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March 2021 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Jenn Finders, Ph.D.

Jenn Finders is a SRCD State Policy Post-doctoral Fellow who is placed in the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration, Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning

Jenn Finders, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

I pursued the SRCD State Policy Fellowship because I wanted to learn how to better situate my research within a policy context and create a seamless bridge between research, policy, and practice. The last six months have taught me invaluable lessons about what a successful partnership between researchers and policymakers looks like and this experience has been instrumental in laying the foundation for my future career.

I am currently placed at the Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning (OECOSL) in Indiana's Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA). The OECOSL is the lead agency responsible for administering the Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Additionally, the office oversees licensing regulations, implements quality initiatives, and coordinates efforts across the broader child care and education system. As most problems require a multifaceted solution, I am involved in projects that span all

of these areas.

A dominating theme throughout my fellowship experience has been the COVID-19 pandemic. Working in a state agency during this unprecedented time has given me a unique perspective on policymaking, and in particular, it has highlighted the critical role that research and data play in the decision-making process. Much of my time has been spent gathering information to inform rapid responses to changing conditions caused by the pandemic. For instance, I have developed surveys and analyzed data to understand the specific needs of essential workers and child care programs. These findings have helped the agency identify where to target immediate relief and resources. Recently, however, the focus at OECOSL has shifted toward thinking about the potential to strengthen the fragile early care and education system by leveraging new funding from Congress. In this regard, I have contributed to formulating metrics that can be used to determine whether child care across the state is on the path to recovery and stability. Through my work on COVID-19, I have learned the importance of collaboration with a diverse team of stakeholders in order to equitably respond to the challenges that communities face today. I am truly inspired by these collective efforts and I look forward to examining the impacts of the innovative solutions as we enter a new phase of sustainability.

I am also engaged in several projects that aim to further priorities for the child care and education system that were established prior to COVID-19. For instance, I am leading an economic evaluation of the costs and benefits of various quality initiatives that the OECOSL supports with partner organizations, such as the Indiana Association for the Education of Young Children (INAEYC). This comprehensive analysis will answer key questions about the relative efficiency of current investments and where enhancements may be necessary. Additionally, I am participating in a birth through 5 strategic planning group that is filling the gaps identified in the state's needs assessment, including providing recommendations to preschool programs about developmentally appropriate socio-emotional learning assessments that can be utilized in practice. Finally, I have partnered with the Indiana Department of Education to design a summer program that will be offered to children with limited preschool experience with the intent to ease the transition to kindergarten. Through my work on these projects, I have learned the importance of not only estimating effects and impacts, but also considering the costs and feasibility of implementing a program at-scale to assess whether an investment accomplishes its intended goals. Further, I am more aware of how the priorities within OECOSL fit within the scope of FSSA and the broader early learning community.

Although I am only halfway through my fellowship year, it has already transformed my professional aspirations and personal identity. Not only have I gained a more refined understanding of how to conduct policy-relevant research, but I now have a greater appreciation for the practicality of policymaking, including the tradeoffs and complexities that are involved. I am so incredibly grateful to SRCD and the OECOSL for the opportunity to reflect, grow, and challenge myself through this immersive experience, and I am excited to apply this new knowledge in meaningful ways moving forward.

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