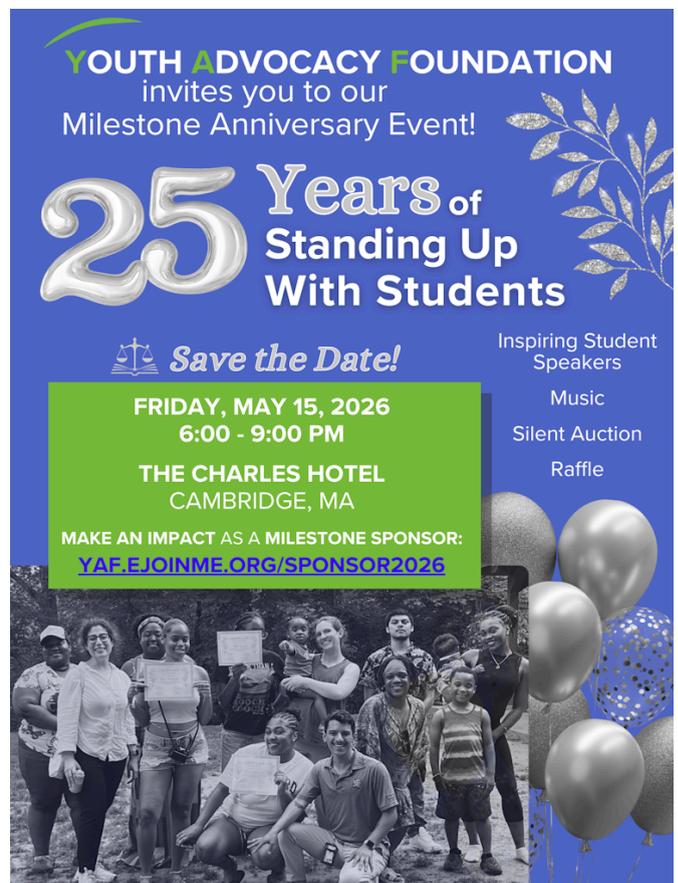
YAF Happenings

**The Youth Advocacy Foundation's 25th Silver Anniversary
Spring Celebration is Coming!**

In late fall, we upgraded our internal platform to better streamline our administrative work, an important step for a small nonprofit like YAF, as it helps ensure more of our resources stay focused on the students and families we serve.

As part of that upgrade, you'll notice a brand-new event website for our 25th Anniversary Celebration, happening on May 15th this year. The new site is sleeker, easier to navigate, and designed to make your experience even better.

Check it out at bit.ly/YAF25Years and while you're there, be sure to secure your event tickets and sponsorships. We can't wait to celebrate 25 years of impact with you!



YOUTH ADVOCACY FOUNDATION
invites you to our
Milestone Anniversary Event!

25 Years of Standing Up With Students

Save the Date!

FRIDAY, MAY 15, 2026
6:00 - 9:00 PM

THE CHARLES HOTEL
CAMBRIDGE, MA

MAKE AN IMPACT AS A MILESTONE SPONSOR:
YAF.EJOINME.ORG/SPONSOR2026

Inspiring Student Speakers
Music
Silent Auction
Raffle

The poster features a group photo of diverse young people and adults, some holding a sign, set against a blue background with silver and gold balloons and a laurel wreath.

Visit Our NEW Event Website!



BANK OF AMERICA BOSTON MARATHON[®] CHARITY PROGRAM

Introducing TeamYAF 2026!

We're excited to introduce the five incredible runners who are going the distance this year in support of Youth Advocacy Foundation (YAF). Each athlete has committed to the challenge of 26.2 miles while raising critical funds to help YAF stand beside young people, support families, and advocate for equitable access to education. Their dedication, heart, and belief in our mission fuel every step of their journey and we're proud to share a little more about each of them below. As you read their stories, we invite you to follow their progress and consider supporting their individual fundraising efforts here: <https://www.givengain.com/campaign/teamyaf2026>

Andrew Peppe



Andrew is running the 2026 Boston Marathon as part of the official Bank of America Charity program because of his desire to support the Youth Advocacy Foundation (YAF). He believes in the work YAF does in empowering young people reach their full potential and overcome barriers.

"By supporting my fundraising efforts, you're not just cheering me on, you're helping to create opportunities for youth advocacy and empowerment. Every dollar counts and will go directly towards programs that make a difference in the lives of young individuals!" ~ Andrew

Becca Keddy



April 20th, 2026 will be Becca Keddy's 7th Boston Marathon and her 5th with YAF and she is deeply excited. Becca is proud to lace up and support YAF because she feels very strongly about the importance of our work in advocating for equal access to justice and opportunity in education for youth in Massachusetts.

"I can't imagine an April in Boston without running. Every year, I'm reminded how much your love and encouragement fuel me — the cheers on Marathon Monday, the poster cutouts of my cats (still my favorites!), and the generosity so many of you have shown through donations. Knowing I'll see familiar faces on the course — and that you're behind me — keeps me going, mile after mile, and up and over the dreaded Newton hills. Completing any marathon isn't something I do alone. It's a shared effort powered by your kindness, energy, and belief in me. So once again this year, I'm asking for your support — for me, for the kids YAF serves, and for the spirit of Boston that connects us all." ~ Becca

Cecelia Spiers



As a product of Massachusetts public schooling, Cecelia is thrilled and excited to participate in the marathon this year while raising funds for YAF. More specifically, Cecelia is excited to be representing YAF because she has experienced first hand the importance of a safe, supportive school environment for all students. Cecelia believes that at YAF, the work we do is imperative to achieving a just educational landscape in Massachusetts schools. Although she doesn't get to represent MA youth in her own legal work, she is excited to contribute to cause that directly supports them.

"Being able to learn without fear of arrest and feel a sense of belonging is fundamental to children's development, and YAF's mission gets at the heart of that: making sure all kids can access their education." ~ Cecelia

Ivana Wijedasa



"I was scared. They threatened to jump me."

These are the words that Ivana heard from a 12 year old who was suspended for bringing a hammer to school. Not only is Ivana running 26 miles to ring in her 26th birthday, she is also doing this to support YAF on their work in providing legal intakes, social support, and programs that provide food, housing and clothing for their youth clients.

"Your donation will help the Youth Advocacy Foundation fund these initiatives. Together we can create a world where children are treated as children and remain in schools not prisons." ~ Ivana

Juliette Barney



Following in the footsteps of her grandfather and achieving one of her biggest dreams, Juliette will be running the 130th Boston Marathon this April. She will be representing the Youth Advocacy Foundation (YAF) in order to raise funds and awareness about the work we do in protecting and empowering young people in Massachusetts who face systemic barriers and hardships in school.

“For me, each mile represents more than just training or endurance—it’s a commitment to creating opportunity, fairness, and hope for the next generation.” ~ Juliette

If you missed these introductions earlier because you’re not following us on social media, please do!

You can find us at:

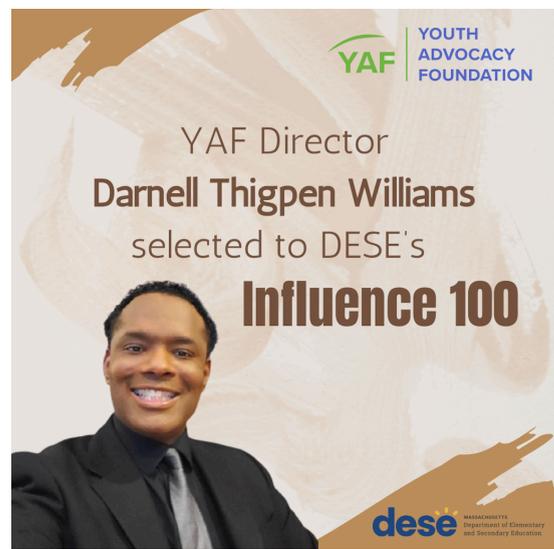
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- Bluesky: <https://bsky.app/profile/youthadvfdn.bsky.social>

Talk of the Town

YAF Board Member, Darnell Thigpen Williams, selected to the Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) "Influence 100"!

We are thrilled to recognize YAF Board Member, Darnell Thigpen Williams, for his selection to the Massachusetts' Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) "Influence 100"! This is a program in which school districts select rising leaders to participate in a two-year fellowship to prepare for the superintendent role through monthly training and ongoing support in key aspects of the superintendency, with a particular focus on equity. Superintendents and a school committee member agree to participate with the Influence 100 fellow(s) in professional development and technical assistance with DESE to enhance their strategic planning for equity.

In 2019, only 4% of Massachusetts school superintendents were people of color, while 40% of the students served by public school districts were people of color. In the fall of 2019 DESE launched Influence 100 to increase the racial and ethnic diversity of superintendents in Massachusetts, create more culturally responsive districts and leaders across the Commonwealth, and promote better outcomes for students. Since the program's inception, the number of superintendents of color has steadily increased to over 8% in 2024.



Darnell is currently the Director of Diversity, Equity, Inclusion, and Well-Being at Belmont Public Schools.

President & CEO, Marlies Spanjaard named one of Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly's Top Women of Law

We are also excited to celebrate our President & CEO, Marlies Spanjaard, who was honored November 18, 2025 as one of Massachusetts Lawyers Weekly's Top Women of Law.

This recognition reflects Marlies' extraordinary leadership in advancing education justice for young people across the Commonwealth. Under her guidance, YAF continues to strengthen the EdLaw Project's work, ensuring students receive the advocacy, educational supports, and fair treatment they need to thrive in and beyond the classroom. Her commitment to dismantling barriers and expanding access to equitable education has made a profound difference for youth and families throughout Massachusetts.



We are grateful to Michele Scavongelli, YAF's Executive Director, who nominated Marlies for this honor, and to Duci Goncalves, Deputy Chief Counsel of the Youth Advocacy Division (YAD) of CPCS and Chair of YAF's Board, for being there to celebrate this recognition in person.

We couldn't be prouder to have Marlies leading this mission. Please join us in congratulating Marlies!

EdLaw at SEPAC Family Resource Fair



On November 13, 2025, EdLaw Staff Counsel, Kayla Mateo, represented the EdLaw Project at the Special Education Parent Advisory Council (SEPAC) Family Resource Fair at the Murphy School Leahy Holloran Community Center in Dorchester — a welcoming, community-centered event designed to connect caregivers of students with disabilities to vital local resources and services. Throughout the evening, Kayla shared information about special education rights and the importance of strong legal advocacy, helping families better understand how to navigate complex educational systems and access the support their children deserve. The event brought together a wide range of community partners offering resources related to food, housing, healthcare, clothing, and legal services, creating a meaningful opportunity to strengthen connections and ensure Boston families feel informed, supported, and empowered.

Grant Updates

In addition to money raised through our annual appeal, the Boston Marathon and our annual event, we rely on grants from Charitable Foundations to support the work we do. Here is a

summary of the grant funding we received in the 2nd quarter of FY26. In Q2, we welcomed two new foundations to the YAF family of funders.



We received word that the Nellie Mae Education Foundation awarded us a \$75,000 grant! The Nellie Mae Education Foundation works to ensure every young person in New England has access to excellent, rigorous, and relevant educational experiences that support their healthy development and prepare them to thrive in school, community, and careers of the future.



We also received a \$5,000 grant from the Bennett Family Foundation. The Bennett Family Foundation focuses on helping teens and young adults get re-connected to a supportive community and become independent adults. We are thrilled to have two new partners in our work to support students facing barriers to success in Massachusetts.



We are also thrilled to have received a \$20,000 grant from the Mass Bar Foundation (MBF). MBF awards financial grants annually to nonprofit organizations in Massachusetts whose programs either provide civil legal services to low-income clients or improve the administration of justice. MBF has been a long time supporter and friend of YAF and we are grateful for continued partnership.

Pro Bono Spotlight

Each quarter pro bono attorneys work hard to greatly improve educational services for their clients. Every October, we celebrate Pro Bono week by recognizing all the wonderful attorneys who have worked with us on pro bono cases throughout the previous year.

Pro Bono Week 2025 was celebrated with the theme "Supporting Communities" and we wanted to recognize and thank all of the law firm and corporate attorneys who do just that, make justice a reality in our community by donating their time and expertise to represent many vulnerable students and help us with our mission to shut down the school-to-prison pipeline.

Throughout the week, we spotlighted the great attorneys who volunteered their time to work with us between October 2024 to 2025. We detailed the incredible work they are doing or have done, to ensure that Massachusetts' children and emerging adults are able to receive access to an equitable

education. You can read all of their stories on our website now at:

<https://www.youthadvocacyfoundation.org/related-news-and-current-events>

We'd like to again thank the firms who encourage and support their wonderful attorneys in the pro bono work that they do. Thank you Morgan Lewis, Goodwin Procter, Anderson Kreiger, Barnes and Thornburg LLP, Choate Hall and Stewart LLP, Foley Hoag LLP, MassMutual Insurance, Ogletree Deakins, Proskauer (Boston), Shook Hardy & Bacon LLP, and Latham Watkins!

ANDERSON
KREIGER

BARNES &
THORNBURG LLP

CHOATE

 **FOLEY**
HOAG LLP

 **GOODWIN**

LATHAM
LATHAM & WATKINS

 **MassMutual**

Morgan Lewis

Ogletree
Deakins

Proskauer 

SHOOK
HARDY & BACON

Staff & Board Spotlight

Congratulations to Tim Sindelar on his retirement!

We are sad to announce that EdLaw Senior Counsel, Tim Sindelar, retired at the end of October.



Tim joined the EdLaw Project in 2022 after spending 20+ years in public interest legal work in Massachusetts, West Virginia and Nebraska as well as 20+ years in a solo private practice focused on representing students and adults with disabilities. Tim enhances the level of practice wherever he goes.

The EdLaw Project has benefited greatly from his legal knowledge, his experience in all aspects of the work, his strong relationships, and his general wonderful presence! We will miss him terribly but wish him well!

Welcome Alexis!

With Tim's retirement in October, we hired a new Staff Counsel in December, who just started at the end of January 2026. Please join us in welcoming Alexis to the EdLaw Project team!



Alexis Rickmers
(she/her)
EdLaw Staff Counsel

Alexis Rickmers joins the EdLaw Project after completing her Equal Justice Works Fellowship at the Center for Law and Education. In her role as a fellow, Alexis worked on racial bullying issues across the Commonwealth where she represented students experiencing racial discrimination, filed federal civil rights complaints, developed and shared Know Your Rights trainings to parents, and created a model anti-bullying policy for school districts to adopt. Alexis graduated with her J.D. from Northeastern in 2023; her M.A. in Higher Education from Boston College in 2019, and her B.A. from the University of North Texas.



Fun Fact: "I taught myself how to quilt and now it's one of my favorite hobbies! Here is me on a picnic blanket I made."

EdLaw Training Updates

This fall, the EdLaw Project launched a monthly webinar series "Get Schooled with EdLaw" on the first Monday of each month. The goal of the series is to give hands on practical advocacy skills to court-appointed attorneys and social workers working directly with young people impacted by the juvenile court system. Over the course of the year, the series will cover a variety of topics, including: school stability, discipline overview, suspension hearings, MDRs, discipline appeals, neuropsychological testing, team meetings, BSEA hearings and conflict resolution, McKinney-Vento, transition services, and English language learners.

In Q2, we offered three trainings in the series, one on special education rights, another on school discipline rights broadly, as well as a training on the specific protections available or students with disabilities.

Including the webinar series, the EdLaw Project offered five trainings for 215 participants.

More Info, Updates & Resources on Our Website
youthadvocacyfoundation.org

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"Education is the most powerful weapon which you can use to change the world." - Nelson Mandela



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