

ELC EDUCATION LAW CENTER



EDUCATION LAW CENTER STRATEGIC PLAN

2026 – 2029

www.edlawcenter.org

I. INTRODUCTION

For more than 50 years, Education Law Center (ELC) has worked to increase access, equity and opportunity and secure justice for students in pre-K to grade 12 public education in New Jersey and across the nation. Over the past three years that were covered by our 2023 to 2025 strategic plan, ELC has:

- **Welcomed a new Executive Director and seven new Trustees** committed to education equity;
- **Participated as co-counsel or amicus** (“friend of the court”) in voucher, school finance, student rights or other education-related cases in 15 states in state or federal courts, including several briefs in the U.S. Supreme Court;
- **Advanced the imperative of school desegregation** as a civil right through groundbreaking litigation in New Jersey and Minnesota;
- **Partnered with and provided technical assistance** to state and local organizations in over two-thirds of states;
- **Worked to secure full funding** of New Jersey’s school funding formula and provided **direct legal representation or advice** to nearly 600 students and families throughout New Jersey; and
- **Engaged in increased federal education advocacy** due to the impact of federal threats on states and school districts.

Over the next four years (2026-29), ELC will continue to serve as a preeminent state-level advocacy organization in New Jersey, while also meeting the challenges and threats facing students, state and local organizations, and partners across the nation.

What are these challenges and threats? At the federal level, they include the introduction of policies to (a) expand school privatization efforts, (b) dramatically reduce federal funding for public education, (c) increase censorship in classrooms and curricula, and (d) threaten students’ civil rights. These policies have placed millions of vulnerable students, and public education as a whole, at risk. Further, the federal actions have mirrored and spurred similar actions by state legislatures and local school boards across the nation. In New Jersey, our challenges include addressing shortfalls and inequities in school funding, modernizing a nearly two-decade-old school funding formula, spurring new construction and renovation of school facilities, enforcing students’ civil rights, and addressing unacceptable levels of segregation by race and income in our public education system.

Despite these challenges, the coming years provide an opportunity to explore what students need to thrive in a world that has changed rapidly over the last quarter century; to secure essential school resources for students using law, policy advocacy, and research; and to bring together communities, advocates, and policymakers to protect and strengthen public education as a pillar of our democracy.

We recognize that, even within a specialized field such as public education, ELC cannot be all things to all people. We have capacity limitations that impact the scope and quantity of our work and our ability to engage in direct litigation and advocacy while also providing requested technical assistance to other organizations. Therefore, we must pursue a forward-thinking strategy that reflects our need to be selective and targeted in our work *and* to take steps to boost our capacity to meet the rising demands of our sector and the growing needs of marginalized students and their schools.

In this strategic plan, we clarify our program areas, articulate programmatic goals that are future-oriented, and describe how we will work to get there.

Vision

ELC envisions a society in which all children have access to a free public education that allows them to reach their highest potential.

Mission

For over 50 years, Education Law Center has pursued justice and equity for public school students by enforcing their right to a quality education in safe, equitable, non-discriminatory, integrated, and well-funded learning environments. We seek to support and improve public schools as the center of communities and the foundation of a democratic society. We strive to secure the rights of students of color, multilingual learners, students living in poverty, students with disabilities, immigrant and migrant students, LGBTQ+ and gender non-conforming students, students of varying religious or non-religious backgrounds, and any student who is underserved or experiences discrimination or inadequate learning opportunities. To achieve these goals, we engage in litigation, research and data analysis, policy advocacy, communications, and strategic partnerships and collaborations.



Key Principles

- Public education is central to student development, community well-being, and democracy;
- All students, no matter their background or needs, must be afforded the resources, supports, and opportunities necessary to thrive in school and throughout life;
- Confronting racism and other forms of oppression is essential to dismantling systemic barriers to educational opportunity and student success;
- Education and advocacy are more effective when they include and value the diverse voices, abilities, and experiences of students, families, and educators;
- Public officials and institutions must be transparent and accountable to the communities they serve; and
- The legal system is an essential tool for upholding governmental obligations and for securing and enforcing students' rights.

What We Do: An Integrated Model for Education Justice

ELC uses six core strategies to execute our mission: community engagement, research, litigation, policy advocacy, communications, and strategic partnerships. We use these strategies not as independent activities but as an integrated circle where legal and policy wins and setbacks generate new questions and opportunities for feedback through community engagement and research. We continuously repeat this cycle to expand our impact.



- **Community engagement** and **research** efforts provide our evidence base, ensuring that our work is grounded in data and the lived experiences of local communities;
- **Litigation** and **policy advocacy**, informed by our evidence base, serve as tools for systemic change; and
- **Communications** and **strategic partnerships** enable us to create a compelling narrative and build a broad base of collective power to accelerate and sustain our policy and legal victories.

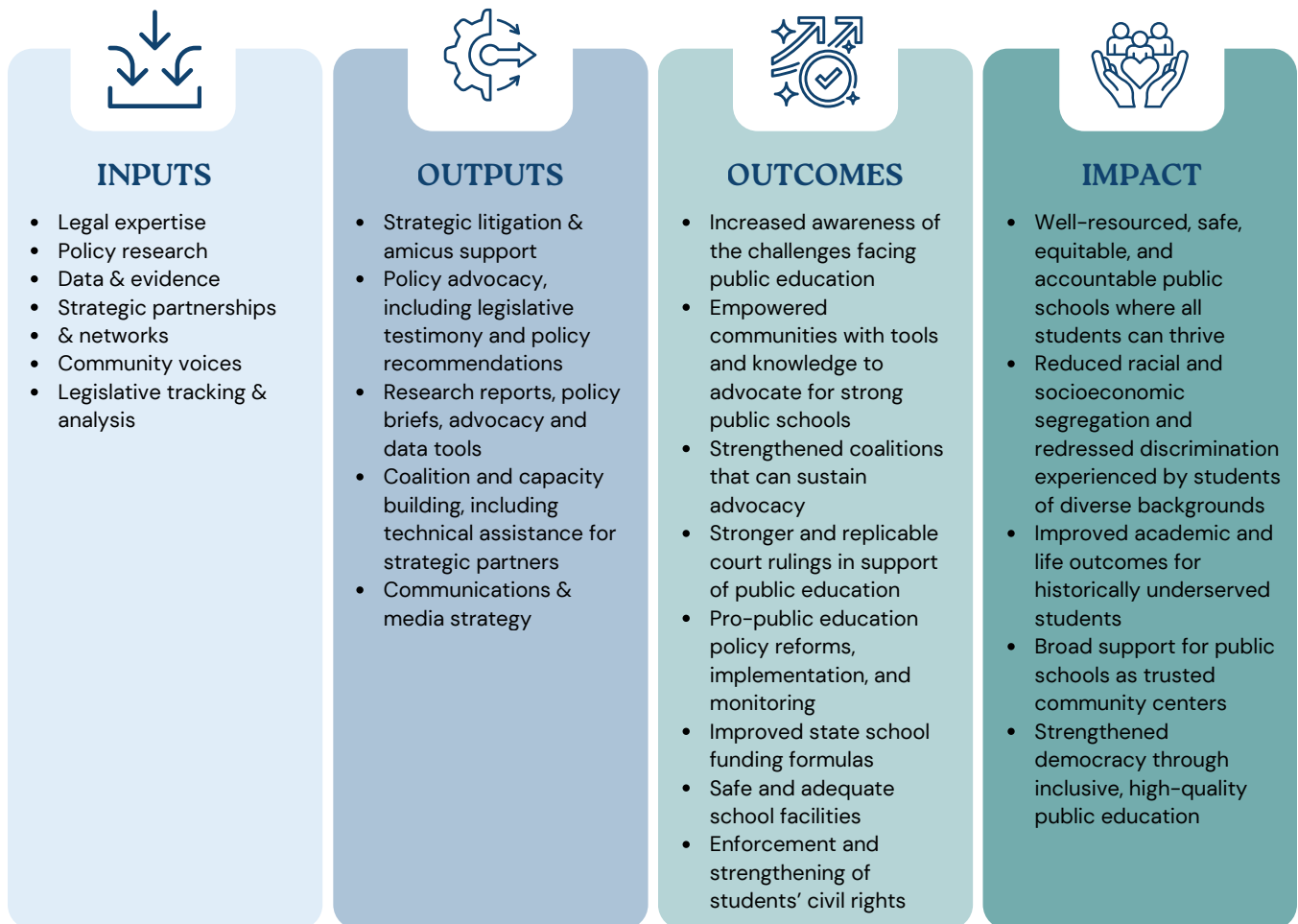
Theory of Change

ELC’s theory of change (see diagram below) is grounded in our belief that every child has a fundamental right to a high-quality public education, and that robust legal protections, equitable funding systems, and accountability are essential to ensuring that right.

When students are unjustly denied the resources and opportunities they need, ELC uses our six core strategies, informed by our legal expertise, policy research and analysis, coalitions and network partnerships, and community voices, to change the laws, policies, and practices that produce and perpetuate those disparities.

The goal of these efforts is stronger legal protections for students’ rights, more equitable and adequate school funding, improved school facilities, increased access to high-quality programs that improve student outcomes, and empowered communities with tools and knowledge to advocate for equitable, high-quality public education.

Over time, these changes will help ensure that public schools are well-resourced and capable of meeting the needs of all students, particularly those in historically underserved communities, and that public education remains the foundation of a strong and thriving democracy.



OUR HISTORY

Since our founding in 1973, ELC has worked to advance fair and equitable school funding, racial justice, and student rights. Our story begins in our home state of New Jersey with the landmark *Abbott v. Burke* school funding lawsuit, heralded by *The New York Times* as the most important legal decision in public education since *Brown v. Board of Education*. In addition to equalizing funding between the state's highest and lowest wealth school districts, the *Abbott* rulings led to the creation of the nationally recognized *Abbott* preschool program, an extensive school construction program, and a series of academic and wraparound programs to support at-risk students in the state's 31 urban school districts.

Today, ELC remains deeply committed to New Jersey, with a substantial share of our operations dedicated to litigation, advocacy, and resources for students and families within the state. We provide a critical voice in New Jersey education policy and serve as a watchdog to ensure that the state continues to meet its obligation of providing schoolchildren with a high-quality public education.

For the past two decades, ELC's work has expanded beyond New Jersey. We have utilized our expertise in topic areas such as school funding, private school vouchers, and student rights to make meaningful legal, legislative, research, and policy contributions in states across the country and at the federal level. We have engaged in direct action and technical assistance as requested by on-the-ground organizations and other partners in states. We have also identified opportunities for impactful work in states, especially in the case of school funding issues. Significant efforts included assuming aspects of the work of New York's Campaign for Fiscal Equity in 2011 and serving as co-counsel in two major New York school funding lawsuits, winning the first ever lawsuit challenging a universal private school voucher program in Nevada in 2016, and providing legal counsel for school funding legal victories in New Hampshire in 2025.





II. CORE PROGRAM AREAS: OVERVIEW

A. New Jersey Program

Through our New Jersey Program, we work to enforce students' constitutional right to a "thorough and efficient" education and serve as one of the state's leading advocates for school funding and education equity. **Our New Jersey Program is organized around three main areas of work: school funding & resource equity, student rights, and school desegregation.**

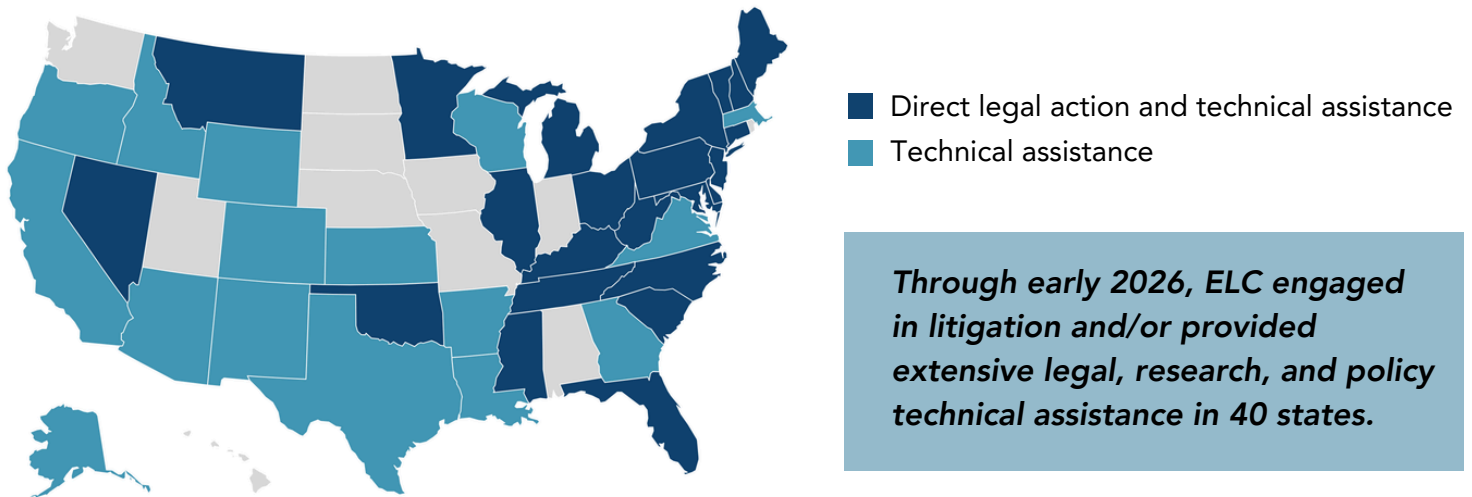
- **School Funding & Resource Equity:** Grounded in decades of litigation and advocacy on behalf of schoolchildren in districts impacted by *Abbott v. Burke*, ELC works to ensure adequate funding for all students, with particular emphasis on students living in poverty, students with disabilities, and multilingual learners. Our work also includes advocating for safe and equitable school facilities and learning environments and high-quality preschool.
- **Student Rights:** Through our Student Rights Project (SRP), the only nonprofit, legal assistance program in New Jersey that specializes exclusively in education law, ELC provides free legal assistance and guidance to hundreds of income-eligible families and in a handful of select cases, direct representation, in disputes involving public education from pre-school through high school. We address issues involving a wide range of school law issues, including special education, discipline, residency, and harassment/bullying. In addition, ELC also provides extensive technical assistance, publishes widely used student rights resources, partners with disability and community advocates, and convenes the New Jersey Special Education Practitioners network.
- **School Desegregation:** ELC engages in critical work to ensure New Jersey students learn in integrated and diverse learning environments. We serve as co-counsel in a landmark statewide school desegregation lawsuit and engage in research, policy advocacy, and coalition work to support desegregation strategies.

B. National Program

Through our National Program, ELC works to enforce education rights in the states and to ensure that all students receive the school funding, educational opportunities, and resources they need to reach their full potential. We help state and national partners pursue fair, adequate, and equitable funding to strengthen public education. **Our National Program focuses primarily on fostering fair and adequate state school funding policies and fighting the spread of private education vouchers, with growing attention to monitoring and addressing federal policies impacting students and public education.**

- **School Funding:** Through our National School Funding Project (NSFP), which will be formally launched in 2026, ELC supports and strengthens school finance reforms nationwide by initiating and assisting in litigation, conducting and disseminating research, and providing extensive technical assistance to advocates, attorneys, and policymakers. At the federal level, we advocate for the continuation of an appropriate federal role and robust investments in public education, and the lawful and effective use of federal education funds for states and districts, through litigation, public comment, and legislative testimony. Each year, we release [Making the Grade](#), a report offering analysis of public education funding in all 50 states and Washington, D.C. We also host an annual convening of experienced school finance litigators (the “Litigators’ Workshop”) and maintain a comprehensive school finance litigation database.
- **Private Education Vouchers:** Our well-respected [Public Funds Public Schools](#) (PFPS) campaign is the national leading authority on private school vouchers and other diversions of public funds to private education expenses. Through litigation, research, legislative tracking, information sharing, coalition-building, and technical assistance, the campaign works to ensure that public funds are used to support and strengthen public education. In addition to filing and joining litigation challenging the constitutionality of voucher programs, PFPS educates policymakers and the public about the harms of vouchers, supports state-based advocacy efforts, creates and disseminates advocacy tools, maintains the only publicly available nationwide voucher bill tracker, and monitors and responds to federal voucher proposals and implementation.
- **Student Rights:** We work to break down barriers and challenge discriminatory policies that deny students a high-quality public education and to advance and strengthen public schools so they remain the trusted centers of our communities and a foundation of democracy. Currently, at the national level, this work includes participating in limited litigation and filing of amicus briefs in state and federal lawsuits addressing cutting-edge legal issues, such as school integration, the rights of students with disabilities and LGBTQ+ students, and censorship.

ADVANCING EQUITY ACROSS THE COUNTRY THROUGH LITIGATION AND TECHNICAL ASSISTANCE



Technical assistance (TA) is a core component of ELC’s strategy for strengthening the national field of public education advocacy. Using our deep-rooted expertise in school funding, student rights (including special education), and private education vouchers, we support organizers, advocates, attorneys, educators, policymakers, and community partners in New Jersey and across the country. Our robust technical assistance program includes:

- **Legal analysis and guidance**, including interpretation of statutes, regulations, and case law;
- **Litigation support**, including strategic guidance in lawsuits, connecting litigators with experts, and maintaining a repository of school finance litigation documents;
- **Policy and legislative analysis**, including review of bills and proposals and assistance with legislative testimony or questions for policymakers;
- **Research and data support**, including access to ELC’s school funding data, analysis of school funding systems and policy changes, and modeling impacts of proposed school funding reforms;
- **Advocacy tools**, such as fact sheets, policy briefs, and talking points;
- **Messaging and communications support** to help partners effectively frame issues and engage the media and public;
- **Coalition participation**, including strategic advice, coordination, and capacity-building support; and
- **Responsive consultation**, providing real-time assistance to organizations facing emerging threats, litigation opportunities, or policy changes.

Partnerships

We advance our mission through strong partnerships and strategic collaborations at the state and national levels. We work with a broad network of community-based organizations, civil rights advocates, educators, policymakers, and legal allies to strengthen public education and promote equity.

In New Jersey, we foster collaboration, amplify community voices, and drive systemic change through convening and participating in coalitions such as Our Children/Our Schools (a statewide network of education, civil rights and children’s rights organizations), Great Schools New Jersey (a network of high-need district superintendents), Healthy Schools Now (a coalition of over 130 organizations working to promote safe, up-to-date school facilities), and the New Jersey Special Education Practitioners network.

Nationally, we partner with leading education and civil rights organizations—including the Southern Poverty Law Center, American Civil Liberties Union, the NAACP Legal Defense Fund, the National Education Association, and the American Federation of Teachers—and participate in cross-sector networks to share expertise, align strategies, and expand the collective impact of public education advocacy. ELC also has close relationships with the Network for Public Education, the National Coalition for Public Education, the National Coalition on School Diversity, the Leadership Conference on Civil and Human Rights, and many state-based organizations. We are also the fiscal sponsor of the Partnership for Equity and Education Rights and provide support to its member organizations.





III. STRATEGIC DIRECTION: ADVANCING EQUITY IN NEW JERSEY AND NATIONWIDE, 2026-2029

ELC will engage in a bold, coordinated strategy to defend and strengthen public education in New Jersey and nationwide. As threats to education funding, student rights, and public institutions intensify, our leadership and expertise will be more essential than ever. Building on decades of impact, we will pursue new or more expansive approaches to education equity—such as making the connection between school funding and segregation, confronting curriculum censorship laws, and advancing students’ civil rights and civil liberties through individual legal representation and impact litigation.

Our strategy for both the New Jersey Program and the National Program includes two stages. **Stage 1 (2026-2027)** focuses on building capacity and positioning ELC to respond effectively to emerging challenges. **Stage 2 (2028-2029)** builds on that foundation to expand ELC’s reach and deepen impact. These stages are outlined below.

A. New Jersey Program

Stage 1 (2026-27): Defending and Strengthening Public Education Statewide

With a new gubernatorial administration in office, ELC is positioned to respond to emerging challenges and changes and to seize opportunities to advance education equity statewide. We will build on our role as one of New Jersey’s leading defenders of public education by engaging with our partners in robust efforts to create a more just and equitable public education system in which all students can thrive. Priorities include:

With increased capacity, ELC aims to:

- Expand our ability to litigate high-impact cases in New Jersey and nationally;
- Broaden our technical assistance and student rights programs to support organizers, advocates, attorneys, and organizations across the country;
- Respond to unprecedented federal threats to public education; and
- Identify opportunities and develop forward-thinking strategies to expand student rights, build support for public education, and strengthen nationwide movements for education justice.

1. **Ensuring school funding equity, adequacy, and integration** by strengthening New Jersey’s school funding formula and enforcing students’ rights to learn in racially integrated and supportive school environments.
2. **Addressing New Jersey’s aging school facilities** by continuing to elevate the urgent need for safe, modern school facilities and renewed state investment in school construction to fill the more than \$7 billion shortfall in capital facilities funding for Abbott/Schools Development Authority (SDA) districts.
3. **Prioritizing student rights** by engaging in a comprehensive review of our New Jersey-focused Student Rights Program (SRP), assessing emerging needs across the state’s student rights landscape, and strengthening communication and collaboration with New Jersey legal and advocacy partners to better meet the needs of students and families.

Stage 2 (2028-29): Strategic Expansion

Depending on increased capacity, we have identified two areas of focus for expansion in our New Jersey Program:

1. **Early Childhood Education:** We will renew our commitment to protect and strengthen New Jersey’s Abbott preschool legacy, promote equitable access to high-quality early education, and elevate New Jersey’s model nationally.
2. **Student Rights Program (SRP):** We will increase direct support for students and families in response to weakened federal civil rights enforcement and work in collaboration with multiple organizations to strengthen statewide capacity to ensure equity for and redress discrimination experienced by students of diverse backgrounds.

B. National Program

Stage 1 (2026-27): Increasing and Preserving Public Education Funding at State and Federal Levels

Our national work will prioritize litigation, advocacy, and research related to private education vouchers and school funding in key states around the nation, while responding to federal policies that harm public education and students’ rights. Priorities include:

1. **Opposing the diversion of public funds from public education and preserving core constitutional principles** by leading and strengthening national efforts to challenge private education vouchers, stop the creation of religious charter schools, and fight back against other privatization schemes that divert public funds from public schools.

2. Continuing our commitment to school funding equity and advocacy by participating in and supporting school funding litigation and research, including formally launching the National School Funding Project (NSFP), positioning ELC as a central hub for funding equity work nationwide.

3. Engaging in federal advocacy and defense to preserve the federal role in and support for public education and by responding to federal policies that undermine public education, including threats to federal funding and civil rights enforcement.

National School Funding Project (NSFP)
NSFP’s Stage 1 includes five activities: (1) litigating existing school funding lawsuits and developing new school funding challenges; (2) providing technical assistance and amicus curiae briefs to support school funding cases across the country; (3) hosting and expanding our Litigators’ Workshop to support school finance lawyers, cultivate the next generation of attorneys in this movement, and bridge the legal and nonlegal communities in the school funding arena; (4) conducting research on the impact of changes in federal funding on educational opportunity and resource equity; and (5) publishing and amplifying our annual, 50-state school funding report, [Making the Grade](#).

Stage 2 (2028-29): Strategic Expansion

Depending on increased capacity, ELC will expand its national footprint through these strategic investments:

Educational Law Technical Assistance Center (ELTAC)

Through the ELTAC, we will increase our ability to provide rapid response support to education and student rights advocates with legal questions, advise attorneys and legal organizations considering or engaging in litigation, disseminate FAQs and other materials on key issues, and host or participate in forums on emerging or common legal issues in public education.

- 1. Establishing a new Education Law Technical Assistance Center (ELTAC)** to increase the capacity of advocates, attorneys, and other partners across the country working to protect public education and student rights.
- 2. Increasing ELC’s involvement in, and support of, private education voucher and school funding litigation nationwide.** Litigation remains one of the most effective tools to limit or roll back voucher programs. Many states also require renewed or new school funding litigation and strategic advocacy to prepare courts for these cases—needs that far exceed current capacity.
- 3. Expanding our student rights focus nationally** by participating in impact litigation; hosting convenings related to student rights; and helping to build capacity for, and coordination around, student rights defense work nationwide.

STRATEGIC PLANNING AND DECISIONMAKING: CRITERIA FOR CHOOSING OUR ISSUES, PROJECTS, AND CASES

ELC makes thoughtful, strategic choices about where to dedicate our limited capacity. We leverage our considerable expertise and experience and that of our broad network of allies to determine not just where advocacy for students is most needed, but also where we can be most effective and avoid adverse unintended consequences, such as harmful court or policy decisions. We select our issues, projects, and cases using the following criteria:

Alignment with Mission and Core Values

ELC's work focuses on advancing equity and justice in pre-K to grade 12 public education, with an emphasis on dismantling systemic barriers that disproportionately harm historically underserved students. Every case and issue we take on must directly further our mission.

Centering Students and Families

We seek out and listen to the experiences of students, families, and communities most impacted by inequities in public education. Their voices and perspectives help us identify urgent priorities and guide the design of our legal and advocacy strategies.

Potential for Systemic Impact

ELC prioritizes cases and issues that have the potential to create broad, lasting change rather than isolated remedies. This means selecting matters that can set legal precedent, shift state or national policy, or dismantle structures that perpetuate inequities in education. We also assess whether legislative and judicial conditions are favorable to our work.

Responsiveness to Urgent Threats or Conditions

In addition to our longstanding advocacy in key areas, we respond to newly emerging threats to school funding, student rights, or the integrity of public education, such as the expansion of private school vouchers and discriminatory and exclusionary practices.

Partnership Support and Field Strengthening

We evaluate whether our involvement and unique expertise adds value to existing advocacy. Where strong partners are already engaged, we offer technical assistance or amicus support. Where there is a gap, ELC may lead litigation, policy advocacy, or other efforts.

Capacity and Sustainability

We assess our organizational capacity—including staff expertise and existing commitments, financial resources, and pro bono support—before pursuing new work. As part of our growth strategy, we aim to expand capacity to take on additional complex and large-scale matters while ensuring sustainability.

IV. ORGANIZATIONAL GROWTH AND SUSTAINABILITY

ELC's growth plan relies on maintaining organizational health while expanding our impact. Organizational priorities include the following:

- **Diversity & Inclusion:** Advance diversity, equity, and inclusion across the organization by strengthening recruitment, leadership, and engagement practices to increase staffing representation and foster greater inclusion and equity in decision-making and operations.
- **Sustainable Funding:** Strengthen ELC's long-term financial sustainability by diversifying funding streams, expanding individual and institutional giving, and pursuing strategic communications to garner greater financial support.
- **Pro Bono Engagement:** Expand and deepen pro bono partnerships by increasing engagement with private law firms and other legal partners to support and enhance ELC's legal program.
- **Brand Recognition:** Expand and deepen ELC's brand recognition and visibility by investing in staff and other infrastructure that will enable us to increase our social media presence, share important and relevant content with the public, create video content, and engage with the media.
- **Board Engagement:** Enhance Board leadership and effectiveness by increasing engagement in fundraising, strengthening governance practices, and leveraging strategic relationships to advance ELC's mission.
- **Organizational Infrastructure & Capacity:** Build organizational capacity by investing in staff development and well-being, improving internal systems and processes, and engaging in long-term planning to support ELC's sustainability and impact.

V. LOOKING FORWARD: MEASURING SUCCESS & IMPACT

Quantifying impact in education civil rights advocacy is inherently challenging. Litigation, legislative advocacy, and regulatory enforcement rarely produce immediate or linear results. Recognizing that reality, ELC tracks intermediate indicators that allow us to assess progress, adapt strategies, and evaluate our success.

We measure our progress not only through legal and policy victories, but through the lasting, systemic impact of our advocacy on students, communities, and public education systems. As we implement this strategic plan, we will continue to monitor indicators and outcomes, such as the number of landmark court decisions resulting from ELC participation; the adoption

and implementation of policies stemming from our efforts or influence that expand resources, protections, and opportunities for historically underserved students; and measurable improvements in access to high-quality public education. We will also track indicators of organizational and field-wide influence, including increased visibility of ELC staff and activities in the media; the reach and impact of our technical assistance program and public presentations to external partners; growth in digital engagement; and feedback from education law, policy, and advocacy partners. Internally, we will measure growth in staff capacity, diversity, and job satisfaction and in annual revenue to ensure we remain strong, sustainable, and effective.

Ultimately, we define success by our contribution to a public education system that is adequately funded, equitably resourced, and inclusive. Guided by our mission and long-term vision for high-quality public education, we remain committed to continuing to advance equity and justice in public schools so that every child has meaningful opportunities to learn, grow, and thrive.