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May 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Kylie Bezdek

Kylie Bezdek is a SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellow who is placed in the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services, Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE)

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I have just wrapped up my fourth year in the Developmental Psychology program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. My research has primarily focused on how early care and education (ECE) classroom quality relates to children's outcomes and the factors that contribute to sustaining gains made in ECE into the elementary school years and beyond. Additionally, I have been involved in work examining mediators and gender differences in long-term outcomes of the Abecedarian Study. I decided to apply for the pre-doctoral state policy fellowship to gain more exposure to the early care and education system in my state and the issues that were most important in the field.

I am currently working at the North Carolina Department of Health and Human Services Division of Child Development and Early Education (DCDEE). This division oversees child care licensing and regulation, the NC Pre-K Program, child care subsidy, and the early care and education workforce. I am working with

members of the policy team whose primary responsibility is grant and project management. This was an exciting time to start working in the DCDEE policy division as North Carolina was one of the recipients of a Preschool Development Grant (PDG). I was able to witness the application process and contribute to strategic planning for the next five years in the agency.

The PDG work has led me to become more involved with the state's Technical Assistance system. While my research focuses on how classroom quality is related to children's development, I had not been exposed previously to the training and coaching side of quality improvement. North Carolina is using PDG funds to provide Practice-Based Coaching training and resources to Technical Assistance Specialists (TAs) across the state. My primary project has been translating North Carolina's Foundation of Early Learning Standards into a self-assessment of teaching practices to guide the focus of coaching. Additionally, we have been committed to creating virtual spaces for TAs across the state to connect and share information with one another. Although this is a relatively small part of the work, we see it as having the potential to break down institutional siloes that have historically created inefficiencies in North Carolina's TA system.

One of the most valuable experiences that this year's fellows are getting is a look at how a state agency responds to an unprecedented crisis like the current coronavirus pandemic. Many of us have had to shift our work to adjust to the new priorities in our offices. For example, prior to the pandemic my mentor and I were analyzing the state's regulatory data to investigate the quality of infant-toddler programs in the state. As the state has moved into an emergency child care system, our research focus shifted to analyzing the daily child care provider surveys to examine trends of opening and closing and how these trends differ by center type, size, quality rating, and region. As North Carolina progresses through the phases of reopening, we will continue to re-evaluate these trends and provide this information to leaders in the division.

From these experiences, I am walking away with knowledge and perspective that I did not expect to gain. Prior to this experience, my view of classroom quality was limited to teacher-child interactions, but the fellowship has pushed me to think about the system-level factors that are impacting teachers' daily practices. More than that, I have gained a network of passionate people, who have motivated me to produce impactful research that demonstrates the importance of ECE in the lives of so many children. I hope to foster these personal and professional relationships beyond the fellowship and continue to promote a research to policy and practice pipeline that supports a better future for children and the ECE workforce.

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