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SRCD State Policy Fellow Professional Portfolio Abstracts: Cassie Simons Gerson, Ph.D.

2021-2022 SRCD State Post-Doctoral Policy Fellow at the Maryland State Department of Education.

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Introduction: I selected these projects to share in my portfolio because they represent the breadth and depth of my work during my fellowship at the Maryland State Department of Education's (MSDE) Division of Early Childhood. I was involved in a variety of projects that aimed to expand and improve conditions for the early education workforce, increase the availability of high-quality child care, examine the effects of state early education programs, and document the school readiness of Maryland's kindergarteners. This work involved examining how policy changes may have affected child care providers who accepted subsidies/scholarships, analyzing school readiness data, and evaluating state and federally funded programs. Many of these projects involved collaborations with other state and federal agencies, research agencies, and educators.

Portfolio Entry 1: Identifying Data & Outcomes for the Evaluation of Maryland's Birth to Eight Strategic Plan

Project Overview:

Background: As part of their work on under the federal Preschool Development Birth to Five Renewal Grant, the MSDE Division of Early Childhood composed a Birth to Eight Strategic Plan entitled "Maryland Ready: A Path to School Readiness and Success." This strategic plan articulated six key goals for moving Maryland forward in early care and education and suggested specific strategies and action steps needed to achieve the goals. To facilitate the evaluation of progress toward achieving the strategic goals, I was asked to identify specific data sources and outcomes that future evaluators could use to assess the State's progress. I created a detailed chart in excel with specific information about specific data that could be used by future evaluators and internal staff and where to find it.

Goal(s): To 1) identify data sources and outcomes that could be used to evaluate progress toward strategic goals 2) suggest specific quantitative or qualitative goals for improvement in these outcomes over time.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Interviewed agency staff about available data and measures
- Created a chart describing specific data that could be used to track progress
- Researched and suggested goals for improvement on each outcome over time

Activity Focus Keywords: Administrative Data; Document Review; Implementation Research; Strategic Plan
Policy Area Keywords: Pre-kindergarten to Kindergarten Transition; Preschool Development Grant B-5
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking at the state level; How data informs decision-making; What information policymakers need

Portfolio Entry 2: Improving Retention of Child Care Teachers through Retention Bonuses

Project Overview:

Background: One consequence of the COVID-19 pandemic was large reductions in the retention of qualified child care teachers. Child care teacher turnover occurs at very high rates and the State of Maryland was interested in investing in programs to improve retention. I conducted an extensive literature review and made recommendations regarding the structure of Maryland's future program and strategies for evaluation research.

Goal(s): To 1) develop a program to dispense financial incentives to child care teachers who remain employed at their centers over a period of time, and 2) recommend strategies for the future evaluation of the program.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Conducted a literature review of existing teacher retention bonus or incentive programs.
- Made recommendations regarding the most effective incentive amounts and intervals
- Drafted a program description
- Identified and convened potential research collaborators to give advice on the program

Activity Focus Keywords: Document Review; Literature Review
Policy Area Keywords: Center-based Child Care
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking at the state level; How data informs decision-making; What information policymakers need; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers

Portfolio Entry 3: Kindergarten Readiness Data Analysis & Presentation

Project Overview:

Background: The Division of Early Childhood analyzes and publicly distributes the results of Maryland's Kindergarten Readiness Assessment (KRA) each year. The purpose of the KRA is to provide a snapshot of incoming kindergarteners skills, knowledge, and behaviors related to social and emotional development, language and literacy, mathematics, and physical development. Results are shared with parents, teachers, and the public to inform teaching and policy. The annual KRA report is shared publicly on MSDE's website and by their partner agency, Ready At Five.

Goal(s): To 1) determine SEL assessment options that align with educator needs, and 2) identify potential indicators of kindergarten readiness to share with stakeholders.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Analyzed KRA Data
- Produced descriptive data summaries for each jurisdiction and the State
- Conducted analyses of performance across demographic groups
- Worked with a state-wide nonprofit to create a reader-friendly publication disseminating and explaining the scores
- Produced data visualizations for presentations on the KRA data

Activity Focus Keywords: Data Analysis; Data Visualization; Disseminate Findings"
Policy Area Keywords: Kindergarten Outcomes; School Readiness
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Evidence-based policymaking at the state level; How data informs decision-making; What information policymakers need Conducting research that's useful to policy and practice; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers; Incorporating a diversity, equity, and inclusion lens

Portfolio Entry 4: Evaluation of the Maryland Head Start State Collaboration Office

Project Overview:

Background: The Maryland State Department of Education received a collaboration grant from the Federal Office of Head Start to create an office within MSDE that facilitates collaboration between Head Start and other child-serving agencies in Maryland. The collaboration director requested that I complete an evaluation of the office's progress toward its strategic goals and give recommendations for the next phase of the grant based on my findings.

Goal(s): Evaluate the extent to which the Maryland Head Start State Collaboration Office made progress toward its strategic goals over the last five years

Contributions of Fellow:

- Created an evaluation survey for Head Start Program Directors
- Created an evaluation interview for State Early Childhood Leadership
- Analyzed administrative data on Head Start center participation in the State Quality Rating and Improvement System
- Conducted quantitative and qualitative analyses
- Produced a full evaluation report with recommendations for the next phase of the Head Start State Collaboration Grant

Activity Focus Keywords: Administrative Data ; Conduct Interviews; Data Analysis; Data Collection; Data Visualization; Disseminate Findings; Document Review; Evaluation; Implementation Research; Needs Assessment; Strategic Plan; Survey Design; Transcribe Qualitative Data; Written Report
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start
Knowledge & Skills Keywords: Federal and state policy connections; How data informs decision-making; What information policymakers need; Conducting research that's useful to policy and practice; Effective communication between researchers, practitioners, and policymakers

learn more about Cassie's fellowship experience