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November 2019 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Caroline Martin

Caroline Martin is a former SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellow who was placed in the Vermont Agency of Education.

Caroline Martin

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My clinical psychology graduate training has followed a traditional scientist-practitioner model whereby scientific research and clinical practice are designed to be mutually informative. Yet, I quickly learned that there are many barriers in the community that prevent access to evidence-based health and education services for children and families. Witnessing this disconnect between our collective scientific knowledge and widespread community practices, I became motivated to help advance and refine the systems that facilitate access to high-quality services. It was with this perspective in mind that I decided to apply for the Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) Pre-Doctoral State Policy Fellowship.

I spent the 2018-2019 fellowship year at the Vermont Agency of Education (VT-AOE) working in the Data Management & Analysis Division (DMAD) and also working closely with the Early Learning Team. Throughout the year, I participated in a variety of projects that bridged both the “data” and “program” sides of the

agency. Ultimately, this created a unique training opportunity during which I learned how state administrative data are managed and used in an applied setting while also having the chance to deepen my understanding of state policy development and implementation. As a pre-doctoral fellow, I was part-time at the agency (20 hours per week) so that I could continue progress toward my degree. This schedule made for a busy year but allowed me to feel fully immersed in ongoing agency projects.

During my fellowship year, I aimed to gain as much exposure as I could to all aspects of agency-conducted research and state-level policymaking and implementation. Given my focus on early learning, nearly all of the projects I worked on during the year related to Vermont's Universal Pre-Kindergarten (UPK) system. Vermont's UPK law, passed in 2014, provides 10 hours per week of state-funded preK to 3, 4, and 5-year-olds through a mixed delivery system of public and private providers. Most of my work with DMAD involved collecting, managing, analyzing, and reporting on preK data, including enrollment rates, demographics, and school readiness indicators. I was grateful to also work closely with the Early Learning team to witness how these data sources were leveraged to inform program and policy decision-making. I had the opportunity to help with the development and implementation of a UPK monitoring system and participated on the "practice" side of a research-practice partnership conducting a formal evaluation of the UPK system. Through my involvement on these various projects, my skillset as an applied researcher has grown immensely, as has my understanding of approaches to integrating scientific rigor and the practical needs of policymakers and program administrators.

The SRCD fellowship has fully reinforced my interest in translational research and policy implementation. It has also helped advance my ability to form policy-relevant research questions and consider effective approaches to disseminating scientific research to improve the lives of children and families. I am incredibly thankful to our mentors, Dr. Ruth Friedman and Dr. Marty Zaslow, and the entire SRCD policy team, for creating this career-altering opportunity and supporting my professional development and growth every step of the way. I look forward to applying the knowledge I have gained during my fellowship year in all aspects of my work and throughout my career.

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