

## CFCR's Mission Moments Newsletter



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Back to school season can be an exciting time for children and their families—seeing old friends, meeting new teachers, and the crisp smell of fresh notebooks. Unfortunately, the detrimental effects of the pandemic are overshadowing the excitement of a new school year. Two years of isolation have had profoundly negative consequences on children’s learning, behavioral issues, and mental health. Schools are struggling to adapt to these new challenges and meet children where they are. The education navigation and advocacy services that Council provides to students and their families is now more important than ever.

**The kids aren’t alright**

The US Department of Education has [expressed concern](#) about long-term learning loss for students who missed class time during the pandemic. This summer, the department reported a drop of nine points in math and four points in reading for 13-year-olds compared to 2020. This is the largest point decrease between tests recorded since 1973. While national tests aren’t always the best way to gauge children’s progress, it is still a concerning drop. North Carolina students may be faring slightly better, with a study from the [NC Department of Public Instruction](#) claiming students are starting to gain ground on learning losses from the pandemic, but lamenting that there is still more work to be done. That’s only accounting for the students that are actually going back to school...the Associated Press estimates that there are [12,000 NC students](#) unaccounted for after the pandemic. These absences cannot be explained by changes in enrollment for homeschool, private charter schools, or out-of-state transfers. It is critical for our community’s future that we find ways to close this pandemic-sized gap in our children’s learning and progress.

**Leading the state...in kicking kids out of class**

Our team has noted that over the past year they have seen more expulsion hearings than ever— and the data backs it up. Mecklenburg County Schools (CMS) accounts for 46% of all expulsions in the state. Even more alarming, CMS is expelling and suspending Black students at a disproportionate rate. The [Charlotte-Mecklenburg Board of Education Progress Monitoring Report](#) from February 2023 stated that while black students only made up 36% of the overall student body, 68% of Black students received at least one out-of-school suspension. That is a 32% difference! Of all expulsions at CMS, 82% affect Black students, highlighting stark racial disparities in school discipline. We know that exclusionary discipline often doesn’t work and can lead to worse outcomes for students in the long-term.

**Fighting for disability rights**

For the 2,000+ children with special education needs and their families in Charlotte Mecklenburg Schools (CMS), a new school year can mean uncertainty about what lies ahead. Will they be able to get the resources they need to succeed? If they’re transitioning between middle and high school or switching schools, who will be their advocate? It is more difficult than ever for students with disabilities to receive appropriate education in the public school system—which they are entitled to by law. Sadly, North Carolina leads the nation in [suspending students with disabilities](#). Worsening the problem, schools are struggling to staff classrooms with teachers licensed in Special Education—meaning that even when they’re in school, that doesn’t mean they’re getting the education they deserve. Council advocates for these students and their families, and you can watch our Education Law Program Director Caitlin Whalan Jones discuss this issue with [WCNC Charlotte here](#).

**What We Do**

The Education Law Program (ELP) at Council helps children and families in our community navigate the complex education system to ensure each child is getting the education they deserve. We do this in a few critical ways:

- **Education Navigation:** We support students who are involved in the juvenile delinquency or child welfare systems facing educational challenges by equipping them and their families with the resources and advice they need to advocate for their right to a proper education.
- **Education Advocacy for Individual Families:** Any parent or legal guardian of students with education needs, such as special education, Section 504, school discipline, bullying, or enrollment can contact our team for referrals, resources, advice, and legal representation. Our small team fielded several hundred calls in the last year alone.
- **Community Trainings:** We offer free trainings to community partners and parent groups covering a wide range of topics related to education advocacy. We also have an [online library](#) of these trainings so that we can reach even more people in our community.
- **Systemic Education Advocacy:** As a small team, we cannot individually assist every family that needs support with education advocacy. Our team’s systems advocacy work gets to the root of the issues affecting our most vulnerable students so that our work can have a greater community impact.

Our small ELP team is serving more students than ever before, but we

continually receive more community referrals than we can serve at current capacity. We need additional support to meet the needs of our community. No family or student will ever have to pay for our services because our mission is to ensure that all students have equitable opportunities no matter their background. You can help our team fight for student's rights with a donation today:

## Donate Today

Please contact our Advancement Director Amy Vavra at [amyv@cfcrights.org](mailto:amyv@cfcrights.org) for more information on ways to donate and to get involved.



*Thank you again to [Alston & Bird](#) and [Association of Corporate Counsel-Charlotte](#) for putting together Back to School Boxes. This service project meant that every child client we saw this summer is starting school with the supplies needed for a successful year!*

## Council Changemakers

This month we'd like to highlight our ELP Staff Attorney & Education Navigator Dan Brown!

# DANIEL BROWN



Staff Attorney &  
Education Navigator

**What led you to Council and how long have you been here?**

Public service was the model set for me growing up. If you're going to do something, do *good*, whatever that may look like, and do it well. Following that feeling, I went to law school in hopes of working with children and families. The Great Recession complicated things but I kept following that feeling, even when it meant not actually practicing law. I managed an international education program for a time, then led a program designed to support non-citizens prepare for their naturalization interviews. Around that time, a friend of mine that worked at Council reached out about an open position and encouraged me to apply. I didn't actually get that job, but, after sitting with my future colleagues, I immediately recognized Council as the place I was meant to work. I applied again the following year and here we are almost five years later!

**Tell us about your role here**

I am a staff attorney for the Education Law Program and have the pleasure of leading our Education Navigation service. This service is designed to help students that are in foster care or are involved in delinquency proceedings understand and access their education rights. These students often have unrecognized or underserved needs arising from, or complicated by, a history of significant trauma. I review the student's education, mental health, and medical history, interview everyone willing to talk, especially the student themselves, and develop a series of action items meant to help the student access the education services they deserve and are entitled to. Invariably, at least one of these action items is aimed at helping the adults involved appreciate their student's trauma and how it may manifest in the classroom. The cases may take a few months to resolve, but I remain an active resource for the duration, fielding all manner of education-related questions.

**What do you enjoy most about working at Council?**

We work for children. Everything we do is intended to make a child's life better in some real, tangible way. At the end of the day, very few people get to say that about their work. We work for children and we are *good* at it. Work aside, though, I genuinely enjoy the folks I work with. It can get serious sometimes and working with people that do not take themselves too seriously can truly make a difference. We laugh, we cry, we grit our teeth and slap the table and we do it together.

**What do you wish people knew about Council?**

We need your help, to be honest. Take the Education Law Program, for example. There's maybe 30 or so attorneys working on special education in the entire state of North Carolina and our team of four are the only ones focused on Mecklenburg County, one of the largest cities in the state and among the fastest growing in the nation. There is simply more work than any four people can do, no matter how dedicated. To begin to meet the moment we are in, we need financial support from the community.

**Where are you from or where did you grow up?**

I grew up in Nokesville, Virginia. Nokesville is a literal one-light town that, while I was there, literally had more cows than people. My elementary school was walking distance to my middle school, which itself was housed in the same building as my high school. I graduated with the same kids I started school with. Today, Nokesville is basically a suburb of D.C.; I have no problem with it, really, other than having to learn a dozen new street names every time I want to visit the home I grew up in.

**Outside of work, how do you like to spend your time?**

Outside of work, we (Hailey, Bear, and I) like to hit the road and go on adventures. If we're home, I like to write and currently have a few projects in the yard up and running. I probably spend more time than I need playing video games but... self-care? Bear has a budding interest in Star Wars and superheroes, so finding new ways to support that is always a pleasure (for purely unselfish reasons).





*ELP Attorneys Susannah Barr, Caitlin Whalan Jones, Dan Brown and Stephanie Klitsch with Board Member and volunteer Najla Long enjoy a break at CLE hosted by Bradley LLP.*



**Council has partnered with [Charlotte Triage Pro Bono Partnerships](#) to build capacity for serving youth and implementing individualized education plans and expand on the utilization of an array of legal tools to affect individual cases and systems change.** Charlotte Triage is a partnership between law firms, corporate counsel, and legal nonprofits to expand capacity to serve the legal needs of the community. Council-trained Pro Bono attorneys will utilize an array of legal tools to help individual children access a free and appropriate public education and draft complaints to effect systems change. In addition to the direct service expansion, this key partnership will build community awareness of issues facing youth in foster care and support for changes in practice and policies.

## Celebrate with Council

Council is making it easy to celebrate this holiday season. **We're asking you to join us in creating a new tradition of making change in the lives of the children we serve by planning for the holidays early!** Below are four stress-free, impactful ways to plan for the upcoming holiday season— [email us today](#) to let us know how you'd like to celebrate with us!

### **Giving Program**

Plan a Giving Program at your workplace, civic club, country club, professional association, or neighborhood/friend group. Start today and create a group that is committed to donate monthly from now until December— we'll take care of the details! On December 8, 2023, join us for breakfast to hear about the incredible change you have made. We will announce and celebrate the group that donated the highest amount.

### **Break the Barrier Breakfast**

Organize a holiday breakfast for your close friends or coworkers and invite us to come speak about the stories of our amazing children and how you can make a difference in their lives. Break the barriers they face by bringing a bus pass, gift card for food, or a journal to the breakfast. A bus pass ensures a child can get to therapy and school, a gift card ensures they have food during school break, and a journal is a wonderful coping tool for youth struggling over the holidays. (Lunch or Dinner works too!) [Book us soon](#) before the dates are filled!

### **Be the Change. Be a trendsetter. BE AN INSPIRATION**

Be a changemaker at your workplace by proposing that your workplace forgo the holiday lunches, galas, or dinners. Instead, ask your workplace to support our youth by donating the amount typically spent on these holiday gatherings. We can also help provide the information and tools to set a donation goal for your workplace. The amount you forgo can make real and lasting change in the life of a child.\*

*\*Did you know that \$500 provides 10 children with trauma-informed mental health and education assessments? \$2,500 restores safety, stability, and security for a sibling group caught in a high-conflict custody battle— and \$8,216 covers the full daily cost for all services at Council.*

### **Have all of your holiday shopping done on December 8th!**

Block your calendar now! Join us for breakfast and bring your address book! In lieu of gifts this year, make a donation in honor of your friends and family. During the holiday season, let that person know that they have inspired change in the life of a child, a legacy that will not be forgotten. This gift will be memorialized in a beautiful card delivered to your loved ones. All of your holiday shopping can be done in just one hour while you drink hot coffee, eat pastries, and hear about the impact you are making on the life of a child. Make it a stress free holiday season— bringing the addresses of your loved ones and Council staff will address and mail the cards that day on your behalf to ensure your gift arrives on time!

Email our team at [advancement@cfcrights.org](mailto:advancement@cfcrights.org) for more information and to book your celebration today!



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