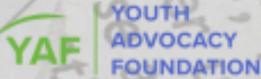


The Advocate

A YAF & EdLaw Newsletter

FY2025, 4th Quarter
(April - June 2025)



Hello YAF friends and supporters -

We are pleased to send you our fourth quarter newsletter (FY25). We are living in a new normal in which we are seeing protections for students with disabilities dismantled, students afraid to attend school, and a disruption of all programs meant to encourage inclusion, diversity and equity. We enter FY26 with renewed resolve to do all we can to zealously protect the rights of the children and young people we represent.

This past year saw the full implementation of our newest initiatives, made possible by you, our supporters. Many, many clients and their families received help in the form of food, clothing, transportation, housing and so much more from our client support fund. Our social workers have supported many of our education clients to help them access counseling, jobs, community services to name a few. We added a paralegal to our team who, in addition to handling our HELP Line, provides interpretation services and legal research assistance to the EdLaw attorneys.

In May, we had a very successful Spring Celebration, and we are already planning for next year's celebration which will commemorate YAF's 25 years of representing students. It will be held on May15, 2025 starting at 5:30 pm at the Charles Hotel in Cambridge. Please save this date on your calendars.

Your friendship and support means so much to us, as we celebrate yesterday's successes, navigate today's challenges, and plan for a better future in which all of Massachusetts' most vulnerable children have access to an equitable and quality education.

With deep gratitude,

Duci Goncalves
Chair of the Board

Marlies Spanjaard
YAF President & CEO

Michele Scavongelli
YAF Executive Director

Initiative Updates



YAF V.O.I.C.E.S.

Voices of Impacted Communities Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline

On May 16th, several members of VOICES proudly took part in YAF's annual fundraising event, presenting a powerful photovoice installation that deeply resonated with attendees. The project and program was [introduced by VOICES members, Anniea Durham and Dream Gillenwater](#). After months of thoughtful collaboration and creativity, VOICES participants unveiled a striking gallery composed of impactful photographs accompanied by both individual and collective captions. This installation provided a meaningful platform for members to share their lived experiences and illuminate the harsh realities of the School-to-Prison Pipeline.



Their work boldly explored how educational environments systematically marginalize students—eroding their self-worth and limiting their future opportunities. The collective description of the album reads: “Judgmental, punitive, and low-resourced environments deliberately push marginalized students into the school-to-prison pipeline, damaging their self-esteem and their future. To dismantle this pipeline, we deserve affirming school environments, and dedicated champions and educators. These schools—and the people in them—would support all students, make them feel accepted without judgment, and provide the resources and opportunities they need to learn, thrive, and belong.” Through this project, VOICES members not only highlighted systemic injustice but also envisioned the kind of transformative change that is both necessary and possible—reminding us all of the power of youth voice and artistic expression in driving social change.



On June 25th, the founding VOICES cohort came together for a meaningful final gathering before the summer break. Held at Larz Anderson Park, the evening was a time for reflection, celebration, and connection—honoring the powerful work and strong relationships built throughout this inaugural project. As we look to the future, we're excited to announce that EdLaw SSA Richie Torres will be stepping into the role of Project Lead. VOICES will take a short summer hiatus as we work behind the scenes to strengthen and expand the program. Stay tuned for exciting updates—we can't wait to share what's next for VOICES!

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



[The Client Support Fund](#)

Thanks to the generosity of YAF's client support fund, Senior Counsel, Elizabeth McIntyre and SSA, Richie Torres, were able to purchase a new phone for their client, who had their previous one stolen. This crucial support promotes our client's independence and autonomy, as they no longer need to rely on their mother's phone. Additionally, this new phone will enable our client to engage more fully

in prosocial behaviors and academic opportunities, particularly in the field of IT, where they are deeply involved.

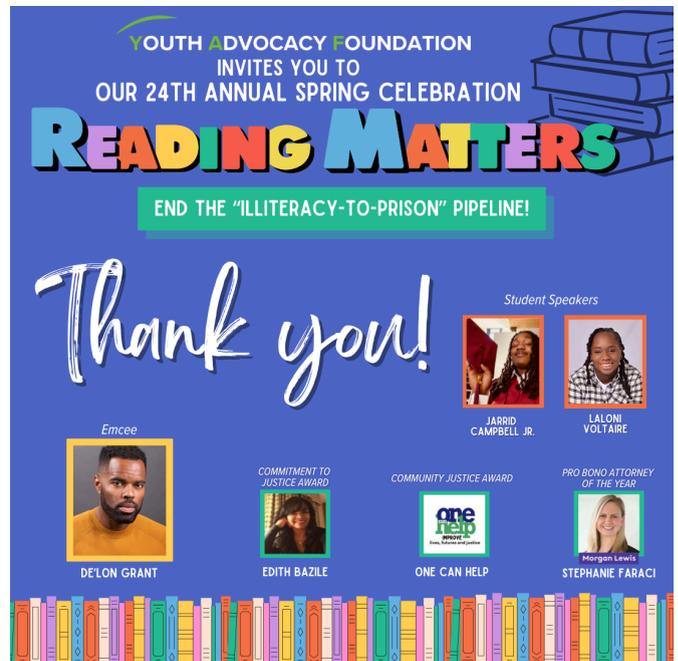
YAF Happenings

[YAF's 24th Annual Spring Celebration](#)

We want to thank all our generous supporters, who made our 2025 Annual Event a great success. It was a wonderful evening to reconnect with supporters and friends, hear from two clients and our VOICES group, and discuss the importance of literacy in keeping kids out of the school-to-prison pipeline. The issues discussed and stories shared are representative of the hundreds of students we assist every year and that wouldn't be possible without your generosity.

For anyone who wasn't able to make it or would like to relive the wonderful moments shared, **you can watch the full recording of the event or individual highlight videos on our website:**

<https://www.youthadvocacyfoundation.org/spring-2025>



[Visit our Website to watch the Recap Videos Here](#)

Thanks to your support, YAF's social workers have been able to support the children and families that the EdLaw attorneys represent. These advocates pursue housing, mental health services, food, employment, and many, many other critical services that these young people and their families need, hence improving the health of the communities they live in. YAF's Client Support Fund provides emergency funds for clients in multiple areas of need including food, school supplies, electronics, housing, transportation, and independent evaluations. These funds help remove some of the stressors impacting our client families. When basic needs are not addressed, success in school is not possible. YAF also supports an empowerment group for former clients and their parents—Voices of Impacted Communities Ending the School-to-Prison Pipeline (V.O.I.C.E.S.).

We are planning more systemic ways to disrupt both the pipeline, and the structural racism present in our schools, policing, courthouses, and detention facilities.

Student Success Stories

Caleb*

There is no single playbook for addressing educational inequity, but we find strength in our collective personal and professional experiences to confront injustice together. YAF Executive Director and EdLaw Senior Counsel, Michele Scavongelli, Intake Coordinator and Paralegal, Ileana Matamoros, and SSA, Richie Torres, have been collaborating on a particularly complex case that underscores the multifaceted challenges faced by students in our education system.



Our client, Caleb*, is a 9-year-old student with severe autism who was removed from school for two years due to the home district's failure to provide adequate education and care. As we engaged more deeply with the case, we discovered it was compounded by ongoing legal and family issues, all of which have directly impacted the student's access to education. His mother has been subjected to ongoing abuse—verbal, physical, and financial—by her husband, with Caleb often witnessing these traumatic events. Financial control and withholding of support by the father have further destabilized the family's situation.

Since taking on this case, our team has worked with great care and diligence to ensure the family receives the support they need. After two years without a proper placement, Caleb has now been offered interviews and tours at two respected programs that can provide him with an appropriate education and relieve many of his mother's worries.

Michele's experience with education advocacy has allowed the team to successfully work with Caleb's district to secure the needed placement. Ileana's legal expertise and fluency in the mother's native language have enabled her to make informed, empowered decisions for her child. Richie's specialization in autism education and research has ensured a child-centered approach, actively involving the student and building connections with programs equipped to meet his needs.

This case reflects the layered and interconnected barriers many families across Massachusetts face in accessing quality education. It also reinforces the importance of a holistic, interdisciplinary response—one we remain fully committed to providing.

*altered identity and stock image used for client privacy

Talk of the Town

YAF at the Mass Bar Association's Eighth Annual Juvenile & Child Welfare Conference: Brown at 70

We are proud to share that several of our attorneys had active roles in the Mass Bar Association's Eighth Annual Juvenile & Child Welfare Conference: Brown at 70.

Duci Goncalves, Deputy Chief Counsel, Youth Advocacy Division (YAD) and Board Chair of YAF, gave an inspiring Keynote speech to open the conference and participated on the "Emerging Adults" panel. In the spirit of the conference's theme, she reminded the audience that while Massachusetts is often lauded as a state with excellent schools, segregation and the opportunity gap between white and black and brown students is large. For example, 63% of MA public schools are racially segregated affecting over 500,000 students, 90% of which are Black or Latino. In MA schools where 90% or more of the student body is non-white, the average graduation rate is 72%, compared to 93% in predominantly white schools. She reminded us that we are not fulfilling Brown's promise and charged us to show up for youth in Massachusetts who are being pushed out of school and into the school-to-prison pipeline -- the very work of the EdLaw Project and YAF. You can read her full remarks by downloading the file on our website [here](#).





Marlies Spanjaard, the Director of the EdLaw Project and YAF Board President was recognized at the conference and presented with the Massachusetts Bar Association's Annual Juvenile Justice and Child Welfare Award. We are so proud of Marlies and the work she has done over the past 20+ years to build the EdLaw Project to the organization it is today. Senior Counsel, Tim Sindelar, of the EdLaw Project introduced Marlies as she received her well-deserved award.

Finally, Tim Sindelar, also participated in the "Emerging Adults Panel" during which he discussed the Class Action lawsuit that EdLaw, in conjunction with the Mental Health Legal Advisors Committee ("MHLAC") and Latham & Watkins, LLP, brought against the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) for the lack of special education services in MA Houses of Correction. During this same panel, Duci talked about YAD's emerging adult pilot office focused on people ages 18 to 25 funded by Columbia University's Emerging Adult Justice Project.



YAF Executive Director, Michele Scavongelli, honored with Pro Bono Publico Award at Mass Bar Access to Justice Awards



In early June, YAF Executive Director and EdLaw Senior Counsel, Michele Scavongelli, received the Pro Bono Publico Award at the Massachusetts Bar Access to Justice Awards Celebration.

For over 12 years, Michele has been a fierce advocate for education equity—representing more than 200 families in school discipline and special education cases. Her leadership has been instrumental in building EdLaw's pro bono panel, and she has trained hundreds of delinquency, child welfare, firm, and in-house attorneys—as well as parent and community groups—on special education advocacy and school discipline rights.

She also launched a statewide special education mentoring network to support attorneys who serve youth across the Commonwealth. Through her tireless work at EdLaw and YAF, Michele is helping dismantle the school-to-prison pipeline, ensuring that all court-involved and at-risk students have access to expert educational advocacy and community-based services.

This award recognizes Michele's unwavering dedication to justice, children, and families across Massachusetts. We can not think of anyone more deserving of this award and are honored to celebrate her impact!



Advocating for Safer, More Equitable Schools

On May 6th, our President & CEO, Marlies Spanjaard, testified in support of *An Act Relative to Safer Schools* (HD.4297 / S.387), legislation aimed at ensuring safety in schools through transparency, oversight, and equitable alternatives to police presence. The bill promotes clear distinctions between disciplinary and criminal matters, requires de-escalation and anti-bias training for School Resource Officers (SROs), mandates public reporting of student-police interactions, and creates grant programs for non-police safety models. Marlies lifted up the voices of our most vulnerable students—especially those with disabilities and youth of color—underscoring the need for school environments that support, not criminalize, our children.



And on June 17th, EdLaw Project attorney Kayla Pulliam testified in support of *H.650, An Act Relative to Affirming and Maintaining Equal Access to Public Education for All Children* (Rep. Moran). Drawing from her work at the intersection of education and juvenile justice, Kayla shared the story of Maya, a student with disabilities who was arrested for a minor infraction due to a misunderstanding of her IEP. Her testimony emphasized the urgent need for policies that prevent criminalization of students with disabilities and uphold their rights to a supportive education. This bill helps ensure that all children—especially those most vulnerable—can access school without fear of exclusion or court involvement.

[CLICK HERE to Read Marlies and Kayla's Full Testimonies](#)

Grant Updates

In addition to money raised through our annual appeal and 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 4th quarter of FY25:



In June, YAF was awarded \$20,000 from the Boston Bar Foundation. YAF was one of 53 local organizations receiving funding to serve the needs of Greater Boston's most vulnerable communities. The grants are funded through Interest on Lawyers' Trust Accounts (IOLTA) funding. Grant funding across all organizations totalled \$2 million dollars.



**Gardiner Howland
SHAW FOUNDATION**
www.shawfoundation.org

YAF was awarded \$20,000 from the Shaw Foundation. The Shaw Foundation is committed to the study, prevention, correction and alleviation of crime and delinquency, and the rehabilitation of adults and juveniles. The Shaw Foundation was one of YAF's earliest supporters and we are so grateful for the continued partnership.



**Cummings
Foundation**

This spring we received \$30,000 from the Cummings Foundation, as part of their \$20 Million Grant Program. YAF was among 130 local nonprofits selected to receive at least \$100,000 each through the \$20 Million Grants Program.

This is a ten year award and YAF is in our fifth year of receiving this generous funding.

Pro Bono Spotlight

Several of pro bono attorneys have achieved greatly improved educational services for their clients. These are just a few of the many terrific outcomes the attorneys on YAF's pro bono panel are securing for their clients.



**FOLEY
HOAG** LLP

Rachel Kerner, Howard Weiss, William Holt & Christopher Hart, Foley Hoag, LLP

Led by attorney Rachel Kerner, this group of attorneys has been representing a 17 yo student since November of 2024. In addition to a specific learning disability in reading which went unrecognized by her school district until the fall of her junior year, she has been dealing with trauma as a result of an assault by fellow students in ninth grade.

Despite trying 3 different high schools in the district, the trauma and subsequent bullying followed her. As a result, she had to receive home education services which were inadequate to address her reading needs. Thanks to Foley Hoag, she will be attending a small school with both reading and therapeutic support this fall. She toured this new program and she and her mother are so excited to know that she will be able to finish her education in a school that will support her emotionally and academically.

Proskauer

**Lexie Reynolds, Jesse Messmer, Carol Wu,
Proskauer Rose LLP**

This team is representing a student entering 5th grade still reading at a first grade level as a result of a specific learning disability in reading. Through mediation they were able to secure 5 weeks of intensive 1:1 tutoring in reading this summer.

Staff & Board Spotlight

Updated YAF/EdLaw Mission

On June 30th, all the YAF and EdLaw staff gathered in the Boston office to continue the strategy discussions begun in March. As a result we have updated our Mission Statement to reflect all aspects of our holistic approach and current initiatives.

Our Updated Mission is to **Shut Down the Cradle-to-Prison™ Pipeline** in MA by ensuring that our state's most vulnerable students receive a **stable** and **quality education** through expert holistic, individual, and systemic **racially-conscious, student-directed** advocacy.

- **Our Vision** is that every student who is ensnared in the court system, including emerging adults, has an expert team who can provide zealous education advocacy for them.
- **Our Focus** is on students who are caught in, or put at risk of being caught in, the family regulation system, juvenile courts, and/or the adult courts.
- **Our Approach** is to leverage the expertise of attorneys and social workers statewide to permanently transform the standard of practice for client and systemic representation in Massachusetts and dramatically improve educational and life outcomes for children, youth, and emerging adults impacted by system involvement.

Last Board Meeting of FY25

On June 17th, the Youth Advocacy Foundation (YAF) Board met in person for a final wrap up of the FY2025 fiscal year and look forward to the work to be done in FY2026. The Board reviewed the results of the Annual Event and approved our FY26 Budget.

Welcome to our Newest (and Littlest) YAF and EdLaw Member!

Please join us in wishing a huge congrats to EdLaw Senior Counsel, Elizabeth Levitan, on the birth of her second son, and a big "Welcome to the World" baby Eli!



Meet the Summer Interns

Every semester and summer, YAF is fortunate to attract talented legal interns to support the attorneys of the EdLaw Project, as well as an undergraduate intern to support YAF development and operations staff. This summer was no exception!

Thank you, Morgan, Julian and Emily, for all your hard work this summer, and helping us in our mission to shut down the school-to-prison pipeline!



Morgan Smith-

(she/her)

3L, Suffolk Law School

EdLaw Legal Intern

Morgan is a 3L at Suffolk University Law School with a passion for education law. She's dedicated to advocating for students, especially in matters of school discipline. This summer, she gained valuable experience assisting EdLaw attorneys with BSEA research, IEP meetings, discovery requests, and drafting PRS complaints and mediation letters.

Fun Fact: Morgan is a huge Buffalo Bills fan and played football as a placekicker in college.



Julian Vallen-

(he/him)

3L, Northeastern University School of Law

EdLaw Legal Intern

Julian is a 3L at Northeastern School of Law. He grew up in Louisiana and graduated from Louisiana State University with a degree in Anthropology before moving to Western Massachusetts where he worked as an educator for several years. Julian is passionate about working with and supporting kids, spending time outside, and trying new recipes.



Emily Cummings-

(she/her)

Senior, Boston University

YAF Operations & Development Intern

Emily is a rising Senior at Boston University studying Education & Human Development with a specialization in Youth Justice and Advocacy and a minor in Emotional and Behavioral Challenges in Schools.

Fun Fact: "I love swimming and the water. I grew up very close to the water - lifeguarding, teaching swim lessons and swimming on swim teams."

EdLaw Training Updates

In the 4th quarter, the EdLaw Project provided four trainings to over 165 participants. Sessions included a training for social workers on the anatomy of a special education case, a panel on education advocacy for emerging adults, and two trainings for court-appointed attorneys on how to seek the help of Special Education Mentors.

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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