

2025 Annual Report



**Empowering children.
Changing lives.**

We are dedicated to:

Protecting the right to learn for every child through collaboration, advocacy, and the law

In everything that we do, we strive to be:

Innovative, Tenacious, Accountable, and Fair

Because our communities are stronger when:

All children can stay in school and thrive



Built for this moment: Protecting every child's right to learn

Dear Friends, Families, and Supporters,

When 2025 started, we knew public education was shifting. What we could not have predicted was the speed and intensity of that change. Across the country, classrooms are feeling the impact of policy upheaval, funding instability, and the erosion of long-standing federal oversight. These shifts are not abstract, they are showing up in real time for students and families.

And as is too often the case, the burden is falling hardest on students who were already navigating inequity: students with disabilities, under-resourced communities, multilingual learners, and students of color. When enforcement weakens and accountability fades, disparities widen. In moments like this, Education Rights Counsel's role is not optional; it is essential.

We are clear-eyed about the challenges ahead. But we are equally clear about our path forward.

ERC was built for moments like this. Our strength has always been rooted in partnership with families, educators, advocates, courts, and community leaders. We are pushing forward. We are strengthening our advocacy to ensure that children's rights remain protected, and re-imagining an education system grounded in care, equity, and connection. With you by our side, we can help shape what comes next.

Our "why" remains our anchor: protecting every child's right to learn through collaboration, advocacy, and the law. That clarity gives us direction. It allows us to adapt strategically, expand our impact, and stay focused on what matters most, Nebraska's children.

The task before us is great, but together we can meet it. The leadership and generosity of our supporters make it possible to defend education rights for all students. This work is deeply human and profoundly personal. We are grateful to the individuals, families, agencies, foundations, attorneys, courts, and community leaders whose commitment helps connect children to the promise of public education.

This Annual Report reflects a year of significant change, but also meaningful progress. It highlights our financial stability, operational growth, and the expanding reach of our advocacy. As we move into 2026, ERC is on strong footing. We are being strategic in order to prepare for the challenges ahead. Systems may shift and policies may change, but children's educational needs do not. Neither does our commitment.

Thank you for standing with us. Your partnership makes this work possible, and together, we will continue to push forward into 2026 ensuring every child's voice is heard and every right protected.

With gratitude,

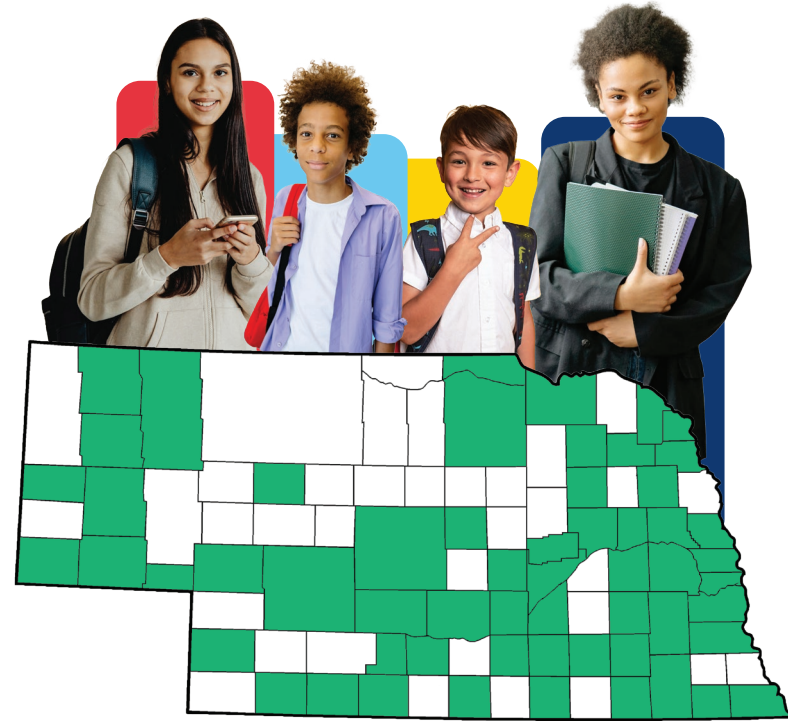

Lauren Micek Vargas
Chief Executive Officer


Yvonnda Summers
Board President



2025 in Review*

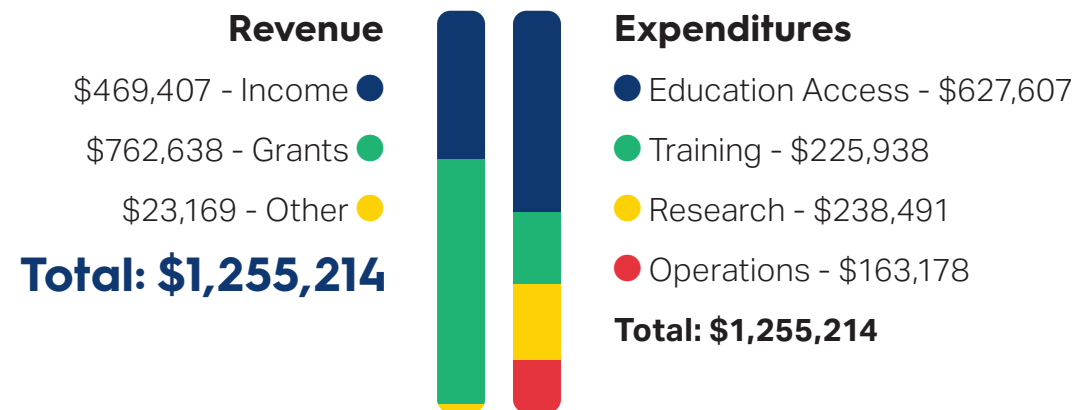
58 counties served



In 2025, ERC served children and families in **58 counties** across Nebraska, expanding our reach to ensure that every child, no matter their location, has the opportunity to learn and thrive.

No two counties face the same challenges. School resources, court practices, and community dynamics vary widely throughout the state. That's why our team shows up. We meet with families, educators, attorneys, and community partners to understand the local landscape and provide guidance tailored to each community's realities.

Responsible stewardship



*Data reflect information available as of January 24, 2026. Percentages may not total 100% due to rounding. Stories in this section are composite narratives based on real experiences; names and identifying details have been changed or omitted to protect privacy.

283 consultations



Maria Smith

Legal Specialist

Maria is the heart of ERC's consultation program. As the first point of contact for anyone seeking ERC's help, she brings warmth, kindness, and empathy to every inquiry. Because of her work, our programs are grounded in care from the very first point of contact.

ERC's consultation program is open to anyone with concerns about a student's education, from birth through age 21. With each call, staff takes the time to understand each story, ask thoughtful questions, and connect Nebraskans with the resources they need to move forward.

For Jon, a father of five, his call came at a moment of deep uncertainty. When he reached out to ERC, his daughter was showing signs of aggression and delayed speech at school. When the school district refused to conduct an evaluation, Jon felt overwhelmed and unsure where to turn. On the recommendation of a family friend, he contacted ERC. During the consultation process, Jon shared his experience with our staff and was connected to an attorney and community resources. With that support, he was ultimately able to secure a timely evaluation for his daughter.

REAL PEOPLE ♥ REAL IMPACT

"ERC has been the biggest blessing to our family that I can think of."

They have listened. They have worked tirelessly on our behalf. And they have believed us when we have spoken."

-Betsy



See Betsy's story at EducationRightsCounsel.org/Real-Impact

324 families represented

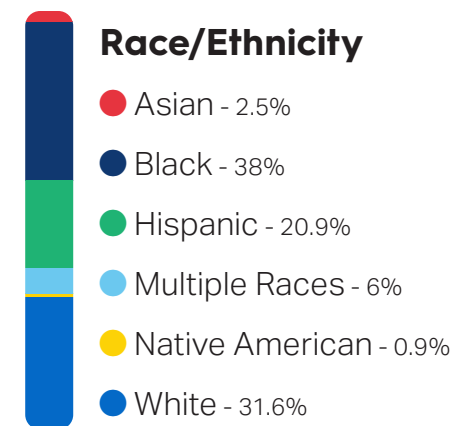
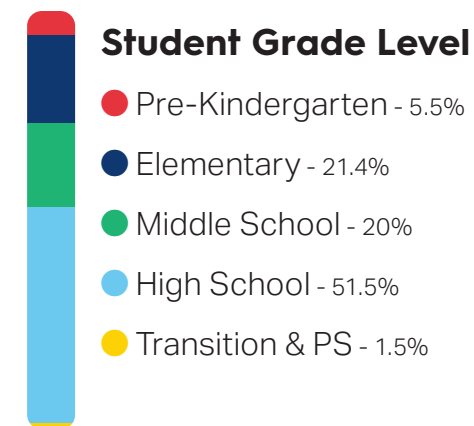
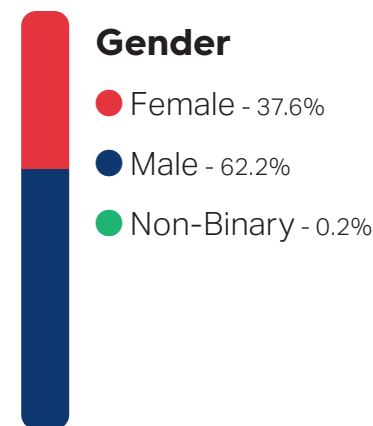


In 2025, ERC represented 324 families and education decision makers whose children's education was at risk. Many faced inappropriate discipline, unmet special education needs, or other instability, but all shared a common challenge: navigating complex systems without the resources or power to do so alone.

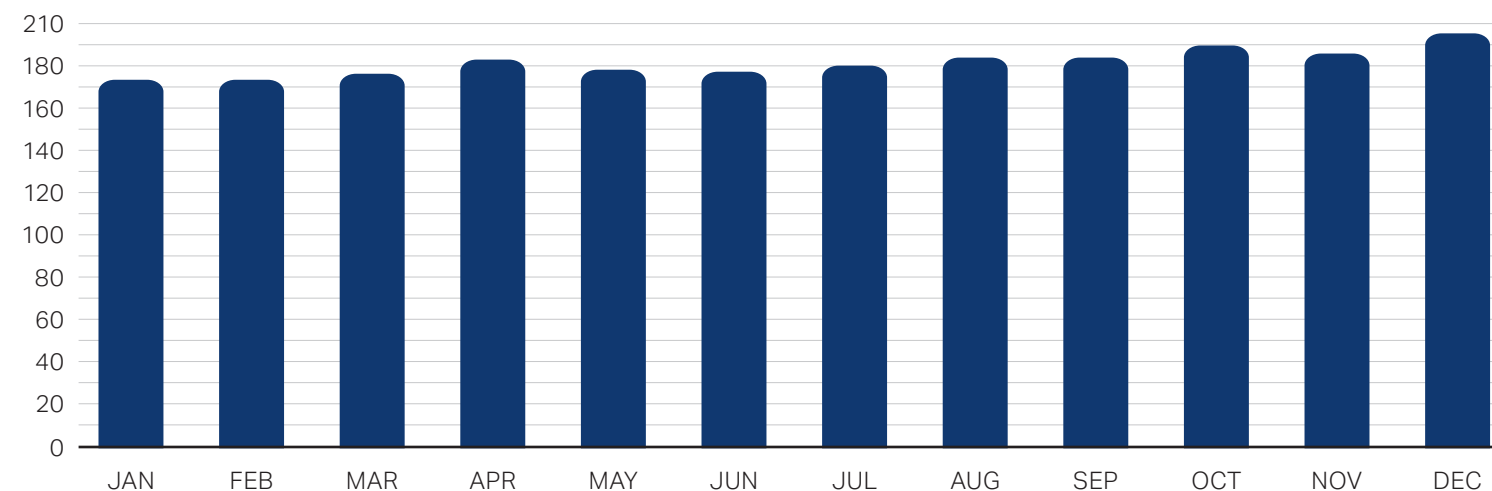
Linda and her 10-year-old son, Felix, are one such family. Felix, who has ADHD and autism, was scoring high on all his academic tests, but still struggled to engage socially with adults and his peers. When the school terminated his individualized education program (IEP), citing strong academic performance, Linda watched her once-playful son become increasingly anxious and withdrawn. When she tried to advocate for him, she felt dismissed and uncertain how to move forward. Linda was referred to ERC by her pediatrician and requested help. When ERC

stepped in with skilled guidance and advocacy, Linda gained the clarity and confidence to fight for the services Felix needed and ultimately got his IEP reinstated to focus on his social skills.

ERC provides both pro bono and court-appointed representation to protect children's right to learn. When families face barriers to services, confusing systems, or schools that are not meeting their child's needs, ERC steps in as a trusted advocate. We work alongside parents and caregivers to secure appropriate educational supports, which may include advocating for appropriate special education services, ensuring IEPs reflect a child's needs, or protecting students from discipline related to their disability, so children can grow, learn, and reach their potential from birth through age 21. As a result, **93 percent of students served achieved improved educational outcomes.**



Case Load by Month



Liz McClelland, *Managing Attorney-Juvenile Lead*

As ERC's Managing Attorney, Liz brings sharp legal experience and deep empathy to her work. She partners closely with young people, their families, courts, schools, and community providers to address educational barriers that often accompany system involvement. Liz's approach is both strategic and compassionate, focused on stabilizing school pathways, protecting legal rights, and ensuring that justice-involved youth are not only represented, but supported with the tools and opportunities they need to re-engage in their education and move forward successfully.

In 2025, Liz was named one of the Midlands Business Journal's **40 Under 40** honorees, a recognition reserved for emerging leaders shaping the future of Greater Omaha. The distinction affirms her steadfast advocacy for youth and the lasting impact of her work across Nebraska.

Liz's recognition reflects more than individual achievement. It signals the strength of ERC's advocacy and the expanding impact of our work on behalf of young people across Nebraska.

REAL PEOPLE ❤️ REAL IMPACT

"ERC really helped us understand the full landscape, especially as foster parents. Working within the foster system, which isn't connected to the educational system, ERC really bridges those two worlds for families."

-Hana



See Hana's story at EducationRightsCounsel.org/Real-Impact



Statewide expansion of juvenile representation

This year, Education Rights Counsel began expanding its juvenile education representation across Nebraska, bringing critical education advocacy to children and families involved in the juvenile justice system statewide. This growth reflects ERC's belief that access to education is not optional. It is essential to the safety, stability, and long-term success of youth navigating court involvement.

Young people in the juvenile justice system frequently face serious barriers at school, including suspension or expulsion, delays in special education services, and challenges re-enrolling after placement changes. When these needs go unmet, youth are more likely to disengage from school and remain involved in the justice system.

ERC's reach into new counties is not happening in isolation. Prior to expanding beyond Douglas, Sarpy, and Lancaster counties, ERC began receiving calls from case professionals working in county courts across the state. An attorney in northern Nebraska attended one of ERC's trainings and, recognizing the gap in his community, invited ERC to provide education rights training in Holt County. Two years later, he contacted ERC again, concerned that the services being provided for his client were insufficient, and requested that ERC be appointed to the case. This story reflects a pattern ERC continues to see: children in the foster care system across Nebraska often have unresolved education needs that follow them through the system.

ERC's interdisciplinary approach helps courts and families resolve education problems before they escalate. By keeping youth enrolled in school and connected to appropriate supports, ERC promotes better educational outcomes while supporting rehabilitation and reducing the risk of further system involvement. To sustain this work across a growing geographic footprint, ERC brought on an additional associate attorney in 2025. With a caseload primarily in Sarpy and Lancaster counties, Abigail Bennetts strengthens ERC's ability to serve youth across the state.

This expansion has been made possible through partnerships with guardians ad litem, juvenile defense attorneys, probation officers, caseworkers, and community members across Nebraska. These partners recognize that education is a critical but often overlooked part of juvenile cases and have helped ERC respond to the real-world challenges youth face in

ERC promotes better educational outcomes while supporting rehabilitation and reducing the risk of further system involvement.

different counties and school systems. As we expand our limited representation education counsel to additional counties, this work represents an important step toward a more equitable juvenile justice system in Nebraska. As ERC develops its capacity, the consult line remains available to accept referrals, evaluate needs, and guide next steps.



2,042 individuals trained

In 2025, **ERC trained 2,042 individuals across Nebraska**, a significant increase from the previous year. Participants included educators, attorneys, court staff, social workers, case professionals, mental health providers, related service providers, parents, and students, reflecting the broad network of adults who influence a child's educational experience.

During the year, ERC was contracted by the State of Nebraska Department of Health and Human Services to develop and deliver training for new caseworkers focused on education rights and effective advocacy of system-involved youth. ERC also expanded its partnership with the University of Nebraska College of Law's Children's Justice Attorney Education Fellowship Program, which trains rural attorneys, such as county attorneys, public defenders, and guardians ad litem, to embed education into their legal practices.

When adults in a child's life are equipped with clear legal knowledge and effective advocacy tools, protecting education rights can begin early and remain consistent. ERC's trainings close critical knowledge gaps, with **participants rating the relevance of the information to their daily work an average of 4.6 out of 5**. By providing communities with actionable, real-world guidance, ERC strengthens the systems that safeguard every child's opportunity to learn.

"Thank you! The more knowledge and resources I have, the more **I can empower, educate, and engage my clients.**"

-case worker

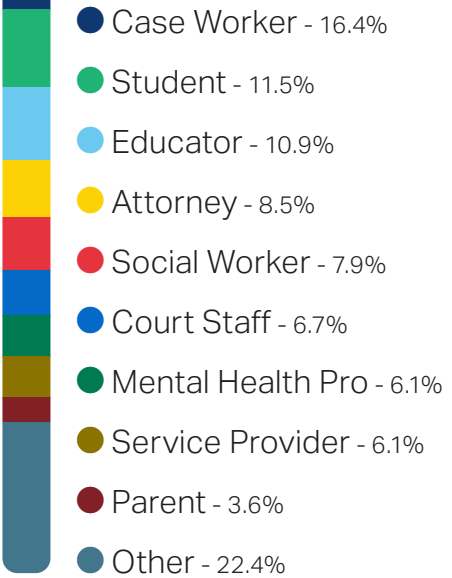
"Thank you so much for this presentation, **it was extremely engaging and important information to learn.**"

-student

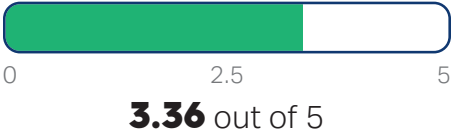
"Very impactful information that will help us serve youth with disabilities in our developmental disabilities program."

-case worker

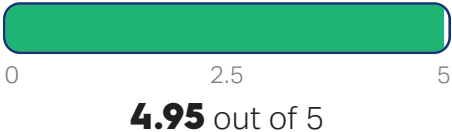
Post-Training Survey Respondents



Familiarity with presentation content



Presenters were knowledgeable/helpful



Information will be helpful in daily work



RAISE THE BAR

The importance of Section 504 of the Rehabilitation Act of 1973 on students with disabilities cannot be overstated. To elevate awareness of this landmark civil rights law, and the educators who bring it to life in classrooms, **ERC launched a new annual event in 2025: Raise the Bar.**

This free community event highlights the importance of educational access and **celebrates educators dedicated to inclusive innovation.** Each year, ERC will present the Debora Basler Wisneski Inclusive Innovation in Education Award, honoring an educator who demonstrates bold, compassionate leadership on behalf of students.

Named in recognition of ERC's founding board president and her six years of service, the award includes a financial reward to support continued innovation. To ensure this recognition endures, ERC is establishing an endowment to fund the award in perpetuity.

In its inaugural year, Raise the Bar also featured 504 Reserve Whiskey by Brickway Brewery and Distillery and a custom T-shirt by RAYGUN. Overall, the event, whiskey, and shirt raised significant funding to advance ERC's work protecting every child's right to learn.



To learn more about Raise the Bar, contribute to the Inclusive Innovation Award fund or view the full event gallery, visit: EducationRightsCounsel.org/Raise-the-Bar.



DEBORA BASLER WISNESKI
INCLUSIVE INNOVATION IN
EDUCATION AWARD

Dr. Meribeth Jackson
Program Director



The Debora Basler Wisneski Inclusive Innovation in Education Award

Honoring bold, inclusive educators who demonstrate compassionate leadership.

Give here to dedicate your funds specifically toward establishing the award.



EducationRightsCounsel.org/Inclusive-Innovation-Award



An Evening in the Cloud Room

An Evening in the Cloud Room, brought together donors and advocates committed to advancing educational justice across Nebraska.

The program included presentation of the Aequitas Awards, recognizing leaders who advance inclusive education and strengthen systems serving students. Guests also viewed the premiere of *Real People, Real Impact*, a powerful video produced by Mud Mile Communications featuring four families whose lives were changed by ERC's advocacy.



To learn more about the 2025 event, award recipients, or to view the testimonial video, visit EducationRightsCounsel.org/Cloud-Room.



AMBASSADOR FOR
YOUTH RIGHTS

James Bankhead
Probation Officer



COMMUNITY
CHAMPION

Dr. Kenneth Zoucha
Pediatrician



ADVOCACY IN
EDUCATION

Linsey Camplin, JD
Guardian ad Litem



Leadership, Honors, & Presence

In 2025, the collective effort to protect students' rights gained vital momentum through the dedication of our community. The Omaha Bar Association presented ERC with the Robert M. Spire Public Service Award, a recognition that reinforces the importance of justice for Nebraska's children.

Together, we showed up where families are, engaging in community events such as the Omaha Children's Museum Community Resource Fair and the Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midlands Back-to-School Picnic. Members of our leadership team were also honored as a Midlands Business Journal 40 Under 40 recipient and a Greater Omaha Chamber Change Maker Award honoree, distinctions that truly belong to the families and partners who work alongside us every day.

These honors reflect something larger: a growing movement of people and partners dedicated to ensuring every child has the support they need to stay in school and thrive.



Omaha Bar Association Robert M. Spire Public Service Award



Midlands Business Journal 40 Under 40 Awards



Panel discussion after a free screening of "Crip Camp: A Disability Revolution" hosted by Common Senses



Omaha Chamber of Commerce 2025 Change Maker Awards



Omaha Children's Museum Community Resource Fair



Raise the Bar, featuring 504 Reserve Whiskey by Brickway Brewery and Distillery and T-shirts by RAYGUN



Big Brothers Big Sisters of the Midlands Back-to-School Picnic



ERC's annual silent auction at An Evening in the Cloud Room



The ERC Team L-R: Sarah Dee Hollibaugh, *Director of Operations* • Maria Smith, *Legal Specialist* • Abigail Bennetts, *Associate Attorney* • Erin Dolph, *Associate Attorney* • Lauren Micek Vargas, *Chief Executive Officer* • Elizabeth Eynon-Kokrda, *General Counsel* • Liz McClelland, *Managing Attorney* • Kate Placzek, *Associate Attorney* • Eileen Chalupa, *Communications Manager*. Not pictured: Hannah R., *Legal Assistant*.



Lauren's Birthday Fundraiser hosted by Kendra Scott

REAL PEOPLE

 REAL IMPACT

"ERC is such a blessing for many people

... just being there for parents and helping them understand what they can ask for and their children's rights. It is incredible."

-Carrie



See Carrie's story at EducationRightsCounsel.org/Real-Impact



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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 wanted her to have the same options as her hearing peers."

-Vicki

Vicki's daughter Ella had been looking forward to attending her neighborhood school for two years—ever since her big sister started there. But, unlike her sister, Ella is deaf and needs a sign language interpreter in class.

Even though Ella was excelling in preschool, she was assigned to a specialized program at an elementary school miles away from her home, far from her friends, her sister, and her community.

"I grew up in a deaf program school," Vicki said. "There were so many times I didn't have choices ... I didn't want that for Ella."

That's when Vicki was referred to ERC. With ERC's help, Vicki appealed the school district's decision and won. Now, Ella is exactly where she belongs, learning in her neighborhood school with her sister, alongside her peers, supported, and thriving.

Vicki and Ella's story isn't unique. **Every year, ERC helps hundreds of families like Vicki's:**

- Parents receive guidance and experienced legal advocates.
- Students receive the services and protections needed to succeed.
- Children who might otherwise be overlooked are seen, supported, and given a real chance to thrive.

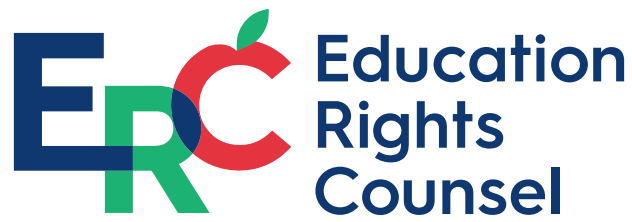
Because of you, children throughout Nebraska are staying in school and thriving.

Thank you for empowering children and changing lives.



See Vicki's story at EducationRightsCounsel.org/Real-Impact





Get involved with ERC today!

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A TRAINING



MAKE A
DONATION



GET
INVOLVED



Empowering children.
Changing lives.

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