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June 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Ann Partee, Ed.M.

Ann Partee is a SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellow who is placed in the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Office of Early Childhood.

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Throughout my first three years in the Applied Developmental Science doctoral program at the University of Virginia (UVA), I was involved in applied research in early childhood settings through my research mentor's projects and my affiliation with UVA's Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning (CASTL). I enjoyed these experiences and knew I wanted to further my understanding of the perspectives, goals, and decision-making processes of state early childhood education leaders and learn how research can inform their work. The SRCD State Policy Fellowship Program gave me this opportunity. Now, as I am approaching the end of my doctoral program and fellowship, it is hard to imagine spending this year any other way.

Much momentum and excitement have been building around the importance of early childhood in Virginia over the past few years, so I could not have asked for a better-timed fellowship experience. My state policy fellowship placement is at the Virginia Department of Education (VDOE) Office of Early Childhood, which

administers the Virginia Preschool Initiative (VPI), a state-funded preschool program for at-risk four-year-olds, among other birth-to-five programming. Most of my work has centered on understanding and supporting the delivery of effective professional development (PD) for preschool teachers who participate in VPI.

Over the 2019-2020 school year, VDOE, researchers and consultants at CASTL, and school division leaders engaged in a research-practice-policy partnership to advance effective interactions and instruction in all VPI classrooms. One piece of this partnership involved supporting division leaders to design and deliver high-quality PD. As part of this collaboration, I led efforts to develop a tool to systematically assess the quality of PD statewide. This tool, called the PD Rubric, describes six elements of effective PD across four levels of quality. After developing the PD Rubric, I worked to apply the rubric to divisions' PD plans and managed the ongoing data collection and analysis. Data from the PD Rubric were used to inform CASTL's consultation work with VPI leaders. This process culminated in a presentation and report to VDOE that presented a high-level description of the quality of PD across VPI programs.

In addition to the PD work, I participated in, observed, listened to, and learned about the many other early childhood initiatives occurring in Virginia. For example, I have been involved in a project that is developing a new set of birth-to-five early learning and development standards. This project brought together early childhood leaders and experts from all over the state, many of whom I was fortunate enough to interact with. I learned how Virginia is using federal Preschool Development Grant (PDG) dollars to work with communities to foster cross-sector connections and build local capacity to address needs around access and quality. I attended a Virginia General Assembly Joint-Subcommittee on VPI meeting, which allowed me to see the types of questions state legislators were asking about the VPI program. Finally, as the General Assembly passed increased funding for VPI, including for a pilot program for three-year-olds, only to then un-allot the funding due to the COVID-19 pandemic, I not only gained insight into the legislative process and the state's budget bill, I also saw how VDOE and the state's Chief School Readiness Officer responded to these unexpected funding changes and strategized on the best path forward.

These experiences have been incredibly constructive to my development as an applied researcher and advocate for early childhood. I have a greater appreciation for the complexity of the early childhood care and education system and the diverse group of professionals who seek to continually improve the system for the benefit of children and families. I am grateful for the many partners I have met along the way, including my colleagues at VDOE, as well as people from the Virginia Department of Social Services, Virginia Early

Childhood Foundation, Virginia Commonwealth University, James Madison University, and VPI divisions. As I enter my last few months of the fellowship, I am excited about the state of early childhood in Virginia and hope to continue to engage in this work in the future!

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