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September 2020 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Christina Padilla, Ph.D., M.P.P.

Christina Padilla, Ph.D., M.P.P., is a SRCD State Policy Post-doctoral Fellow who is placed in the District of Columbia Office of the State Superintendent of Education, Division of Learning.

AUTHOR

Christina Padilla, Ph.D., M.P.P.

I have known I wanted to be an SRCD Policy Fellow since I first heard about the fellowship during my first year of graduate school in my dual public policy and developmental psychology MPP/PhD program at Georgetown University. Multiple Georgetown alumni had participated in the fellowship and every time I talked to a former fellow, I would hear about what a transformative experience it was and how deeply the fellow had learned about the connection between developmental research and public policy. At that time, SRCD offered only federal policy fellowships in either the executive or legislative branches of government. But by the time I was able to apply for a fellowship, SRCD had introduced a new state policy fellowship opportunity and had graduated its first cohort of state policy fellows. This new possibility left me wondering which path to pursue—while I remained certain that I wanted an immersive on-the-ground policy experience, I had never before considered working in state government. I wondered what I would learn from each setting and whether I might enjoy the day-to-day experience of one type of fellowship over the other.

While I am certain that I would have learned a tremendous amount about the connection between research and policy in either a federal or a state setting, I ultimately chose to pursue a state policy fellowship, and I am glad that I did.

I have spent the past year as a fellow in the District of Columbia's Office of the State Superintendent of Education's (OSSE) Division of Early Learning (DEL). Within DEL, I was part of the Policy, Planning and Research unit, which supports policy development and research for DEL. Throughout my year at OSSE, I have been involved in a number of projects and have used my research skills in ways both familiar and new to me. For example, I worked throughout the year on Capital Quality, the District's Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS). All child development facilities in the District that accept child development subsidies must participate in Capital Quality, and all classrooms in participating Capital Quality facilities must be observed annually as part of the quality rating process. I was heavily involved in this data collection effort over the course of the year. I also analyzed OSSE's Capital Quality data and wrote a report for DEL leadership detailing the findings. I very much enjoyed using my research skills to make a clear contribution in supporting the agency.

While I was used to data collection, analyzing data, and writing reports from my previous research experiences, I was less accustomed to working in research-policy partnerships—particularly from the policy side of the table. During my fellowship year, I had the opportunity to support and collaborate with a team of researchers that served as evaluators for the District's Preschool Development Grant, Birth through Five (PDG B-5). Above all, this experience taught me about how important relationships are for research-policy partnerships to work. The researchers we worked with approached our work as true partners—they did not impose a research agenda on the DEL team and all of our work was done with OSSE's goals in mind. Knowing what it feels like to sit on the policy side of this relationship will undoubtedly inform how I approach these partnerships in my future work once I am back on the research side.

Throughout my work on Capital Quality, PDG B-5, and in other areas, I got to observe firsthand states' unique roles in policy-making and agenda-setting. Whereas prior to my fellowship I mostly thought of states as receptacles and facilitators of federal policy decisions, I now see states as really important agenda setters in the early childhood space in their own right. For instance, the District's decision to provide universal pre-k for all 3- and 4-year-olds, while not a perfect system in practice, impacts thousands of families every year by providing affordable care that might not otherwise have been available. A state's commitment to early childhood—in conjunction with but also independent from whatever federal policymaking is

happening—sets the tone for the entire early childhood system in the state, and makes a real difference in the lives of many early learners and their families. I am now more excited than I likely otherwise would have been to work on state-level initiatives in my future work.

Of course, my fellowship year took place during the midst of the global COVID-19 pandemic. This impacted the nature of my work, as priorities shifted and multiple data collection efforts I was involved with were canceled or put on hold. After the immediate challenges were addressed, much of my work shifted to supporting DEL in planning and making decisions about potential future policy shifts as a result of the pandemic. While certainly not what I had imagined at the start of my fellowship, this was a unique opportunity to see how states respond in times of crisis and how important strong leadership and quick decision making often is. The District, like other states, has worked hard to support early childhood providers during this challenging time, all while facing serious financial constraints and navigating a great deal of uncertainty. I have undoubtedly gained a deep appreciation for the work that states do—both during times of stability and times of uncertainty. I am forever grateful for this opportunity with SRCD and OSSE and look forward to putting what I've learned over the course of the year to good use in my future work.

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