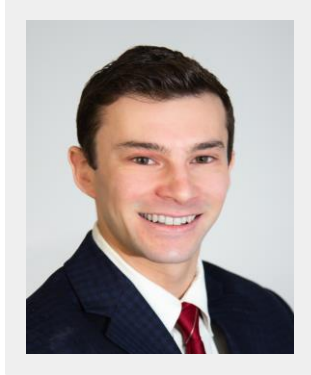




# EQUAL JUSTICE AMERICA

## Summer 2023 EJA Fellow:



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**Law School:** University of Virginia School of Law

**Organization:** Mass Advocates for Children

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**Update 1:** I'm so grateful to receive funding through Equal Justice America to support my legal work with Massachusetts Advocates for Children (MAC) over the summer. MAC is a nonprofit child advocacy organization committed to being an independent and effective voice for children who face significant barriers to equal educational and life opportunities.

So far in my internship, I have been researching and writing a memorandum to discuss how families can bring claims of racial discrimination against students with disabilities in Massachusetts. We have found that students of color are disproportionately placed in significantly separate classrooms in comparison to their white peers, yet it is not clear how families can raise such claims of discrimination. I have also been fielding and responding to calls from parents to our helpline. It has been an exciting challenge to interview these individuals in an area of law that is new to me, quickly form relationships of trust, and then effectively respond with appropriate legal guidance. Taking the helpline calls and hearing the pain that these families are going through is a humbling reminder of the importance of this work.

I look forward to continuing to work to ensure that racially diverse, disabled, limited English speaking, and low-income children have full access to the services and resources to which they are legally entitled.

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**Update 2:** I'm so fortunate to be working at an organization that is at the forefront of child disability law in Massachusetts and to be learning from attorneys who have been doing this work for decades. Disability law is a completely new subject for me, and I have learned more about the substantive law in the month that I have been at my internship than I likely would have learned in a full semester class at law school. I have been deep in the weeds in learning about both federal statutes and regulations guiding disability law as well as state statutes and



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regulations. As a result, I have been able to provide guidance to families who call our helpline and are searching for any assistance they can get during their family's most trying times.

I have also been very fortunate to have the opportunity to work on a bill to improve augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) opportunities for children with disabilities. AAC includes methods of communication other than oral speech, such as pictorial language boards, manual communication systems, speech synthesizers, iPads, or other electronic communication devices that can enhance or replace conventional forms of expressive and receptive communication for individuals who are nonverbal or who have limited speech. The legislation will help ensure that all teachers who apply for an initial Massachusetts educator license receive instruction on the appropriate use of augmentative and alternative communication devices for children with disabilities who are nonverbal or who have limited speech. I have helped draft testimony for the bill hearing and I have spoken with the individuals testifying to help prepare them. Later today, I will be going to the State House for the hearing. It has been an incredible opportunity not just to learn about the legislative process in MA, but it also has been a great way to learn about effective legislative advocacy and best practices in policy making.

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**Update 3:** It's pretty incredible to think that I only have two more weeks left at my internship with Massachusetts Advocates for Children. It has been such an incredible learning experience, and I am very fortunate to be working with attorneys who are at the forefront of disability and special education law in Massachusetts. Most recently, I had the opportunity to help craft recommendations regarding the Department of Elementary and Secondary Education (DESE) Tiered Focus Monitoring (TFM) of Augmentative and Alternative Communication (AAC) devices. The purpose of the TFM is to ensure that school districts are complying with requirements to provide students who need AAC devices with the appropriate devices and related services. One thing that our organization has consistently heard is that even if students have the devices, the teachers are not properly trained in how to assist the students in using the AAC devices. So, for the recommendations that we're sending to DESE, we included a number of questions that will allow the TFM chairperson to determine not only if students who need the AAC devices are receiving them, but also to determine if such students are receiving the necessary support from teachers and staff. It's exciting to think that the recommendations that I've helped craft may get implemented by DESE and hopefully help ensure that school districts in MA are complying with the law.

In addition to my work on the TFM recommendations, I have also continued to work on a memo to determine how families in MA can bring claims of racial discrimination against students with disabilities. The question is if the Bureau of Special Education Appeals or the Problem Resolution System, both of which hear claims of discrimination against students with disabilities in MA, have jurisdiction to also hear claims of racial discrimination. It has been an exciting challenge to answer this question, and it's something I've been working on since my first day with the organization. I'm really looking forward to putting all of the research I've done over the past 6 weeks into a final memo that will hopefully help families and advocates alike.



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**Update 4:** It's pretty incredible how quickly my time with Massachusetts Advocates for Children flew by. I learned so much in just over two months with the organization, and I am incredibly grateful for the experience. As has become abundantly clear from my work with MAC this summer, identities such as race, national origin, and disability are inextricably linked. But for families who want to raise claims of discrimination at the intersection of these identities, it is not always clear what legal recourse is available to them. So, this summer I researched whether the Bureau of Special Education Appeals and/or the Problem Resolution System in Massachusetts have the authority to hear claims of racial discrimination against students with disabilities. This was an ongoing project for me throughout the entire summer, and it was great to submit the memo and present my research to staff during my last week of the internship. I hope that the research and the memo will help clarify what options are available to students and families who feel that they have been discriminated against based on both race and disability. It was also a great experience for me to refine my legal research and writing skills. I am very thankful to my supervisor, who held me to high standards and pushed me to create the best final product that I could.

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**Update 5:** Overall, I had a great summer working at Massachusetts Advocates for Children. My big project for the summer was researching and writing a memo on whether the Bureau of Special Education Appeals has jurisdiction to resolve claims of racial discrimination against students with disabilities. In addition to that, I drafted testimony for a legislative hearing concerning an act to improve augmentative and alternative communication (AAC) opportunities for children with disabilities. I also conducted initial interviews of parents raising educational concerns and provided information and resources to support them in advocating for their children when parents called our helpline. Through these different projects, I was exposed to different methods of advocating for change, from legislative advocacy to direct advocacy and policy change. I learned that no one method of advocacy will be complete on its own, and that it's important to employ different strategies depending on the change you are trying to make.

As for the training and supervision I received, I worked under an attorney who has been doing disability legal work for over 40 years. It was an incredible experience to learn from her and absorb the wealth of knowledge she has on disability law. I feel like I learned more in the 10 weeks that I worked there than I could have in an entire semester-long class. My supervisor held me to very high standards with my work, which really helped me to refine my legal research and writing skills. She also always ensured that I was doing meaningful, substantive work without ever overwhelming me. And she provided plenty of feedback along the way, with weekly check-ins and an exit interview at the end of the internship. For future law students interested in child advocacy, disability law, or education law, I would highly recommend applying to work at Massachusetts Advocates for Children. Not only was it a great learning experience for me, but the work was meaningful, and I felt like I was contributing to positive change for families around Massachusetts.