

2009

## New Clinic to Assist Children with Special Needs and Their Families

Jaime Welch-Donahue



## **New Clinic to Assist Children with Special Needs and Their Families**

By Jaime Welch-Donahue

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William & Mary Law School has announced the opening of a new Special Education Advocacy Clinic to assist children with special needs and their families with eligibility or Individualized Education Program meetings, discipline matters, mediation, and administrative hearings. The clinic, which will begin accepting applications from clients on Feb. 1, and a new course taught by Pamela Darr Wright and Peter Wright are part of the Law School's new Parents Engaged for Learning Equality (PELE) Initiative.

Patricia Roberts, Clinical Assistant Professor of Law and Director of Clinical Programs, said that the clinic is designed to bolster the partnership between families and schools. "We see ourselves as working in tandem with school systems and families and, through collaboration, maximizing the services available to children who have disabilities."

Law students, working under Roberts' supervision, will offer their services to families at no charge and also will conduct a free training class each semester to offer tools and information to parents so that they can become more knowledgeable advocates for their children. Roberts also is working with the William & Mary School of Education to design a collaborative model for the clinic that would include graduate education students, as well as law students, in the clinic's work.

A number of groups around the state already have lent their support to the clinic. The Virginia Trial Lawyers Association (VTLA) has taken on PELE as a service project. VTLA member attorneys will receive training in special education law and will take on select clinic cases on a pro bono basis and mentor clinic students. The law firm of LeClair Ryan and the Virginia Office of Protection and Advocacy also have volunteered to assist with cases and work with clinic students. In addition, Virginia Commonwealth University's Center for Psychological Services and Development will help with testing.

Roberts credits Jeffrey Breit, the 2008-2009 St. George Tucker Adjunct Professor of Law and partner at Breit, Drescher, & Imprevento, as providing the impetus to create the clinic. Breit, she said, saw the challenges facing friends who have children with special needs and thought a clinic would be of great assistance to other families in the community and also afford an important learning opportunity for students. Breit



introduced Roberts to the Wrights, noted experts in special education law and advocacy, and the Law School designed the new clinic with the trio's extensive input.

The Law School is seeking private funding to support the clinic on an on-going basis. Jeffrey Breit and the law firm of Breit, Drescher, & Imprevento, the Legal Aid Society of Eastern Virginia, the Peninsula Autism Society, and the Virginia Trial Lawyers Association provided initial grants to get the clinic off the ground. In addition, the Wrights are conducting a one-day conference on special education law and advocacy training as a fundraiser for the PELE Initiative on Jan. 30 at the College of William & Mary's Sadler Center.

Jennifer Bacon '09 and Rich Mallory '09 are among the students who will work at the clinic during its first semester in operation. Prior to law school, Bacon participated in the Teach for America program in New Orleans and, later, after Hurricane Katrina, in Miami. She taught in schools which had high percentages of children with special needs and saw a whole system - parents, teachers, and administrators - needing more resources. If there is an area that is deserving of law students' help, she said, "it is definitely special education advocacy." Mallory said that the clinic was the type of public service encouraged among students at the Law School. The community benefits, he said, when schools understand "the statutes, regulations, and policies geared toward helping these kids get the right kind of therapy, treatment, or counseling that they need in their educational environments."

Interim Law School Dean Lynda Butler predicted that the clinic will be "both an education and inspiration for the law students involved in it. I trust that long after they graduate these law students will look back on their work with parents and children in this clinic as among the most rewarding experiences in their legal education."

*Families interested in learning more about assistance offered by the Special Education Advocacy Clinic may call (757)221-3780 or email [pele@wm.edu](mailto:pele@wm.edu) for more information.*