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July 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Clarissa Corkins

Clarissa Corkins is a SRCD State Policy Pre-Doctoral Fellow in the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE), Department of Curriculum and Instruction.

AUTHOR

Clarissa Corkins, M.S.

As I made the transition from teaching in a preschool classroom towards a more research-focused realm, my heart was still pulled towards the experiences I had in the classroom. My career goal transformed to a focus on learning how to use research to support teachers in their practices to better child outcomes. Originally, policy was not on my horizon as I entered my Ph.D. program in Human Development and Family Science at Oklahoma State University. I entered the program with the goal of gaining quantitative analytic skills (which expanded to also include qualitative and mixed methods skills) to conduct research. As I progressed in my program and started contemplating career trajectories including those outside of academia, I realized policy work is a way to apply research skills on a large scale to impact educators, classrooms, and ultimately children. The SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellowship has allowed me to practice the skills I have been developing throughout my doctoral program while gaining hands-on experience in the world of public policy.

Over the past ten months I have worked with the early childhood team housed within the Office of Curriculum and Instruction at the Oklahoma State Department of Education (OSDE). Through my work I have learned about the wide range of supports that OSDE offers to in-practice educators, administrators, schools, and districts as they navigate educating children. While 4-year-old Pre-Kindergarten (Pre-K) is universal in the state and one of the larger focuses of the early childhood team, there is still much work to be done due to the ever-changing landscape of emerging research and political changes. While my personal teaching experience occurred in the state of Kansas, the fellowship has allowed me to see deeper into the projects and mechanisms that are in place at state agencies, which many teachers may not be aware of. It has been encouraging to work, learn, and grow with my supervisor and the early childhood team at OSDE as they come with a wealth of expertise and experience, all working towards the ultimate betterment of children within the state.

The main project I have been tasked with during my time at OSDE is developing a “Programs of Excellence” rubric that aims to identify and operationalize Oklahoma’s quality programming goals for Pre-K and Kindergarten programs. The OSDE Office of Curriculum and Instruction started an initiative called The Champions of Excellence that focuses on highlighting and ensuring quality programming and practices across the state of Oklahoma. The program is focused on three main pillars; 1) Envisioning: what we dream to see in every classroom and for every student, 2) Support: what OSDE will do to help achieve this vision and providing a support for schools to learn from one another, and 3) Celebrate: celebrate what is going well in schools across the state as there are great things happening everywhere. As part of the envision pillar, rubrics are being developed and continually refined across all education areas to cast a vision of quality that aligns with current policies, emerging research, and the specific Oklahoma context. My role was to develop a program-level rubric specific to Pre-K and Kindergarten that was grounded in current research. Through this process I completed a qualitative synthesis of what is being done in other states, identified overarching indicators, and then aligned these indicators with the other Program of Excellence rubrics to ensure consistency across multiple domains. From there, I utilized my knowledge of the research and many peer-reviewed resources to begin drafting what specific aspects of quality programming would be included in the rubric. I then collaborated with our team staff, other OSDE internal staff, and educators and administrators across the state to identify and refine the rubric to the specific Oklahoma context.

This project provided an opportunity to truly embed current developmental science, family science, and other pertinent research areas into the work of OSDE, which helped me refine and reflect on the role of research and policy. My initial view of the link between research and policy was that research was conducted

and then used to change specific policy and practices. However, I now see that, because of the experiences and research knowledge of OSDE staff who are supporting current educators, research is informally embedded into almost all aspects of the work being done by the Department of Education. While formal analyses or the process of specifically setting a goal of using research to promote an effort may occur occasionally, in most instances, research is automatically embedded due to the knowledge of those who are working on policy development, implementation of policy (Administrative Rules), and supporting state projects beyond specific policies. This raises the question - how do we ensure that those working at the state level are up-to-date on the current research literature?

Through this experience I have further solidified my future career trajectory upon my completion of my doctoral degree. Through developing networking connections during the activities I engage in during the fellowship, conducting informational interviews, and participating in monthly fellowship seminars, I have learned about many organizations that align with my interests of embedding research into practice and larger policy efforts. These connections have also led me to adjust my dissertation topic to align with current needs at the state level. This invaluable fellowship has allowed me to learn more about bridging my love of teaching and supporting young children with research and policy.

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