

PRESS RELEASE

Baker Donelson Provides Pro Bono Representation in Support of Homeless Students in Florida Education Funding Case

February 7, 2017

In the high profile case of *Citizens for Strong Schools vs. Florida State Board of Education*, attorneys with the law firm of Baker Donelson are providing pro bono representation to help ensure the needs of Florida's more than 71,000 homeless students are being met.

The lawsuit, which was originally filed by Southern Legal Counsel on behalf of a number of advocacy groups and students, charged that Florida violated its constitution by failing to meet the constitution's standards for a public education system. After a trial in Leon County Circuit Court in Tallahassee in 2016, Circuit Court Judge George Reynolds III ruled in favor of the State Board of Education. As part of an appeal of the ruling, Baker Donelson attorneys filed an amicus brief to highlight the unique plight of homeless students in Florida.

Filed on behalf of the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty, the Bassuk Center on Homeless and Vulnerable Children & Youth, the Children and Youth Law Clinic and the Disability and Public Benefits Clinic at Florida Coastal School of Law, the amicus brief argues that homeless students are a large and important subset of the students whose education is the subject of the appeal and that the trial court's ruling was incorrect and did not adequately consider the needs of Florida's homeless student population.

Baker Donelson's Dena Sokolow said, "Under Florida's constitution, the State has a duty to all of Florida's children to provide them with a high quality education. We believe that Florida is failing the homeless student population by failing to address their unique educational needs. While the trial court received voluminous evidence on the plight of homeless students, the court failed to consider this evidence in ruling that the State is meeting its constitutional duty to all of Florida's students."

According to data from the Institute for Children, Poverty and Homelessness (ICPH), Florida has the fourth highest homeless student population in the country, with more than 71,000 homeless students in the state.

"The explosive 45% growth in the number of homeless students identified in Florida since 2009 has vastly outpaced federal funding, but the State has failed to make up the difference," said Maria Foscarinis, executive director of the National Law Center on Homelessness & Poverty. "This is unacceptable, and violates Florida's constitutional obligation to its children to ensure all of them, including homeless students, are able to obtain a high quality education. The State must provide supplemental funding to ensure their educational needs are identified and met."

The Baker Donelson team contends that, despite the high number of homeless students, the State has failed to create a plan to ensure it is meeting its constitutional duty to these students, whose circumstances present unique challenges. Many homeless children have faced physical, emotional or sexual abuse, and may live with drug abusers.

The full amicus brief is available [here](#).