

A Board Member Reflects on Practicing School Law

By *Lara Hruska*
WWL Publicity VP

"School law? How interesting! What is that?"

More often than not, when I tell people my practice area, I'm met with puzzled interest. Nobody really considers just how many legal issues take place within schools, until I explain that my practice encompasses nearly countless areas of law: Employment, labor, torts, contract, property, disability, family, municipal, and Constitutional legal issues abound within a school law practice. There is never a dull moment, and my practice is dedicated to promoting an institution that I see as nothing less than the cornerstone of democracy: public education.

Before law school I was a special education teacher and social worker in Harlem, Brooklyn, and post-Katrina New Orleans. I worked exclusively in Title I schools where the vast majority of students were students of color living in urban poverty. My colleagues were the most selfless and dedicated people I have ever encountered and together we worked to navigate students and families through the seemingly endless issues that low-income communities encounter daily.

After five years on those frontlines, I began to experience some very real compassion fatigue and to think strategically about how to transform my career into a more systems-oriented approach to the issues I was seeing in my schools. In my role as a founding special education director for a charter school in New Orleans, I worked closely with an attorney who advised our leadership team on how to handle situations within our school that at first glance seemed insurmountable. Her expert guidance alleviated our intense anxiety and enabled us to focus on the

critical business of teaching and learning. Like her, I wanted to be a problem-solver, freeing educators to do the work that brought them to teaching in the first place.



WWL Publicity VP Lara Hruska
 (photo credit: Preg O'Donnell & Gillett PLLC)

I went to law school with a very specific focus in mind: I wanted students, teachers, and schools to remain a central part of my career. At the University of Washington School of Law I met professors who, like me, had come from teaching backgrounds and introduced me to attorneys whose practices supported school districts around the state. As a law student, I worked in-house with general counsel for two districts that face many of the same diversity issues I encountered helping my disenfranchised students find agency in their circumstances. Now I work in a school law practice at a Seattle firm that does exactly the work I came to do and supports school districts around the state. In addition to the litigation side of our legal practice, my firm provides trainings to school districts on issues such as racial disproportionality in student discipline, promoting diversity in the workforce, and ensuring that district

policies and procedures are compliant with state and federal anti-discrimination law related to sex, gender, race, and ability. We work proactively with district general counsel and administrators on risk assessment and pre-litigation matters to prevent issues on the front-end and promote functional and successful schools. I call upon my past experiences nearly every day in order to best advise our clients and feel tremendously grateful to have that continuity in my vocation.

I strongly believe that a school is the most important institution in a community. Even the most polarized stances on education reform stem from the common belief that strong schools are fundamental to a healthy society. I love that my job as a school lawyer is to make sure the schools stay strong so that students from all backgrounds can learn. ♦♦♦

Lara Hruska is an Associate at Preg O'Donnell & Gillet where she practices school law. Prior to law school she was the founding special education director for two post-Katrina charter schools in New Orleans. She currently serves as the WWL Publicity VP.

Save the Date

2013 Annual Reverend Dr. Martin Luther King, Jr. Luncheon

Friday, January 17, 2014
 Noon - 1:15pm

Sheraton Seattle Hotel
[Registration Page](#)

26th Annual Goldmark Award Luncheon

February 21st, 2014
 Noon - 1:30PM

Sheraton Seattle Hotel
[Registration Page](#)