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February 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Nneka Ibekwe, M.S.W., Ed.M.

Nneka Ibekwe, M.S.W., Ed.M. is a former SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellow who was placed in the Office of Early Learning, Delaware Department of Education

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As a Ph.D. student in the Human Development and Quantitative Methods Division at the University of Pennsylvania's Graduate School of Education, I have become increasingly interested in the intersection of developmental psychology, early childhood education, and social policy. Specifically, I am most interested in how to best use research to inform the development and successful implementation of social policies. As a researcher, I was shocked at the lag between what we discover in research and the creation of polices at the local and state levels. In my role as a Society for Research in Child Development Pre-Doctoral State Policy Fellow, I gained firsthand knowledge of the complexities of using research to inform policies at the state-level.

I started my predoctoral fellowship in the Office of Early Learning (OEL) at the Delaware Department of Education. The mission of OEL is to develop a comprehensive early childhood system for children birth

through eight by: addressing the developmental needs of children; supporting families as first teachers and health providers; providing access to high-quality early care; and coordinating policies and programs across agencies.

During my fellowship year, I was fortunate to work on multiple projects such as: developing a teacher pilot study; contributing to the Preschool Development Grant; analyzing the state's kindergarten readiness data; integrating data across state-level agencies; and developing strategies to improve the state's Quality Rating Improvement System. Although the outcome of each project varied greatly, I gained a deeper understanding of how entangled, yet siloed, many of the early childhood programs and services are at the state-level. I also learned how useful simple descriptive statistics are in helping policymakers to interpret data and ultimately advance evidence-based policy initiatives. This was my "ah-ha" moment and one of the most fulfilling parts of the fellowship experience. I produced real-time analyses that directly influenced policies impacting children in Delaware.

Further, while analyzing the state's 2015-2019 kindergarten readiness data, I noticed little change in the overall percentage of children considered "emerging" or "not kindergarten ready." It made me curious about how to identify these children prior to kindergarten and it inspired my dissertation topic. I use an ecological model to explore the effects of proximal and distal influences on children's early cognitive, language, literacy, mathematics, physical, and social-emotional development. My dissertation is intended to explore how integrated, administrative data provides a deeper understanding about which factors contribute to or impede kindergarten readiness. My hope is that these findings will offer important insight into early risk factors and intervention opportunities prior to kindergarten.

The experiences I gained through my fellowship journey, have undoubtedly contributed to my Ph.D. studies and future career goals. I am grateful for the mentorship I received from OEL, my faculty mentor, and the entire SRCD policy team. The fellowship experience has reaffirmed that translating research into actionable polices is the greatest lever that I can employ to create change.

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