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July 2022 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. State Policy Fellow: Cassandra Simons Gerson, Ph.D.

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As an applied developmental scientist, I have always been interested in how state and federal policies impact educational programming and child and family services. Prior to my SRCD State Policy Post-doctoral Fellowship, I served as an external evaluator of a variety of state-funded programs. I had a general understanding of the types of information policymakers wanted from researchers, but I was still an outsider. It wasn't until I started working within the Maryland State Department of Education (MSDE) that I truly started to understand the complex relationship between State legislatures, education agencies, school systems, child care providers, and families. In my 10 months as an SRCD fellow at MSDE, I have gained priceless knowledge of the state legislative process, the roles and responsibilities of state education agencies, the impact of federal policies on state activities, and the integral role of data in the political process.

At the beginning of my fellowship year, SRCD arranged for me to receive state-specific policy training from Maryland Family Network, a non-profit organization that leads advocacy efforts for family support services. This opportunity to discuss current policies with people who were actively involved in State politics was much more impactful than any course or seminar on state policy I have taken in the past. I found it fascinating to learn about the way organizations like Maryland Family Network build coalitions to advocate for specific legislation such as paid family leave and the expansion of infant and early childhood mental health services. Meeting people who were involved in organizing and lobbying and learning about how they worked to influence policy was both exciting and enlightening. My biggest takeaway from our conversations is the immense importance of building relationships with family service organizations and specific policymakers. When there are open lines of communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers, big things can happen.

During this year's annual legislative session, the Maryland General Assembly passed several transformative bills that will provide hiring and retention bonuses for child care providers, increase child care scholarship/subsidy reimbursement rates, establish presumptive eligibility for child care scholarships/subsidies (allowing individuals to become eligible for subsidies faster by submitting an application and attesting to their eligibility rather than waiting for all of their documentation to be reviewed), and establish regulations for expanded prekindergarten services within Maryland's mixed delivery early education system. It is exciting to watch so many policies come to fruition at once. But policy is only one part of the equation. MSDE leadership and other state entities must immediately jump into action to create implementation and monitoring systems for all these programs. With limited staff and resources, this is a real challenge. I have watched my colleagues at MSDE rise to the occasion, often jumping over many hurdles to get things done. I have a new appreciation for all the staff who monitor grants and review applications for funding.

In my day-to-day work at MSDE, I have stepped into a natural role as a data analyst and researcher. Most of my work has centered on finding ways to present statistics in a reader-friendly format for policymakers, educators, and the public. One example of my work is the report on Maryland's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA). I helped to analyze results of the Kindergarten Readiness Assessment and worked with MSDE and consulting agencies to determine ways to present the data in a reader friendly format. MSDE was very receptive to my feedback about how to present the data and they allowed me to add several new figures to the report. For example, previous reports compared KRA scores across racial/ethnic groups without considering income. This year, the MSDE Division of Early Childhood allowed me to include comparisons of

Kindergarten Readiness Assessment scores by both race/ethnicity and direct-certification status (a proxy for income) to provide more context for group-based performance differences. I have also gathered and analyzed administrative data related to Maryland's Child Care Scholarship (Subsidy) Program, the performance of children who received services from Judy Center's (family support centers in Title I schools), Covid-19 child care closures, the State strategic plan for early learning, and more.

One of my final projects at MSDE will be an evaluation of their Head Start State Collaboration Office. I am currently conducting online surveys of Head Start Program Directors, interviewing state early childhood systems leadership, and analyzing Quality Rating and Improvement System data to determine whether the collaboration office has met its strategic goals and to identify the areas where they should focus during the next phase of their collaboration grant. It has been interesting and rewarding to speak to so many people in different positions, organizations, and levels of State government to complete this project.

The SRCD State Policy Post-doctoral Fellowship has been a wonderful experience and opportunity for professional development. I have gained countless insights about education programs and policies that are simply not possible to learn without direct experience. I am so thankful to SRCD and my mentors at MSDE for this year of learning and growth. I am hopeful that I will continue to collaborate with State policymakers in my evaluation work for years to come.

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