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White-Riley-Peterson Fellowship: demystifying the policy process for afterschool educators

By ANN RICHARDS

Policy fellowship helps educators create support for positive change

White-Riley-Peterson fellows learn by carrying out policy plans in home states

Fellowship helps strengthen and replenish pool of leaders in field of afterschool

A new way of conceptualizing afterschool policy was one of several valuable lessons Katie Kross came away with following her year as a [White-Riley-Peterson Policy Fellow](#).

“When I thought about policy, I always thought about legislation – creating it, and getting it passed. But the fellowship experience helped me realize that policy is also about creating support for positive change,” said Kross, program manager for [Georgia Statewide Afterschool Network](#), one of 41 statewide afterschool networks supported by the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation. Driven by a largely online case-study curriculum designed to give educators an understanding of how policy plays out at the national, state and local levels, the fellowship also requires a week of intensive study at Furman University’s Richard W. Riley Institute of Government, Politics, and Public Leadership in Greenville, S. C. The institute was founded in 1999 to address barriers to economic opportunity by focusing on issues of education and diversity and promoting discussion and analysis of the dynamics of public policy.



White-Riley-Peterson Fellowship Class of 2012-13

Following the week-long residential workshop, fellows return to their home states to carry out organizational policy plans and participate in a series of online sessions and small group conference calls. The fellowship culminates each spring with individual virtual presentations of each fellow's policy project, said Cathy Stevens, director of the White-Riley-Peterson initiative.

The fellowship is named for William S. White, Richard W. Riley and Terry K. Peterson – a foundation president, a former U.S. Secretary of Education, and the chair of the National Afterschool Alliance board – whose relationships cemented in the early 1990s as they worked together to encourage school-community partnerships to promote positive youth development through the expansion of the federal [21st Century Community Learning Center](#) (21st CCLC) initiative. The fellowship was created in 2012 with the support of a \$200,000 grant from the Charles Stewart Mott Foundation.

“Terry (Peterson) came to us with the idea,” said Stevens. “He was interested in developing some kind of program for emerging leaders.”

Concerned that many of the most experienced and savvy practitioners in the field of afterschool were nearing retirement age, Peterson was looking for a way to replenish the pool of potential lead educators and provide them a supportive group of peers.

Through a national nominating process, 15 fellows are selected each year to participate in the fellowship.

“The experience opened up a lot of ‘ah ha’ moments for me,” said Ken Anthony, director of professional development for the [Connecticut Afterschool Network](#). Along with Kross, Anthony was a member of the inaugural class. He is returning to the [Riley Institute](#) as faculty for the 2013-14 fellowship to present his policy project as a case study for the next class of fellows.

Prior to taking part in the program, the policy side of afterschool and expanded learning was “a bit of a blind spot for me,” said Anthony.

“I’ve been in the field 20 years, and I understand what makes a quality afterschool program. The fellowship experience helped me gain a better understanding of how program quality measurements – and the data I regularly collect – can be used as a great tool for advocacy and eventually, systems change.”

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Working with Connecticut's department of education, Anthony used the information he collected from all state and 21st Century Community Learning Center afterschool programs to create a set of seven quality improvement benchmarks.

Adopted by the department of education, the benchmarks were used to score programs applying for state and 21st CCLC funding.

The original purpose of the benchmarks was to avoid losing “some real gems” of afterschool programs – programs that had built community capacity and had the infrastructure in place to support strong programming, said Anthony. But when the governor’s proposed budget threatened to cut all state funding for afterschool, the benchmarks took on a new purpose.

“From the legislative standpoint, they proved to be a great advocacy tool as well,” he said, noting that over the past year, the Connecticut Afterschool Network successfully used the benchmarks to help strengthen and preserve afterschool programs throughout the state.

“What was exciting about the fellowship experience was the realization that by combining the best of best practices and the policy piece, it’s possible to put change in motion,” said Anthony.

If he’s learned anything from the fellowship and the emerging “alumni network” of fellows, it’s “not to be a fly on the wall.”

“If you want to make a difference, you’ve got to get out there, shake everyone’s hand, pass along your card,” said Anthony. “Having hard data on the academic and behavioral gains of students attending afterschool programs is important – but if you’re interested in change, getting that information into the hands of policymakers is critical.”

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