

## TEAMCHILD ATLANTA PROJECT

For Danny Mack, school was an afterthought. Danny had struggled with reading and math since kindergarten. Though he failed test after test in elementary school, he was moved to the next grade. In middle school, he was repeatedly suspended, yet he was promoted to high school. In high school, he started to lose hope, and his attendance deteriorated. When we found Danny, he was in juvenile court on possession charges. He was also reading on a pre-K level. Today, through the work of TeamChild Atlanta, the school properly identified Danny as having a severe learning disability – the real reason he did not like school. TeamChild was able to secure intensive educational instruction using the federal laws regarding disabled students in public schools. By targeting Danny’s most pressing needs, TeamChild helped to extract Danny from the juvenile justice system and ensure that he had the same chance to learn that all non-disabled students get. TeamChild Atlanta is a holistic legal services project of Atlanta Legal Aid Society. The core concept and guiding principal of the program is that children belong in school, not jail. TeamChild works to uncover the reasons why a child exhibits behavioral or educational problems and then advocates on the child’s behalf to ensure that any unmet educational, medical, and social needs of the child are addressed. Most of TeamChild’s legal advocacy has been in the area of special education law.

TeamChild typically serves low-income minority children with disabilities, like Danny, who end up before the Juvenile Court because the educational and social services systems that should have served them failed to address their needs. As a result, children who could otherwise be successful in school end up in jail. The TeamChild program has evolved into a uniquely effective truancy and dropout prevention program that improves quality of life for its clients by addressing the needs that are typically outside the jurisdiction of the juvenile court, such as access to special education services, mental health services, health care services, affordable housing, and public benefits.

The TeamChild attorney addresses the child’s need for civil litigation and advocacy and then partners with the child’s defense attorney, probation officers, caseworkers, therapists, physicians, and school to identify other areas of need and to solve problems as a “team”. This team approach is the most significant component of the TeamChild model. By utilizing the strengths of the all team members, TeamChild helps build continuity of service, communication between providers, and a better understanding of what the client will need to succeed.

Since its inception in 2002, TeamChild has been committed to generating more legal resources for Atlanta’s youth. In 2004 and 2005, TeamChild initiated volunteer lawyer projects at Nelson Mullins Riley & Scarborough and Alston & Bird. TeamChild has benefited from the Fellowship Program, an exchange program between private firms and Atlanta Legal Aid Society where law firm associates work with TeamChild (or other Legal Aid projects) for several months. The associates returning to the firms help generate an interest and enthusiasm for TeamChild’s efforts. TeamChild continues to explore the private bar for interested lawyers that want to make a difference for Atlanta’s at-risk youth. For more information please contact Craig Goodmark at 404-614-3955 or [clgoodmark@atlantalegalaid.org](mailto:clgoodmark@atlantalegalaid.org).

*This is part of a continuing series dedicated to raising awareness of, and pro bono support for, critical legal services programs for Georgia’s children and youth. The Lawyers’ Challenge for Children, an initiative of the YLD and the Juvenile Law Committee, has been created to highlight innovative programs that serve Georgia’s most vulnerable populations. The*

*need for appropriate legal representation is particularly profound for children. Please look for ways to offer your support throughout the coming year. For more information about the Lawyers' Challenge for Children Campaign, please e-mail Leigh Schrope, at leighstevensoh@hotmail.com.*