The Children’s Rights Committee is pleased to announce the recipient of this year’s Child Advocate of the Year Award is Maura McInerney. Ms. McInerney is a senior staff attorney with the Education Law Center in Philadelphia. In 2007, she joined the staff of the Education Law Center; however her work in child advocacy began 17 years ago when she started as a volunteer attorney with the Support Center for Child Advocates.

ELC is a public interest law firm and its staff works on behalf of Pennsylvania’s public school students most at risk of school failure, such as children who are poor, homeless, in the child welfare system, or who have disabilities. Ms. McInerney’s recent work has included serving as lead counsel in two important lawsuits under the McKinney-Vento Act (related to school enrollment of homeless children), which led to the Education Law Center receiving an award from the National Law Center on Homelessness and Poverty. Also a result of these law suits, the Pennsylvania Department of Education issued a directive clarifying that children with no fixed residence can attend school in any district with which they have a substantial connection. Ms. McInerney also recently developed a Toolkit for homeless shelter staff statewide to help them address issues related to school enrollment for children in their shelters.

Ms. McInerney’s work on behalf of children involved in the child welfare system has been groundbreaking and truly instrumental in shaping the state of law and practice in Pennsylvania, as well as nationally. Along with her colleagues, she has developed a screening tool for caseworkers in the child welfare system to use in determining whether the educational needs of the children in care are being met. She persuaded the Department of Public Welfare’s Office of Children Youth and Families to mandate the use of the screening tool for every child that comes into care. This effort has resulted in a change of practice within child welfare agencies statewide. According to her colleague at the American Bar Association, Ms. McInerney’s screening tool and training curriculum have since been used as a model for other states. Ms. McInerney is also a key author of a nationally recognized publication, Solving the Data Puzzle, that provides information on how education and child welfare agencies can share important student data in a way that is consistent with applicable confidentiality laws.

In her work with children who have disabilities, Ms. McInerney has recently served as lead attorney in a complaint filed with the Pennsylvania Department of Education on behalf of 65 children in short-term drug and alcohol treatment programs, who were not receiving sufficient education at their treatment facilities. The Department ruled in her favor and now the children receive the same amount of instruction as all public school students. In another law suit on behalf of foster children living in residential care who were being educated in a segregated
program, the result of the suit was that the segregated educational program has now been shut down.

Although she is deeply involved in policy issues and systemic reform, she does not hesitate to help individual children as well. As one nominator reported, “she won’t rest until she is assured that each student is properly enrolled in school.” By her nominators, Ms. McInerney has been described as “passionate, brilliant, and creative.” The nominators additionally noted that “Pennsylvania is lucky to have her as an attorney.” The Children’s Rights Committee is pleased to select Maura McInerney as this year’s recipient of its Child Advocate of the Year Award!