Extraordinary advocates for children and families
Providing the knowledge base and skills for effective advocacy

Loyola University Chicago’s Master of Jurisprudence (MJ) in Children’s Law and Policy is an online degree program for professionals who work with children and families in a variety of disciplines. The two-year, part-time MJ program provides individuals with a firm understanding of law and policy as they affect children and families.

The program is offered in conjunction with Loyola’s nationally renowned Civitas ChildLaw Center. Our graduates work in areas including social work, education, health care, law enforcement, child welfare, and juvenile justice, and many have moved into exciting leadership positions in their fields. Meet a few of our accomplished graduates and current students.
“In my work, I’ve cited landmark United States Supreme Court cases and used the excellent advocacy skills I’ve gained through my coursework at Loyola. Learning to write a persuasive legal memo has been invaluable.”
LOYOLA MJ IN CHILDREN'S LAW AND POLICY GRADUATES

Work on behalf of children as a court-appointed special advocate

NANCY KAY BLACKWELL (MJ ’18)
Baltimore, MD
BA, Foreign Language and Political Science
Mount Saint Mary’s University, Maryland

Executive Director, Court Appointed Special Advocates of Baltimore, MD
Nancy’s 20-year career in human services has included managing a caseload, lobbying, fundraising, grant writing, and working at the policy level for families seeking reunification and youth aging out of foster care. At the Center for Fathers, Families and Workforce Development in Baltimore, she started the state’s first Fatherhood Initiative program. At the District of Columbia’s Child and Family Services Agency, she authored a white paper that helped secure funding to implement housing strategies.

“My goal and passion throughout my career has been to effect positive outcomes for foster care, foster youth, and fragile families. With my master’s degree, I plan to work as a lobbyist at the federal level on behalf of foster youth and families.”
The MJ program was an incredible experience in which I learned things I didn’t know I needed to learn. I can now overlay a legal lens to strategic planning to advocate for legislative and policy change at both the federal and state level.

JENNIFER KENYON GENTRY (MJ ’14)
Tacoma, Washington
BA, Theater Management
University of Washington

Partnership Advisor, Casey Family Programs
At Casey Family Programs, Jennifer works in the Systems Improvement Office, focused on improving child welfare policies, practices, and financing in all 50 states. Shortly after earning her MJ, Jennifer was promoted to partnership advisor on the National Partnerships team. This team works with similar-minded organizations to reduce the number of children in out-of-home care and improve how the federal government finances child welfare. Jennifer’s portfolio includes national nonprofit organizations that bring the voices of youth who have experienced foster care to federal and state legislators and other stakeholders to advocate for change. Jennifer is also a volunteer court appointed special advocate for children.
LOYCE SPELLS (MJ ’16)
Evanston, Illinois
MA, Corporate-Organizational Communication
Northern Illinois University

Juvenile Investigator, City of Evanston, Illinois
Loyce’s police work encompasses community development, social justice, and youth advocacy. He’s also skilled in violence prevention, community policing, organizational leadership, and crisis intervention. Loyce serves on the board of several organizations, including the Illinois Juvenile Justice Leadership Council, and is a restorative justice practitioner throughout the Chicagoland area.

“An effective juvenile justice system requires a great balance of social engineering and equitable application of the law. Loyola’s MJ program equips you with the necessary tools to fulfill this mandate and trains a body of change agents to become better child advocates throughout the world.”
“I apply what I learned at Loyola to my work by confidently addressing psychoeducational concerns with parents, giving advice on both the medical and psychological components of their children’s health and the available educational accommodations.”
“I chose Loyola because of its reputation in the field of child welfare. The faculty are experts in their fields, and the program is flexible—so I can work full time and complete my coursework in the time allotted.”

LINDA ZEKAS (MJ ’18)
Chicago, Illinois
BS, Nursing, Applied Psychology, Criminal Justice Minor
Loyola University Chicago
MSN, Neonatal Nurse Practitioner Program
Rush University

Pediatric Nurse Practitioner, Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago
Linda works within the Division of Pediatric Surgery at Ann & Robert H. Lurie Children’s Hospital of Chicago. She is passionate about advocacy for children with special health care needs and says Loyola’s program is providing her with a better understanding of the complexities of child health policies.
I was always seeking out the legal advice of others. I decided to go back to school to get that expertise. Loyola’s MJ was perfect. It gave me the skills to navigate the courtroom and regulations without being a lawyer. The online format is perfect. I live in Atlanta and don’t have to put my life on hold to attend school. I’m now working as a foster family consultant, and my new expertise is really making a difference.”
Teach children with disabilities

JEANNE RANEY (MJ ’16)
Pinedale, Wyoming
BA, English Literature and Spanish
St. Olaf College
MA, Communication Disorders
University of Minnesota-Twin Cities

Speech Language Pathologist, Sublette County School District
A school-based speech-language pathologist who also runs a private practice, Jeanne began her teaching career in Botswana, Africa, where she realized her passion for helping children with learning disabilities. Her participation in the Utah Regional Leadership in Education for Neurodevelopmental Disabilities training program, which considers important aspects of work with people with disabilities (ethnic viewpoints, gender viewpoints, socioeconomics, health, law, and historical contexts), increased her desire for further education in the area of disability law and educational policy.

“The program was thought provoking and allowed me to gain valuable knowledge about the law and minors. My capstone paper on special education and English language students is being used as a framework of reference for our district.”
LOYOLA MJ IN CHILDREN’S LAW AND POLICY GRADUATES

Work in state departments of education

MEGAN WILLIAMS (MJ ’18)
Washington, D.C.
BA, Journalism
Georgia State University

Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA)
Compliance Manager,
Office of the State Superintendent of Education (OSSE)

Megan oversees compliance across school districts that serve students with disabilities. At OSSE in Washington, DC, she serves as annual performance report coordinator, responsible for coordinating OSSE’s IDEA reporting and compliance activities to the U.S. Department of Education, Office of Special Programs. At OSSE, Megan previously worked as a state complaints investigator for IDEA and local IDEA compliance monitor for DC education agencies.

“Working in a field in which policies are always being created and revised, the MJ program has prepared me to better understand the effects of policy changes and how to effectively apply those changes to my work as it relates to ensuring that programs are doing right by students with disabilities.”
“I’m only in my first semester, but my satisfaction level with this program is extremely high. I feel I’m being challenged, as well as learning new and exciting information relevant to my field.”

LAUREN ZBYSZINSKI (MJ ’18)
Phoenix, Arizona
BA, Marketing
MEd, Early Childhood Education Curriculum and Instruction
PhD, Early Childhood Education, Executive Function and Social-Emotional Development
Arizona State University
Director of Professional Learning and Sustainability, Arizona Department of Education
Lauren has worked to organize all state departments and to create a singular professional development track for early childhood education in the State of Arizona. Her research focuses on approaches to learning/executive function and social-emotional development, emphasizing development in preschool and kindergarten years. She is collaborating with the State Board of Education, other educational institutions, and federal agencies to establish a K–3 formative assessment system in Arizona.
Loyola went above and beyond my expectations. The classes, professors, and material were challenging and engaging. The additional supplemental programs like the immersion weekend and the Rome program were extraordinary and enriching. I also really appreciated my relationships with the professors, and knew they were available not only for questions, but also for additional materials and useful conversation.”
Preparation for success in diverse careers

Loyola alumni take many career paths, all playing key roles in the lives of children and families. Here are some of the positions held by Loyola’s MJ graduates:

- Chief of Staff, Assistant Secretary of Education, U.S. Department of Education
- Executive Director, First Nations Child and Family Caring Society (Canada)
- President, American Professional Society on the Abuse of Children
- Director of Early Childhood Development, American Academy of Pediatrics, Illinois Chapter
- Executive Director, Latino Family Institute
- Superintendent of Schools, Elmwood Park, NJ
- Clinical Associate Professor, Feinberg School of Medicine
- President, Allendale Association
- Child Welfare Specialist, Little City Foundation
- Consular Agent, Secretary of Foreign Affairs
- Director of Policy, Child Advocacy Center, Cook County, IL
- Executive Director, Court Appointed Special Advocates, LaSalle County, IL
- Development Director, Family Service: Prevention, Education and Counseling
• Counselor, Department of Probation and Court Services

• Clinical Coordinator, Juvenile Court Clinic

• Clinical and Forensic Social Work, Child and Family Resources

• Executive Director, Child Abuse Prevention Council, Madera County, CA

• Director of Court Mediation

• Screening, Assessment and Support Services Supervisor, Community Counseling Center of Chicago

• Child Welfare Case Manager, DeKalb County, GA

• Social Work Program Administrator, Department of Social Services, Edgecombe County, NC

• Victim Advocate, Police Department, Evanston, IL

• Network Social and Emotional Learning Specialist, Chicago Public Schools

• Corporate Mediator, Center for Conflict Resolution

• Founder/Director, Reach Out Community Center

• Executive Director, Changing Worlds Educational Arts Organization