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June 2021 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Wendy Wei, Ed.M.

Wendy Wei, Ed.M. is a SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellow who is placed in the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC).

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Since beginning my doctoral degree in Education at the Harvard Graduate School of Education four years ago, I have been driven by the following research questions: What role do contextual factors play in promoting children's access to high-quality early education and care, and, ultimately, their developmental outcomes? How can we translate this knowledge to inform policy and practice? During my doctoral studies, I have explored these research questions at numerous contextual levels (e.g., home, school, neighborhood, state policy initiatives). However, in my experience, the connections between research, policy, and practice have largely been abstract and seldom immediately actionable by policymakers and practitioners. Over the past year, my SRCD U.S. State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellowship placement in the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) has been an incredibly enriching experience by illuminating the direct links between research, policy, and practice, as well as providing me with an immersive experience in the day-to-day work of a state government agency.

Housed under the Executive Office of Education, EEC oversees early education and care; residential, placement, and out-of-school/afterschool providers; as well as relevant programs and initiatives that support children's and families' access to these programs (e.g., the subsidy system). Similar to Claudia Kruzik, a SRCD Pre-doctoral Policy Fellow from the 2019-2020 fellowship cohort, I have been placed within the Programs Division, which manages various projects including continuous quality improvement initiatives, family and community support, and workforce development, as well as a growing research and innovation arm.

One of my primary projects is to integrate data from the various grant programs and initiatives within the Programs Division (e.g., QRIS, Head Start, workforce development, early childhood mental health) that could be used and analyzed by any staff within the agency. The first goal of this project is to begin to understand how many providers licensed by the agency have also engaged in programs and initiatives provided by EEC – an effort yet to be undertaken. The second goal is to use these data as one mechanism to promote collaboration between the quality improvement and licensing efforts at EEC—two workstreams that have historically been separate at EEC. While working on this project, I have learned a great deal about the ongoing work of the Programs Division. I have also come away with an enhanced set of skills beyond data cleaning and analysis. Through conversations with EEC staff, I have been pushed to identify steps of the data integration process that could be simplified, to consider users' experience with these data particularly for those who do not regularly engage with data, and to reflect on ways that the data could be used to spur further conversation internally and externally. In the final months of my fellowship, I will strategize ways of making these data integration efforts more sustainable for the agency to support their continuous quality improvement efforts in the future.

This year, I have also been involved with the Early Childhood Mental Health (ECMH) program, which provides services to support young children's socioemotional and behavioral development. Specifically, I conducted descriptive analyses regarding program implementation and addressed questions like *who* the program served, *why* referrals to the program were made, and *which* types of practices children, families, and program staff engaged in through the program. Although these analyses shed light on aspects of the program, they also further illuminated gaps in knowledge, such as whether and how ECMH consultants engaged with providers and educators to develop sustainable practices after ECMH supports ended. As such, I have been revising and improving current approaches to data collection to address these gaps in knowledge. Through this work, my views regarding "meaningful research for creating change" have since broadened. Whereas in my doctoral studies much of the emphasis has been placed on research that demonstrates impact, I now

have a greater appreciation for descriptive research that can get behind the *who, what, which,* and *where* of programs and initiatives. Moreover, I have always viewed “creating change” as the formal implementation of policies and practices. Through opportunities such as this one, I have learned that change is an iterative process and oftentimes starts with smaller actions—even as simple as revising data collection protocols—that can eventually feed into broader systemic change.

I am so grateful for the opportunity to work with SRCD and EEC. This experience has reinforced my commitment to the early education and care field and my desire to foster connections between research, policy, and practice. Through my placement at EEC, I now have a greater appreciation for the complexity of this system and the processes behind decision-making—both small and large. Finally, I am so thankful to have met and worked with so many amazing and thoughtful individuals who have demonstrated their passion for advancing positive outcomes for all children, families, and educators and reducing inequity in the early education and care system.

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