



**Strategic Plan 2022-2025**  
**Adopted 04/21/2022**

Mission Statement

To ensure all children in West Michigan receive the quality education they need to thrive.

Our Services

Provide comprehensive non-legal advocacy and legal representation to West Michigan children for all educational needs. This includes:

- Pairing families with a non-attorney advocate, supervised by an attorney, to provide wide-ranging support in obtaining and monitoring their child's education needs. Our trained advocates provide weekly contact with families to address all education issues.
- Working closely with related service providers to assist parents in fully understanding their child's disability, strengths, areas of need, and recommended services and interventions.
- Representing children and parents for due process hearings and related legal proceedings to ensure every child receives the free and appropriate public education they are entitled to when non-legal advocacy is no longer effective in addressing the student's needs.

Who We Serve

Children in West Michigan\*, ages Birth to 26, with a particular focus on:

- Low-income students with disabilities
- Minority students with disabilities
- Students involved in the juvenile justice system
- Students involved in the child welfare system (foster or kinship care)

MI AECRES serves children in the following counties: Allegan, Benzie, Berrien, Berry, Cass, Grand Traverse, Kalamazoo, Kent, Lake, Leelenau, Manistee, Mason, Muskegon, Newaygo, Oceana, Ottawa, St. Joseph, Van Buren, and Wexford.

# SWOT Analysis

## Our Strengths

### I. WHAT IS OUR STRONGEST ASSET?

A. Experience and expertise in education law, along with other aspects of disability, juvenile, and family law.

1. Special education law in itself is a very niche area, particularly when representing families; approximately a dozen max statewide, most concentrated in the greater metro detroit area
2. Even harder find attorneys with special education law experience combined with other aspects of juvenile law
3. Parents can't exercise their rights under special education and related education/disability laws without an attorney - required for filing due process complaints and complaints in federal court that can be well-argued when going against a district armed with an attorney
4. Schools often don't inform parents of their rights proactively, so attorneys are needed to train both parents and non-attorney advocates to serve families

B. Professional relationships with other individuals, agencies, service providers, and courts working with families to generate referrals, promote collaboration, and best meet client needs to serve as many students and families as possible, as effectively and efficiently as possible

C. Dedicated and organized individuals

1. Passionate about education, making sure that children are getting the quality education they need to thrive.
2. Range of experience and expertise including non-legal advocacy, training, supervising, systemic advocacy, litigation
3. Over 25+ years of combined experience in special education law and advocacy

a) KT - class action litigation with ACLU related to Flint Water Crisis; special education eligibility due process success; worked for Children's Law Center, representing youth for all aspects of court-involvement; New Haven Legal Assistance, represented children caught in school-to-prison pipeline; co-authored article for the inaugural Education Law issue for the Michigan Bar Journal

b) JB - Established for LSEM direct representation of families impacted by the Flint Water Crisis Education Litigation, creating model of training students to serve as non-attorney advocates for families under her direct supervision for due process complaints as needed; established private education firm immediately following admission to the SBM, filing state and due process complaints within first 6 months of operation; successful outcomes for clients through mediation, including financial compensation - settled case for \$40k for client; co-authored article for the inaugural Education Law issue for the Michigan Bar Journal

c) LA - 15 years of experience with education law, 7 years of experience with Title IX. Previously worked for Legal Aid in Cincinnati

and worked for Legal Services in Michigan, briefly, before working for Michigan State. Operates a solo firm providing representation in special education, civil rights, employment, and Title IX cases. Also serves on the board of The Firecracker Foundation, a Lansing-based nonprofit which serves children who have survived sexual violence.

d) CH -8 years experience representing k-12 students at disciplinary hearings. Serve as supervising attorney for U of M's Student Representation Project. Senior staff attorney at Street Democracy representing Detroit's homeless in criminal and civil matters since 2016 as well as spear-headed Street Democracy's Rethink Discipline Project. Authored article regarding education discipline reform published in Michigan Bar Journal. Chair of the Lansing ACLU Local Unit. Secretary for Gerald Beckwith Constitutional and Civil Liberties Fund

e) CC - Master's in Social work. Experience in the juvenile justice system, school social work system, foster care and adoption work, and have recently accepted a job as an LGBTQIA+ youth play therapist. I have worked at the CO State Capitol working on diverse legislation to provide equal opportunity for all individuals.

II. HOW IS OUR NONPROFIT DIFFERENT FROM OTHERS?

A. Provide comprehensive, coordinated direct advocacy and representation to meet students' education-related needs - can assist families from beginning of non-legal advocacy all the way through to appealing due process decisions/filing in federal court without needing to refer families elsewhere or spend time playing "catch up" when taking in-progress cases from elsewhere - creating the "one stop shop"

B. Will provide comprehensive, holistic representation to children involved in delinquency and/or abuse/neglect cases to address underlying education needs in conjunction with criminal charges/being placed outside of the home

C. Operating largely as a law firm as a non profit, which helps with long-term funding and financial sustainability

D. Serving areas with significant gaps in these legal areas, including low-income families.

E. Will provide collaboration on policy that furthers our mission toward equitable education for all children.

III. WHAT UNIQUE RESOURCES DO WE HAVE ACCESS TO?

A. Network of education and juvenile attorneys, both across the state and across the US.

1. Help us to identify key changes and advocacy efforts

2. Help us to identify and implement best practices in education advocacy and representation

3. Stay updated on trends and trainings

4. Model programs to represent targeted populations, such as youth involved in delinquency courts or family courts

IV. DO WE HAVE A SUSTAINABLE COMPETITIVE ADVANTAGE?

A. Yes, training young legal leaders in education law to lead the effort in the future and expand access to families to know and enforce their education rights; developing the necessary future legal talent

- B. Yes, by maintaining professional relationships to generate referrals and expanding to have court contracts focused on providing education advocacy and representation to underrepresented populations in juvenile and family courts, as well as to work closely with other related service providers
- C. Structuring as a non-profit law firm to maintain current programming through attorney fees, offering families affordable payment plans/sliding scale fees for services
- V. WHAT IS OUR UNIQUE SELLING PROPOSITION?
  - A. The only non-profit firm in West Michigan providing comprehensive education advocacy and legal representation to students with disabilities to ensure they are receiving an appropriate education to allow them to become independent, successful, and thriving adults; “one stop shop.”
  - B. Ability to pair families directly with an advocate to be proactively involved in assisting families, making weekly contact with families, and being very involved to fully support families in real-time
  - C. Serving areas with significant gaps in these legal areas, both geographically and economically
- VI. DO WE HAVE ANY MARKETING STRATEGIES OR POTENTIAL?
  - A. Potential - targeted outreach to agencies working with youth, connect with Legal Services of Western Michigan, connect with local courts. Spreadsheet of agencies currently being drafted.
  - B. Potential - Local Community Foundations
- VII. WHAT SKILLS DO OUR FOUNDERS/STAFF/BOARD MEMBERS HAVE THAT OTHERS DON'T HAVE? ALSO SEE ABOVE
  - A. Experience representing families and students with disabilities for education needs, both through litigation and non-legal advocacy
  - B. Experience training and supervising law students/interns to act as non-legal education advocates
  - C. Representation experience with Juvenile delinquency
  - D. Connections on westside of state

Our Weaknesses

- I. WHAT EXPERTISE/SKILLS DO WE LACK?
  - A. Personal connections to the communities we're serving. Jacquelyn resides in Mason County and Kristin resides in Kalamazoo county, but connections need to be made in the remaining west Michigan counties.
  - B. Personal connections with funders to provide unrestricted funds for costs while applying for specific grants
- II. IN WHAT AREAS ARE OUR COUNTERPARTS BETTER THAN WE ARE?
  - A. We have no accountant or person with financial expertise on the board to assist with financial management and fundraising/donation efforts
  - B. Counterparts are more established within the communities they serve.
- III. WHAT ASSETS DO WE NEED THAT WE CURRENTLY DON'T HAVE?
  - A. Money to pay initial salaries and marketing materials - actively looking to identify potential underwriters/initial donors, grants to apply for
- IV. DO WE HAVE ALL THE TECHNOLOGY OR EQUIPMENT THAT WE NEED?

- A. Mostly, but would be better if we had funding to afford case management software specific to legal firms. Jacquelyn will look into PIKA, but that will still have an associated cost. Jacquelyn and Charles will also speak with Jayesh about the database he designed.
- V. ARE WE UNDERSTAFFED?
  - A. Not at this time - recently retained new interns; have attorney to supervise. Board members available for consultations and feedback. However, do need to continue planning ahead, so there are no gaps in staffing between student semesters.
- VI. DO WE HAVE ANY CASH FLOW PROBLEMS?
  - A. Yes - have very minimal cash right now. Cash available is insufficient to pay complete independent contractor fees.

### Opportunities

- I. WHAT TRENDS MIGHT POSITIVELY AFFECT OUR AREAS OF FUNCTIONING?
  - A. COVID/school shutdowns continue to effect type of student programming and effectiveness/consistency of student education plans
  - B. Push for criminal justice/juvenile justice reform
  - C. Push for education reform
  - D. Findings of lead in more areas - can craft grants specifically around that issue and those needs
- II. IS THERE TALENT AVAILABLE THAT WE COULD HIRE?
  - A. Yes - for-profit advocates may be willing to work for us, either as an employee or Independent Contractor.
  - B. Also, law students that intern/extern for us may consider as an employer upon graduation if we're able to offer adequate financial compensation
- III. IS THERE A NEED IN THE FIELD THAT WE'RE NOT MEETING, BUT COULD?
  - A. Yes, VERY LITTLE education advocates/attorneys dedicated to west michigan, particularly in the northwest region.
  - B. A lot of times, juvenile courts don't consider educational needs or underlying disabilities when charging children criminally
  - C. District attorneys have had a monopoly on establishing precedent in the west side as parents have lacked means and ability to retain advocates and attorneys
- IV. ARE THERE ANY GOVERNMENT POLICIES/FUNDING/TRENDS THAT WE COULD TAKE ADVANTAGE OF?
  - A. No waivers of substantive IDEA requirements during COVID
  - B. Criminal justice/juvenile justice reform
  - C. Education reform
- V. IS THERE A NICHE AREA OF NEEDS THAT WE'RE NOT CURRENTLY TARGETING?
  - A. Yes, children with disabilities in high-poverty areas, high-minority areas
  - B. Those involved in juvenile justice system and placed out of home
  - C. Those involved in family court and placed out of home

### Threats

- I. WHAT POLICIES/TRENDS/ISSUES IN THE EXTERNAL ENVIRONMENT COULD NEGATIVELY IMPACT THE SETUP/FUNCTIONING/SUSTAINABILITY OF THIS NONPROFIT?

- A. Deferring to schools as “experts” and “trying their best,” particularly during COVID
  - B. Focus on kicking the can down the road in terms of providing services, particularly during COVID
  - C. Other states, like Georgia, have an education law section, whereas Michigan has not made education law a priority within the State Bar
- II. ARE THERE ANY SOCIAL ISSUES THAT COULD NEGATIVELY IMPACT OUR FUNCTIONING?
- A. Covid can definitely hurt and help
  - B. Oxford shooting - resurgence of zero tolerance, wanting to be extra cautious
  - C. Lack of teaching staff, other school staff shortages in general
- III. ARE THERE ANY OTHER ORGANIZATIONS THAT COULD COMPETE FOR FUNDS IN OUR AREA?
- A. Legal Services of Western Michigan
  - B. Possibly other organizations, but I could not identify any other non-profits specifically doing education advocacy in West Michigan for competing for grants

## Goals and Objectives 2022-2025

**Goal 1:** Expand education advocacy to families in high-poverty or remote geographic areas to improve educational outcomes, such as increased graduation rates and increased inclusion in the general education classrooms.

Objective 1: Increase the amount of clients served through outreach to agencies/families in the counties we serve

### Activities/Strategies:

- Create database of agencies (churches, doctors offices, counseling offices, service providers, ISDs) who come into contact with children with disabilities and their parents
- Contact all agencies within the database
- Create phone script for reaching out to agencies
- Create outreach flyer to share with agencies
- Create quarterly newsletter to share with families and agencies
- Create database to track number of intakes per month
- Partner with agencies to appear at their community outreach events

### Outcome Measures:

- Intake database created by April 1, 2022
- Agency database created for all counties by May 1, 2022
- Outreach Flyer created by June 1, 2022
- Phone script created by June 1, 2022
- Agencies contacted and contact list updated in database by August 2022
- Identify baseline of number of intakes by August 2022
- Quarterly Newsletter started in November 2022
- Number of monthly intakes increased by at least 80% by November 2024, compared to August 2022
- Attend at least 10 community outreach events by November 2024

Objective 2: Provide direct education advocacy to clients

### Activities/Strategies:

- Create database of law schools, schools of education, community agencies that could potentially provide/recruit volunteer advocates
- Contact all agencies within the database
- Host event on “why should you be an advocate/what an advocate does”; partner with agencies to host this
- Participate in law school/graduate school networking events
- Create and maintain database of advocates
- Train Advocates in education advocacy
- Create “Education Advocate Manual”
- Create and maintain current and past client database

### Outcome Measures:

- Database of potential recruiting agencies created by April 1, 2022
- Database of current and past clients created by April 1, 2022
- Agencies on database contacted by May 1, 2022
- Host annual “Why You Should be an Advocate” event in August of 2022, 2023, and 2024.
- Participate in at least 6 law school/graduate school networking events by November 2024
- Host an advocate training each semester (approx January and August of each year)
- Create Education Advocate Manual by August 2024
- Database maintained with quarterly updates by November 2024.
- Increase the number of current clients by at least 90% by November 2024, compared to April 2022.
- Increase the number of education advocates to at least 5 by November 2024.

Objective 3: Improve educational outcomes for clients

Activities/Strategies:

- Create and distribute exit survey for clients
- Create student outcomes chart to complete for clients at intake and exit

Outcome Measures:

- Create exit survey by May 1, 2022
- Create student outcomes chart by June 1, 2022
- Increased academic performance, as measured by grades or district assessments for at least 80% of clients by November 2024
- Increased participation in general education classroom for new or current clients placed in self-contained classroom or receiving resource room support >50% of the day
- At least 80% of clients graduated or on diploma track by November 2024
- Favorable responses on exit surveys for at least 80% of clients by November 2024

**Goal 2:** Increase resources to meet the needs of clients and create a self-sustaining organization

Objective 1: Increase incoming funds to ensure overhead and independent contractor costs are covered, and to hire part-time lead education advocate

Activities/Strategies:

- Create and maintain donor database
- Create and maintain donation strategy/plan to improve number of donors and amount given
- Create and maintain database of grants to apply for
- Apply for grants

- Host fundraisers
- Draft and file due process complaints
- Increase number of fee-for-service clients

Outcome Measures:

- Donor database created by May 1, 2022
- Client income bracket chart created by June 1, 2022.
- Donor database of at least 100 individuals by November 2024
- Average yearly donation of \$100 per donor by November 2024
- Grant Database created by February 2022
- 8 grant applications submitted by November 2024
- At least 1 grant received by November 2024
- First fundraiser hosted by August 2022
- 2 fundraisers hosted in fiscal year 2023
- 3 fundraisers hosted in fiscal year 2024
- An average of 3 due process complaints filed with at least \$2000 in attorney fees awarded per year by November 2024
- At least 50% of clients paying at least 50-100% of standard fee for services and at least 30% of clients paying 20-50% of standard fee for services by November 2024, with the remainder of clients being served pro bono.

Objective 2: Increase number of education advocates to serve clients

Activities/Strategies:

- Create database of law schools, schools of education, community agencies that could potentially provide/recruit volunteer advocates
- Contact all agencies within the database
- Host event on “why should you be an advocate/what an advocate does”; partner with agencies to host this
- Participate in law school/graduate school networking events
- Create and maintain database of advocates

Outcome Measures:

- Database of potential recruiting agencies created by April 1, 2022
- Database of current and past clients created by April 1, 2022
- Agencies on database contacted by June 1, 2022
- Host annual “Why You Should be an Advocate” event in August of 2022, 2023, and 2024.
- Participate in at least 6 law school/graduate school networking events by November 2024

Objective 3: Expand the use of volunteer service providers/providers who accept medicaid or work on sliding scale fee to work with clients

Activities/Strategies:

- Create database of service providers who work with children with disabilities

- Contact all agencies within the database
- Create phone script for reaching out to agencies
- Update resource page on website accordingly, as providers increase

Outcome Measures:

- Agency database created for all counties by June 1, 2022
- Phone script created by June 1, 2022
- Agencies contacted and contact list updated in database by September 1, 2022
- At least 3 service providers total identified in each service area (ie counseling, tutoring, SLP, PT, OT) by November 2024

## **Current/Potential Resources**

### Cash and Equipment Resources

- Cash
  - West Shore Bank - \$2,166.32
  - PayPal - \$146.02
- No agency equipment - independent contractors/volunteers responsible for own technology
- Virtual shared drive - Google Suite
- Google Voice number for agency

### People Resources

- Current volunteers – 4
  - 2 additional interested
- Skilled and experienced Board members
- Miscellaneous contacts (bankers, government regulators, business people, etc.)
  - Account available for consulting as needed
  - Disability Rights Michigan
  - Skilled mediators
  - Reading specialist
  - MiPAAC - education organization for referrals/outreach
  - School SLP, able to provide input on cases in other districts
  - Contacts in the media for publicity
  - Chalkbeat
- Volunteers with technical skills (database development, website building, graphic design, and so on)?