



Helping Kids Get Back on Track

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By JASMIN K. WILLIAMS Amsterdam News Staff | 1 comment

Bernard Dufresne is one lucky young man. At 27 years of age, he is doing what he loves to do. Luckier still are the young people fortunate to meet him. For Dufresne, he's just paying it forward.

Dufresne is an education lawyer and staff attorney at Advocates for Children of New York. From the very start, he realized that education and positive support were the keys to success. They fuel his passion for the work he does so well.

"A lot of it had to do with having the support of my two older brothers. I always knew I had those two people in my corner. Growing up and being in school and working in special education, I realized that everyone was not as fortunate to have those opportunities so I wanted to bridge that gap and be that advocate for those who are not as fortunate," he told the AmNews.

"When you're looking at the high school level and the impact of the school suspension policy on students of color, who knows what would happen if that student had an advocate in their corner and what effect it would have on their education. But we do know that education is tied to earning potential," he said.

Dufresne graduated from Boston College with a BA in developmental psychology. He began working in an after-school program for students with developmental disabilities. He saw how the system was failing students and decided to tackle the problem from the inside. His next stop was Fordham University School of Law, where he earned his degree and set his sights on making a difference in the lives of underserved kids of color.

What are the biggest problems he sees? "One of them would be schools not having appropriate behavioral support for students that dovetails into school discipline, especially for students of color and students with disabilities. Students come to school with a lot of things on their shoulders, and schools need to provide positive support to help deal with their behavior. Providing that support improves academic outcomes. Many schools don't have that support," he said.

As an education lawyer, Dufresne works on improving school policies and helping to lower suspension rates for students. "More than 50 percent of the 69,643 New York City students suspended during the 2011-12 school year were Black—though Black students make up just 28 percent of enrollment. And

special needs students, who constitute 12 percent of those enrolled in city schools, represented almost one-third of suspensions. This has to change,” said Dufresne.

When a student is facing suspension, Dufresne gets to work to ensure that their rights aren’t violated in the process. He also works with students and their families, providing free legal representation at school hearings, a service many don’t have access to.

“There’s one of my cases that I’ve been working on since September of 2011. It was a student who had gone through incredibly traumatic experiences in life as a 16 or 17 year old, who has no guidance. I realized that having positive relationships and people on his side to provide mentorship has enabled us to get a positive outcome.

“Our relationship evolved because he saw me as someone who was committed to helping him. He was not in the right academic environment, where someone was telling him that college was possible. I saw him recently on what was going to be his first day of school. He wants to improve his situation. He realizes that education is step one not only for himself, but for his family,” said Dufresne.

What does he see as a key component for greater success with this challenging problem? “I think there needs to be a more individualized approach. More time should be spent on developing relationships between school staff and the students that they are working with. Providing more behavioral and emotional support is tied to their education.” This type of work is a natural fit for Dufresne, who worked at a clinic in his last year of law school where he did the same type of work. It was great training.

As for turning down the perks of corporate law to help troubled kids stay in school, he says, “I was sitting on a panel and a question came up from a student who said, ‘I have all these loans and I’m interested in working for criminal defense.’ If you do what you’re passionate about, you’ll get good at it and your earning potential will go up,” he said.

“I’m doing something that I love. I’m not concerned with what I’m earning, but with how many people I am able to help. I’m in a good place. I’m lucky,” he concluded.

In addition to his work with Advocates for Children of New York, Dufresne is also a member of Dignity in Schools NY, a citywide coalition of parents, student advocates, educators, grassroots groups and lawyers working to improve the learning environment and reduce school push-out.

