



2024 Annual Report



93% of students involved with ERC
have improved education outcomes.



**Empowering children.
Changing lives.**

VISION

All children stay in school and thrive.

MISSION

Creating systemic change by removing
barriers to educational equity.

CORE VALUES

Innovation • Tenacious • Accountable • Fair

FROM THE CEO

Stronger Together: New Leaders and Partnerships Powering Lasting Change

Dear Friends, Families, and Supporters,

Education Rights Counsel was founded on a simple but powerful belief: every child deserves access not only to education, but also to skilled advocates who protect their rights, secure necessary services, and improve their educational outcomes.

Education law remains complex and ever-changing, and while 2024 brought new challenges, it also strengthened our resolve. I am proud to share that we continue to turn challenges into opportunities, advancing our mission with growth, momentum, and measurable impact.

In 2024, we concluded a successful three-year strategic plan that elevated education rights across Nebraska. With your support, we represented 291 students and families; provided 191 free consultations; and trained more than 1,700 people statewide. These numbers reflect the tangible difference your support makes each day. We now represent clients in all three juvenile courts across Nebraska and are preparing to begin our first cases in county courts in 2025.

To meet this growth, we welcomed new staff, including Associate Attorney, Erin Dolph, who specializes in juvenile actions and Maria Smith, Legal Specialist, who helps facilitate consultations and provides legal support. We were equally honored to welcome Yvonnda Summers, Robert O'Neil, and Kate Gallagher to our Board of Directors, whose leadership ensures we remain accountable and forward-looking.

Our partnership with the University of Nebraska–Lincoln College of Law flourished in 2024. Through

the Nebraska Children's Justice and Legal Advocacy Center, we provide training, consultation, and advocacy support to students and attorneys. This work builds the foundation for durable, statewide education advocacy. Similarly, our partnership with Douglas County solidifies structural change to ensure children in detention also access much-needed education support, and our work with UNO's Juvenile Justice Institute helps students approach their work holistically.

We continue to actively engage with the concerns and ideas of beneficiaries, staff, and partner organizations, ensuring their perspectives help guide and improve our work. We are deeply grateful for the insights of our advisory boards and the collaborative home we share at the Barbara Weitz Community Engagement Center, which strengthens our connections with students and other nonprofits. Enduring impact requires not only new ideas, but also the systems and practices to carry them forward. By investing in people, partnerships, and infrastructure, Education Rights Counsel is building an organization prepared to adapt, thrive, and serve Nebraska for years to come.

Thank you for believing in our mission and helping us bring it to life.

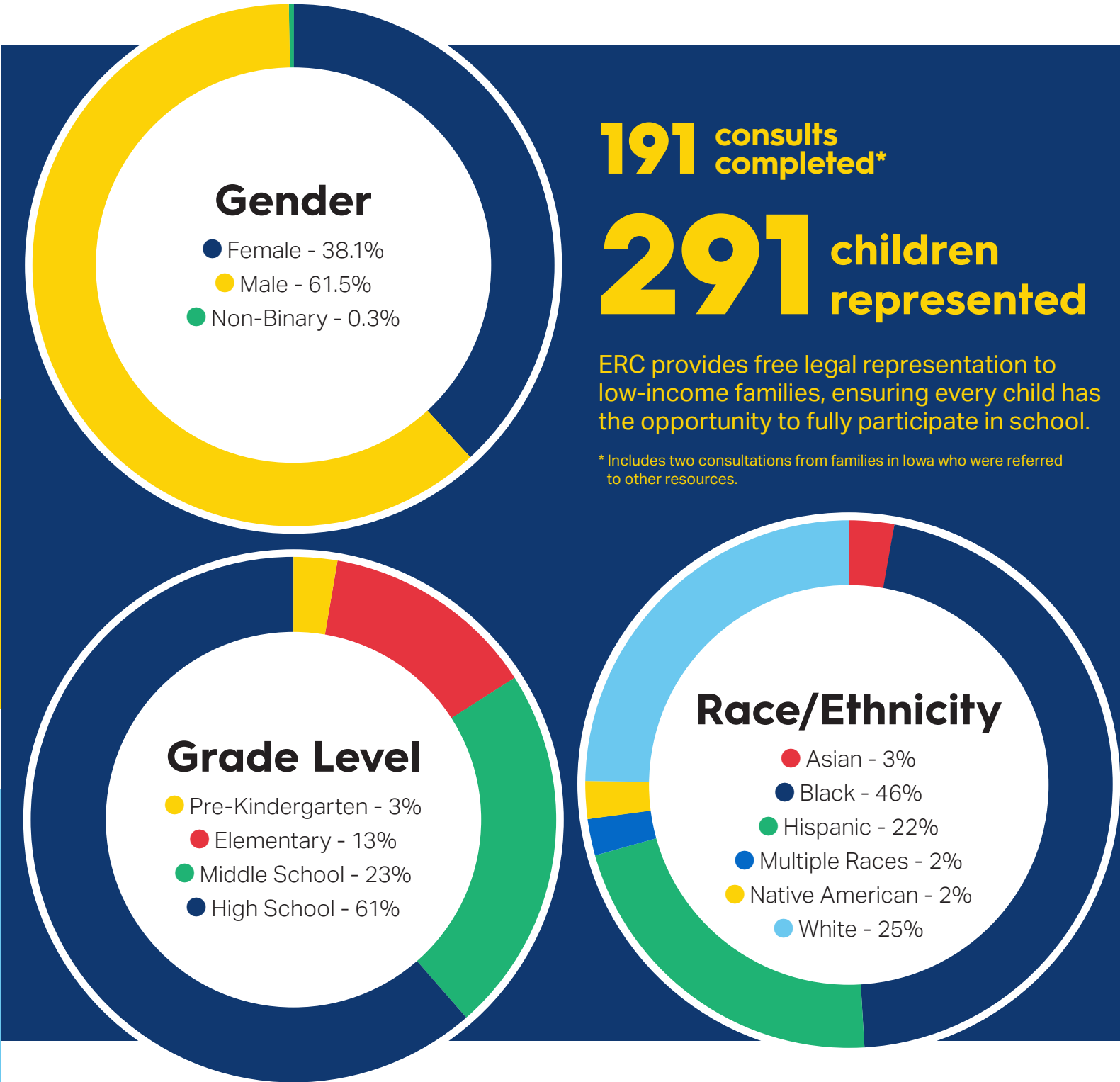
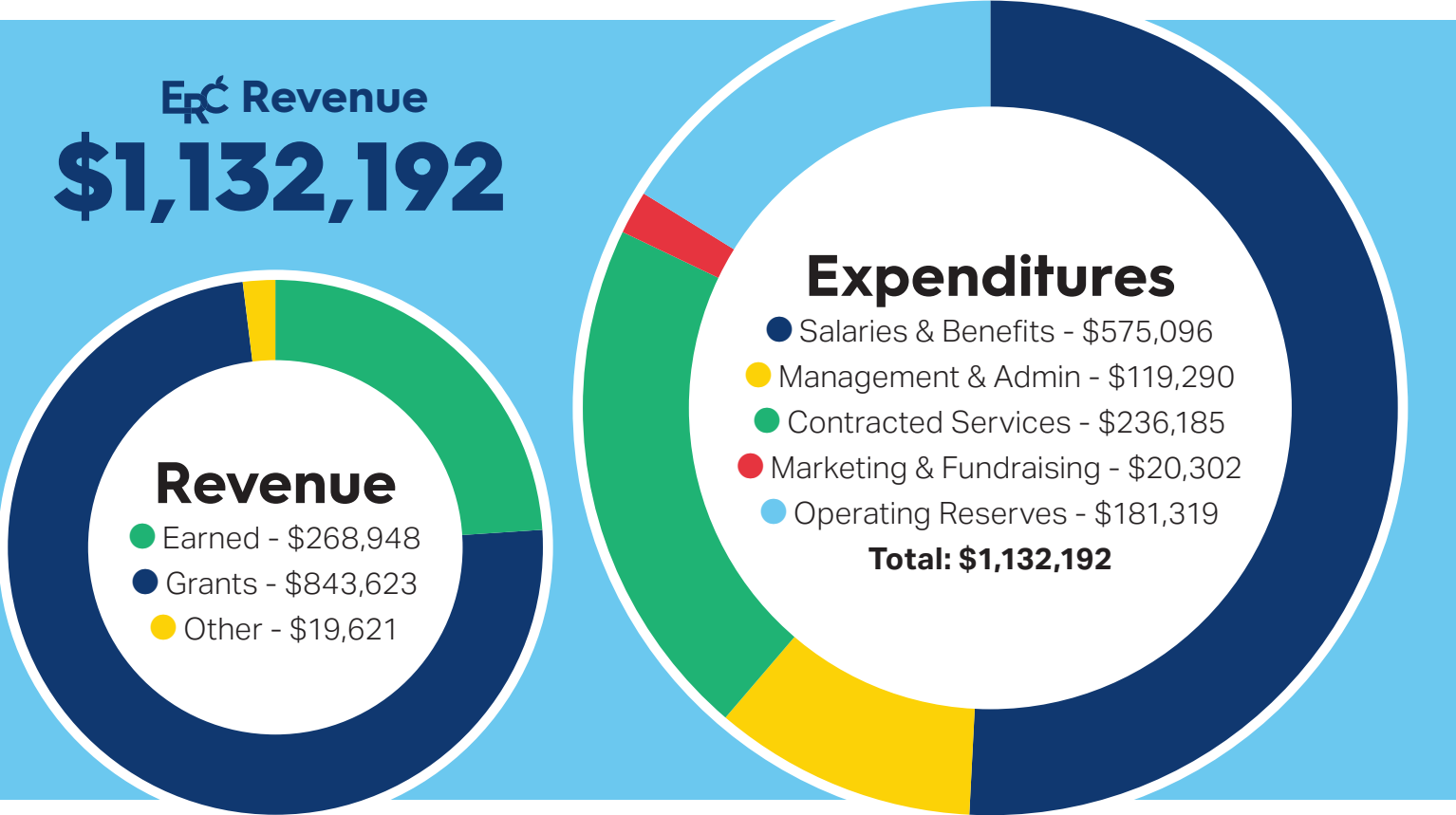
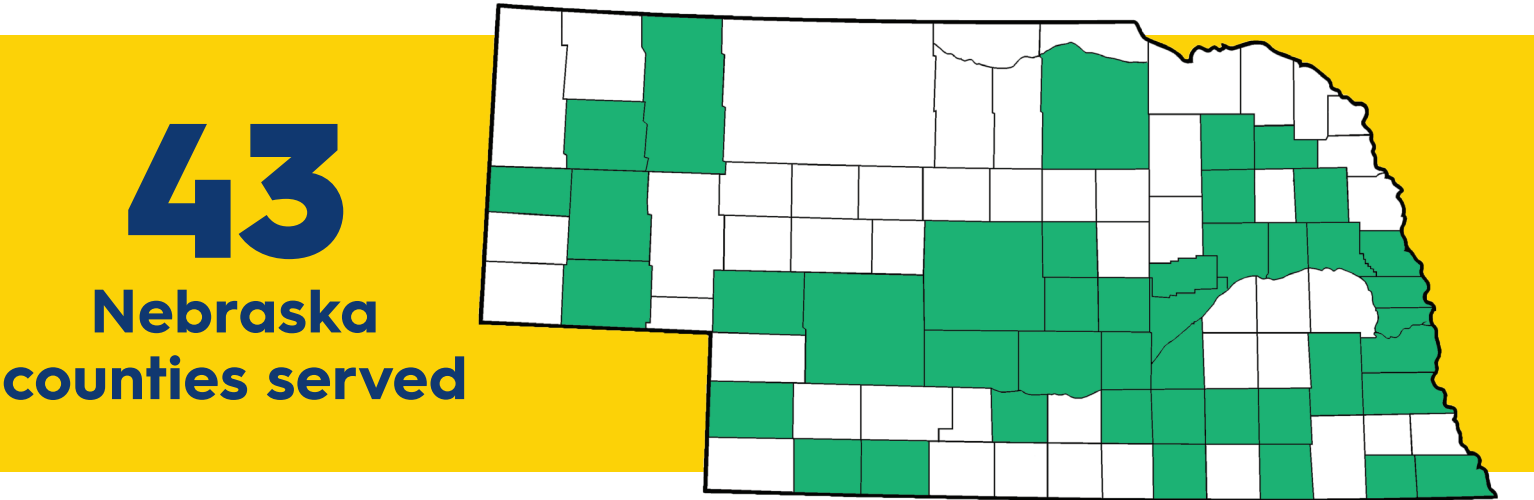
With gratitude,


Lauren Micek Vargas
Chief Executive Officer



Empowering Children Changing Lives

Thanks to our supporters, **ERC expanded our reach into 43 Nebraska counties and increased financial support by 28 percent** in 2024. Those gains helped us hire additional staff, strengthen our legal and outreach services, and deliver timely help to families.

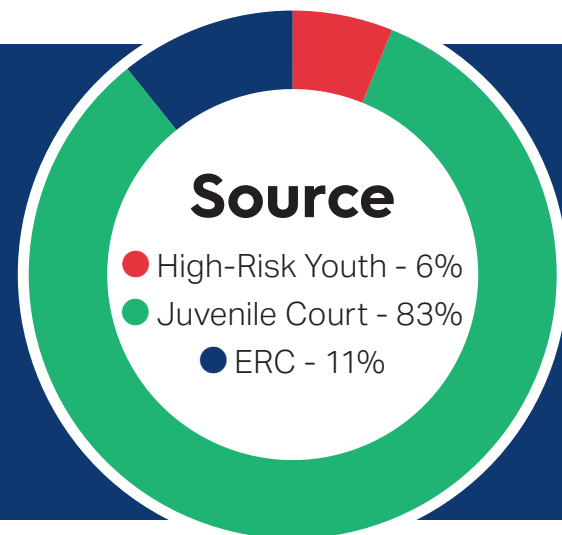


REAL PEOPLE ♥ REAL IMPACT

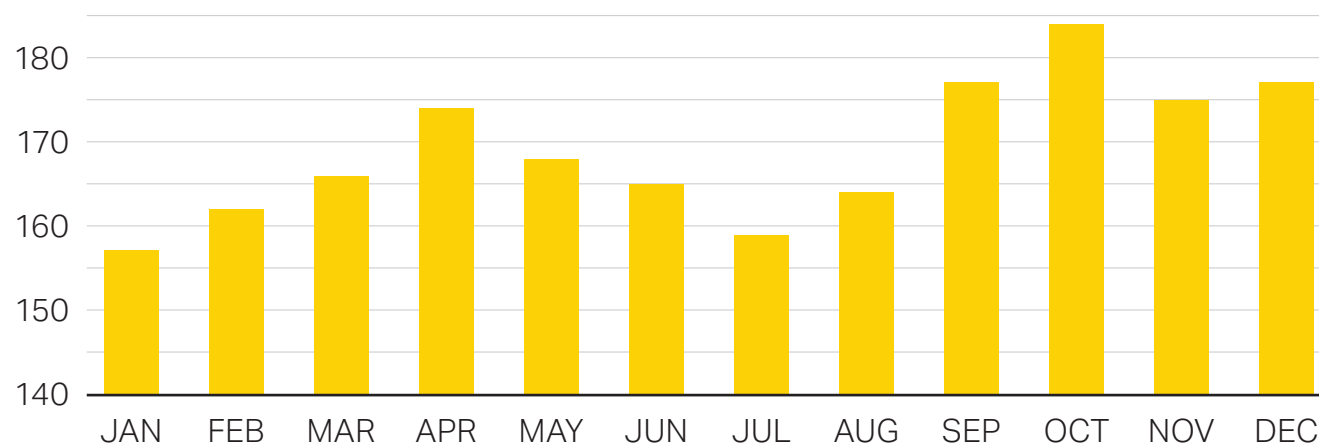
ERC helped me know what my rights were and what services were available. They **taught me how to advocate for my children** and fight for the services they deserve.

-Amy, parent of Lani

Court-involved and high-risk youth often face unique barriers to fully participating in school. That's why ERC is dedicated to protecting their education rights, ensuring more children can stay in school and thrive.



Case Load by Month



REAL PEOPLE ♥ REAL IMPACT

For my family and me, ERC has been like a light during a very dark time.

With ERC's involvement, the school took real, meaningful action to help my family. Clear goals were set and consistent support was provided."

-Fabiola, parent of Amiri and Jamir



REAL PEOPLE ♥ REAL IMPACT

From expulsion to early graduation

How persistent advocacy helped Thomas Galgerud, Jr. stay in school and thrive

Thomas Galgerud, Jr.'s high school diploma didn't come easily. After unmet Individualized Education Program (IEP) goals, a stretch of suspensions, and an expulsion, his educational future looked bleak. But with persistent family and ERC advocacy, the education system began delivering the supports he needed, and Thomas pushed through to graduate 13 months early.

"We struggled a lot ... getting IEP supports in the classroom," said Thomas's father, Tom Galgerud. "Then he had some disciplinary stuff."

With each suspension, Thomas fell further behind. "Every time I got suspended, they wouldn't give me any help. I wouldn't be able to do any schoolwork," Thomas said.

"I think that's where we first started struggling," Tom said. "Thomas got a 10-day suspension sophomore year, and they sent him home for 10 days. Then he went back to school and tried to get caught up, but he was so buried."

Tom tried to work with the school to get his son's IEP requirements met, but made little progress.

"We'd have these IEP meetings ... and nothing really seemed to come of it."

So he reached out to ERC and was connected with Lauren Micek Vargas.

"Lauren seemed to have Thomas's interests at-hand where nobody else really seemed to," Tom said. "When Lauren got involved, she made sure the school was doing the proper meetings. She made sure what was talked about in those meetings was being done in school."

With Lauren's help, Thomas began receiving the supports required by his IEP, even during suspensions.

"We found out from Lauren that [sending schoolwork home] during a suspension is required by the IEP," said Tom. "I don't think [the school] ever acknowledged that until Lauren was involved."

Unfortunately, disciplinary issues proved too much, and Thomas was expelled. To prevent further educational delays, he enrolled at the Sarpy County Juvenile Justice Center.

With a new school, proper supports, and a fresh start, Thomas began to thrive. He set aggressive academic goals, aiming to make up for lost time. Once caught up, he maintained the pace and ultimately graduated early.

Now, with his high school career complete, Thomas is looking forward to a bright future: finding a job, turning 18, and studying a trade at Metro Community College.

"I'm very impressed with what Lauren is doing," Tom said.

"Thomas's mom and I've had IEP meetings and school meetings since elementary school, and we're the only two advocates for Thomas's education. And that's the way it is for most kids. When you hit a roadblock or a dead end, it just feels like no one is listening, no one is helping," he said.

"It's nice to have someone like Lauren representing, understanding what we're going through and fighting for Thomas's rights as well." ■

Lauren seemed to have Thomas's interests at-hand where nobody else really seemed to.

Tom Galgerud, parent of Thomas

ERC is a true partner to our entire community.
When conversations get complicated, ERC helps guide the discussion. They are a bridge to help families and schools move forward together.

-Carley Starling, PsyD, LP



1,714
individuals trained

Training parents, educators, and other professionals is a critical part of ERC's mission. We empower others to advocate for students' rights by holding virtual and in-person training sessions throughout the state.



As a student attorney in the Children's Justice Clinic at the University of Nebraska College of Law, having access to a resource like **ERC has been invaluable.**

-Paige Langley, guardian ad litem



Advisory Boards

ERC's Parents and Professionals Advisory Boards are essential partners in our mission. Parents bring lived experience navigating the education system, while professionals offer expertise from the classroom, courtroom, and community. Together, they guide our work and ground our advocacy in real-world needs.

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From Idea to Action: The ERC Origin Story

Learn about the women and inspiration behind Education Rights Counsel.



Watch Now
Vimeo.com/EducationRightsCounsel



INTRODUCING



2024 Board of Directors

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BOARD UPDATE

Many thanks to Dr. Debora Basler Wisneski, David Pedersen, and Katie Weitz for their years of dedicated service on the ERC Board of Directors.

After six years, Debora stepped down, and in 2025, Yvonnda Summers became the new Board President. David concluded his service at the end of 2024, with Robert O'Neil stepping in as Secretary & Treasurer in 2025. Katie also completed her board membership at the end of 2024, and we are deeply grateful for her thoughtful contributions and steadfast support. Additionally, Christine Tran transitioned out of her role as Vice President, with Kate Gallagher taking on the position. We are grateful that Christine continues to serve as an active and engaged board member.



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& RECOGNITION

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RIGHTS COUNSEL

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THE WELLBEING PARTNERS'

LAUREN MICEK VARGAS

Excellence in Public
Service Award
OMAHA INSPIRE AWARDS

Friend of Child
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NEBRASKA CHAPTER OF
THE AMERICAN ACADEMY
OF PEDIATRICS

The ERC Team

As the only nonprofit provider of education-focused legal representation for low-income families, the demand for ERC's services grows every year. Thanks to the generous support of our donors, grantors, and sponsors, we were able to add several positions in 2024 and early 2025.

Maria Smith, Legal Specialist
As demand for ERC's services grew, it became clear we needed a dedicated role to guide families through the consultation process. Maria joined ERC in 2024, bringing her passion for justice and equity to the team. She is the first point of contact for potential clients—offering referrals, gathering essential information, and ensuring every inquiry is met with care, compassion, and professionalism.

Erin Dolph, Associate Attorney
Erin's commitment to representing traditionally under-served communities was clear even before she graduated from the University of Nebraska College of Law. Through her work with the Children's Justice Clinic, she connected with ERC, ultimately joining our team full-time to continue advocating for children and families.

Eileen Chalupa, Communications Manager
Eileen's dedication to clear, transparent communication and her passion for nonprofit work made her a natural fit at ERC. She amplifies ERC's impact by sharing our stories—helping more families, donors, and partners engage in the mission to ensure every child can stay in school and thrive.



Lauren Micek Vargas
CHIEF EXECUTIVE OFFICER



Elizabeth Eynon-Kokrda
GENERAL COUNSEL



Liz McClelland
MANAGING ATTORNEY



Sarah Dee Hollibaugh
DIRECTOR OF OPERATIONS



Erin Dolph
ASSOCIATE
ATTORNEY



Kate Placzek
ASSOCIATE
ATTORNEY



Maria Smith
LEGAL SPECIALIST



Hannah R.
LEGAL ASSISTANT



Eileen Chalupa
COMMUNICATIONS
MANAGER

2024 Aequitas Award Winners

“Aequitas” is the Latin word for justice and equality. Each year, ERC recognizes three advocates who have demonstrated dedicated to advancing educational equity for Nebraska’s children.

►► COMMUNITY CHAMPION

Chris Rodgers is a respected, practical political voice seeking to advance a new era of equity and progress in Omaha, Douglas County, and the surrounding metropolitan area. As a Douglas County Commissioner since 2005, Rodgers is focused on building a post-pandemic local public health system, improving the social determinants of health, strengthening adult corrections programs, reforming the juvenile justice system, and wisely spending taxpayer dollars. As president of the National Association of Counties (NACo) in 2012-13, Rodgers brought national attention to two critical issues: smart justice and cybersecurity. His Smart Justice Initiative continues to build knowledge and capacity for successful criminal justice policies and practices among the nation’s counties. Rodgers graduated from Creighton in 1992 with a Bachelor of Arts in journalism and a Master of Business Administration in 1999. Rodgers also received a Master of Public Administration from the University of Nebraska at Omaha in 2002. He is currently a part-time student at the Creighton School of Law.



Chris Rodgers

►► AMBASSADOR FOR YOUTH RIGHTS

Mary Pat Coe, J.D., graduated from Creighton University School of Law in 1993. Before coming to the Court Improvement Project, Coe practiced in the area of juvenile law for more than 18 years, representing parents and other family members in neglect/abuse proceedings and youth in delinquency/status offense matters. She also served as a guardian ad litem for both parents and children in dependency proceedings. In her current role, Coe continues to advocate for children, families and youth by looking at ways to improve the juvenile justice system through the continued education of its stakeholders.



Mary Pat Coe, JD

►► ADVOCACY IN EDUCATION

Dennis Marks earned a Bachelor of Arts degree in English from Briar Cliff University in 1983 and a Juris Doctorate degree from Creighton University School of Law in 1985. He has been representing juveniles in District, Juvenile, and Appellate courts since 1996 as a Deputy Public Defender for Sarpy County, Nebraska. During this time, he has also been a member of numerous local, state, regional and national boards, committees, subcommittees and task forces dedicated to juvenile justice. Marks has spoken at numerous conferences nationwide and has testified before the Nebraska Senate Judiciary Committee on several legislative bills involving criminal justice reform. He has authored articles for the Nebraska Criminal Defense Attorneys Association and The Nebraska Lawyer publications. Additionally, he contributed a chapter in a yet to be published book entitled The Handbook of Psychology and Legal Decision Making. Marks has been an Admiral in the Nebraska Navy since 2002.



Dennis Marks, JD

♥ Thank you, Donors!

The generosity of our donors provides the stable foundation that allows ERC to protect children’s rights and plan boldly for the future. They ensure **every child has the opportunity to stay in school and thrive.**

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REAL PEOPLE ♥ REAL IMPACT

I read your newsletter religiously and appreciate the heck out of the work you do. I am so grateful you are out there advocating for kids.

-Kenneth Zoucha, *pediatrician*

♥ Thank you, Grantors!



♥ Thank you, Benefactors!

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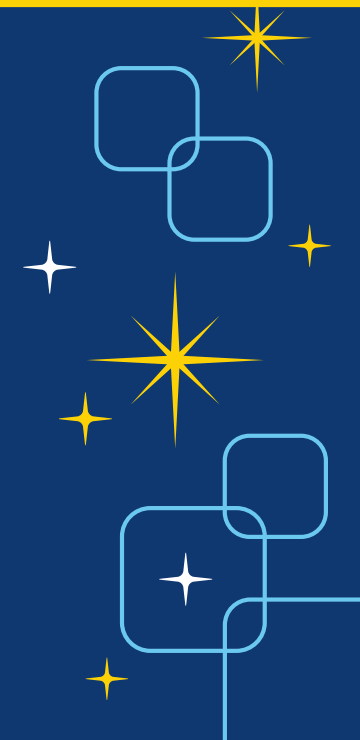
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