

Shawon Jackson

2013 Liman Fellow

Summary Report

During the summer of 2013, I was an education policy intern with the Children's Defense Fund in Washington DC. CDF is a non-profit organization that advocates for children's rights, with a particular emphasis on low-income and minority children. With this mission, CDF – amongst several other offices – has a policy team that makes recommendations to Congress about what legislation is best for children. The policy team also works with the advocacy team, which spearheads grassroots campaign efforts to effect positive change in specific communities. On the whole, I had an incredible experience, and I sincerely thank the Arthur Liman fellowship program for affording me the opportunity to pursue an internship in child advocacy.

As an intern, I had the opportunity to help several departments at CDF, though my primary support went to the education policy team. One of our priorities revolved around the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). I reviewed proposed legislation from the House and Senate, and summarized what the latter version said about school discipline in schools. Additionally, I summarized what the Senate version of the ESEA bill said about early childhood education. Considering that school discipline and early childhood are priorities for CDF, my supervisor was able to use this information to make a sound judgment about which bill our organization should support.

In addition to reviewing legislation, I also attended congressional briefings and hearings related to ESEA. When the Senate marked up the bill, for example, I attended this session with my supervisor on behalf of CDF. At the markup, I tweeted live updates for CDF's Twitter page, keeping our followers informed about the status of this important education bill. At this session, I

also took detailed notes about which Senators supported and opposed the bill being debated. This information was useful in that it gave CDF a sense of which Senate members were supportive of their mission and core values.

My second and largest project related to school discipline. This project had three primary components. The first involved collaborating with the Young Advocate Leadership Training (YALT) team. The YALT team was working to pursue a grassroots campaign on school discipline reform in Mississippi. To do so, however, they needed concrete information about the suspension and expulsion rates in multiple school districts throughout the state. I compiled that information for them and created fact sheets about the state of school discipline in select Mississippi school districts. These fact sheets included: the demographics of each district, the academic achievement (graduation rate, ACT score [if applicable], etc.) of the students in that district, and details about the school discipline practices in that district. To gather the information needed, I consulted the National Center for Education Statistics, the Office of Civil Rights Data Collection (Department of Education), each school district's website, and other relevant sources.

The second component of my school discipline work related to a joint project with the American Association of School Administrators (AASA). Together with AASA, CDF planned a conference on school discipline reform with select superintendents from across the nation. To prepare for this convening, I researched best practices on school discipline and compiled a report of my findings. This report highlighted specific high schools or entire school districts that worked to reduce the number of out-of-school suspensions and expulsions students receive. To complement these concrete examples, I reviewed scholarly research about the drawbacks of zero-tolerance school discipline policies; summarized the Gun-Free Schools Act, which is often cited as one of the principal causes of zero-tolerance policies today; and reviewed reports from

peer organizations about school discipline reform. All of this information helped my supervisor plan relevant materials to give to the superintendents at the conference. Ultimately, the goal was to start a discourse around school discipline reform in America, with the hope that each superintendent would return to his or her home community to improve school discipline practices in their respective school districts.

A great deal of my work also revolved around early childhood education and kindergarten. During the first week of my internship, I attended a conference hosted by CDF that brought together leaders in early childhood from across the nation. At this two-day event, we discussed President Obama's recent proposal to provide high-quality pre-school to all children, beginning with those who come from families with the highest levels of poverty. After this conference, I wrote several memos about early childhood education. This summer, for example, the Department of Education announced its 2013 Kindergarten Entry Assessment Competition – a competition to incentivize States to improve their kindergarten entry assessments. I summarized language from this Department so that CDF has background information about what the government is doing to support high-quality kindergarten. I also wrote a memo about faith-based Head Start programs (services for primarily low-income children) and the challenges they face as religion-affiliated organizations. Lastly, I wrote a brief memo on a C-SPAN airing of “Kindergarten in America” for CDF’s archival records.

Aside from the memos, I participated in a “TweetChat” with leaders in early childhood education. My primary role was to document the conversation between the hosts: Senator Patty Murray, Senator Dick Durbin, Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, and Secretary of Education Arne Duncan. Having a record about what these leaders think about early childhood education is useful for CDF as it proceeds with its future policy recommendation and advocacy efforts.

In addition to my core projects, I attended several off-site meetings on behalf of the CDF. At the beginning of my internship, I attended several hearings on Capitol Hill and at the Department of Education. These hearings ranged from the presentation of a budget related to education to a conversation about school discipline reform in the U.S.

Perhaps one of the most meaningful parts of my internship was attending a briefing at the Department of Education on how to engage youth in policy conversations. Oftentimes, policymakers make decisions about education without putting a face to those that would be impacted. At this hearing, however, two high school girls shared touching testimonies about their difficult childhood experiences and how education and a youth advocacy program transformed their lives for the better. There were two key takeaways from this moment. For one, hearing such powerful anecdotes about the challenges these girls faced reinforced my belief that education is needed to help those whose circumstances place them at a disadvantage. Secondly, this briefing provided an excellent example of what policy conversations should look: an intersection between policymakers (who create legislation) and youth (those who are actually affected). I learned that policy discussions should never be removed from what is occurring at the grassroots level.

After such an incredible experience with the Children's Defense Fund, I wholeheartedly intend to work in the public sector. Immediately after graduation, I hope to work abroad in Latin America for 1-2 years to learn more about the Hispanic community and to refine my Spanish skills. While abroad, I intend to work for an advocacy organization that fights for high-quality education and services for low-income children. Afterwards, I plan to earn a Master's in Public Policy. Then I would like to become a policy associate for education, either at for a non-profit, think tank, or government agency. Ultimately, I am interested in running for office and impacting education policy at the federal level.

I am extremely grateful to the Liman fellowship program for their support. Without this fellowship, I would not have been able to complete an internship with the Children's Defense Fund. Attending a conference with Liman fellows in April 2013 was inspiring in that it revealed how multi-faceted the world of public service can be. The Liman program continues to do an excellent job of supporting students find a meaningful internship, and there are no major suggestions that I have at this time. I look forward to seeing which students will have the wonderful opportunity to be Liman fellows in the coming year. Without question, I strongly recommend all undergraduate and graduate students to take advantage of this exceptional opportunity.