

Pro bono law can improve education

As readers will doubtless be aware, this week is National Pro Bono Week. Over the last few days we have learnt about the numerous ways in which the legal profession gives time and expertise in the pursuit of access to justice for all. However, access to justice does not merely depend on legal advice; rather a broader understanding of people's rights and responsibilities.

Education is key. Nowhere in the world do children begin on a level playing field — with the influence and resources of parents remaining the most likely indicator of a child's eventual position in life. However, education can go a long way towards redressing that balance, ensuring that — against the odds — disadvantaged kids can achieve a position in the job market reserved in past times for their more privileged contemporaries.

Although most advanced economies provide universal education, their standards vary widely. Schools in deprived areas are less well-resourced and, unsurprisingly, find it more difficult to attract the top teaching staff. Often children with learning difficulties are not properly catered for. As a result, the levelling influence of education can be lost altogether.

The law can be surprisingly effective in assisting access to education.



LAWYERS ACROSS OUR OFFICES GIVE FREE LESSONS TO STUDENTS OF ALL AGES. THIS WILL EMPOWER THESE KIDS TO TAKE THE LAW INTO THEIR OWN HANDS

In most advanced economies there is some public organisation with a duty of care in relation to the education of children. Lawyers in our Atlanta office recently succeeded in two cases against

Atlanta Public Schools. In one, the court found that the public school authority (the equivalent of a UK local education authority) had misdiagnosed a child with a specific learning disability as 'mentally retarded' and, as a result, had put him in the wrong class for five years. Their reaction to a retesting, which showed their error, was to dig in their heels and refuse to change the child's class. Not surprisingly, this was held to be a breach of the public school authority's duty to the child.

A number of European countries have signed the European Social Charter, drawn up by the Council of Europe as a complement to the European Convention on Human Rights. The Charter guarantees the right to a free education and the integration of disabled children into mainstream education. Jones Day's head of pro bono in Paris, Evelyne Friedel — who is also president of Autism-Europe — has worked to ensure that the educational needs of autistic children are met, resulting in decisions against France for failure to comply with the Charter. More importantly, Evelyne's work has contributed to successive plans from the French Government (in 2005 and 2008) to provide proper education to autistic children. Clearly there is more to be done, but the lot of autistic children in France

has been greatly improved as a result of legal action.

Disability issues aside, the widely differing educational standards between the rich and the poor remain an uncomfortable fact of life. Lawyers across our various offices give free lessons to students of all ages, providing both practical insights into the profession for prospective law students and wider legal education. Hopefully, this will empower these kids to, quite literally, take the law into their own hands.

Turning educational achievement into something more financially rewarding is not always straightforward, which is why mentoring is so important. Matching professionals to disadvantaged young people with whom they can talk on a regular basis — which is something we do through our mentoring programmes — is a way of providing the guidance that many of us obtained from friends and relatives in better-paid professions. Advice on interview techniques, subject choices and career aspirations can be invaluable.

More than anything else, a good education brings the most precious commodity of all to young people: hope and an understanding that not everyone ends up in life exactly where they started. ■

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