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April 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Lillie Moffett, Ph.D.

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Being an SRCD State Policy Postdoctoral Fellow at the California Department of Education (CDE) has been the culminating experience of years of training and is truly a dream come true. Over the past seven months I have had a front row seat to historic policy decisions and participated in exciting early childhood projects in the diverse (and huge!) state of California. As a fellow I have contributed to a multitude of efforts including assisting with the implementation of a state assembly bill related to collecting home language data in the California State Preschool Program; facilitating a group of external researchers co-designing Universal Prekindergarten (UPK) research questions; joining the State Superintendent of Public Instruction's literacy task force; and contributing to CDE's UPK implementation guidance development and presentations for diverse interested parties, including local school districts. I have also had the opportunity to draft research

talking points for state budget hearings; design a research process for reviewing state preschool program quality standards; collaborate with interested parties and union members in a rate reform workgroup; and co-lead updates to the California Preschool Learning Foundations and related assessments and curricula.

In addition to the policy skills and knowledge I have gained in my fellowship experience, I have also reflected on the role that research can play at a state education agency. Unlike the slow pace of academia, the education policy world operates at a rapid speed—bills and budgets are constantly being proposed, revised, and implemented, and, if it is to be effective, research must be integrated quickly and efficiently at each point in the process. In the case of early education, the need for immediately accessible and applicable information makes leveraging research to inform policy decisions difficult. For example, much of what is known in the early childhood education space comes from small-scale studies or studies conducted in states and localities that lack California's remarkable diversity. There are 58 counties in California, which are home to over one million 3- and 4-year-old children, more than half of whom are dual language learners, with over a hundred different languages represented among them. Determining the scalability of research in this context has been particularly difficult in discussions around indicators of state preschool quality, which assessments or measures to use, and the effectiveness of curricula. California lawmakers want assurance that a program, practice, or tool that is expensive to implement will work for the children in California. However, early childhood research is often littered with caveats, making it difficult to leverage when it is up against competing voices of early childhood advocates, community members, and funding limitations.

This raises the question: how can we make research more applicable to state education policymakers? During my time at CDE I have realized how critical early childhood education data are to achieving this goal. State agency leaders in California are eager to use research to inform policy, but they lack support in managing and improving their data infrastructures and researcher partnerships to effectively contextualize research to make it both applicable and timely for policymaking. For instance, I have been using my position within CDE to demonstrate the value of using research-based preschool curricula, yet the lack of data on current curriculum use in California prevents me from fully articulating the problem and conveying how my recommendations would improve programs. Likewise, in my work to provide research-based recommendations for preschool quality standards improvement, the lack of clear and decisive research consensus on which elements of quality matter most for child outcomes, specifically in California, stymies progress. If we support state administrative data collection and use in California, we will be better equipped to both define problems for lawmakers and identify evidence-based solutions.

As I continue my fellowship, I hope to move the needle on some opportunities to improve California's education data infrastructure, especially as the state is expanding access to Transitional Kindergarten (TK) to all four-year-old children. Policymakers will want to know: Is TK working? What about TK is working? How is the early education landscape being impacted? These are questions we cannot answer using research conducted in other cities or states, and answers we will need on a continuous basis, not with one-time funding for program evaluation. A sustainable data infrastructure will create opportunities for continuous improvement efforts for years to come.

Overall, I am grateful to this fellowship for opening my eyes to some of the real-life obstacles researchers and policymakers face in using and applying existing evidence, as well as introducing me to the excitement that comes along with enacting real change in communities. I have met many remarkable leaders at my state education placement office and I am encouraged by how much they value research in their work to improve the lives of children and families. I am eager to continue building on this fellowship opportunity and inspired to remain in this place of continued impact for early education in the state.

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