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August 2021 Spotlight on SRCD U.S. Federal Policy Fellow: Jackie Gross, Ph.D.

Jackie Gross is an SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow who is placed in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS)

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As a developmental scientist, my core goal has always been to use research to help as many children and families as possible, especially vulnerable and historically underserved children and families. I sought the SRCD Federal Policy Fellowship with this goal in mind, hoping to gain a broader perspective of how, as a researcher, I could make a difference. In particular, I wanted to learn how to select and formulate research questions that are impactful and policy-relevant. As I reflect on the last 11 months in my first year of the fellowship, I'm able to take stock of all the ways I've learned how to formulate more informed and useful questions by understanding the linkages between research and policy.

Prior to the fellowship, my research questions were guided mostly by research previously conducted in the field and the topics that interested me the most. Although these are necessary conditions for impactful

research, they are not sufficient. Through my fellowship experiences, I've learned that to make a difference in the lives of children and families, research questions must also have the potential to provide *useful* and *timely* information to those who can benefit from the research, including policymakers, practitioners, researchers and experts in the field, administrators, educators and providers, and families themselves. In addition, information produced by the research must reach those audiences in a form that is *understandable* and *actionable*.

My fellowship placement is the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), which is situated within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). OPRE is responsible for conducting research and evaluation projects to support the work of ACF program offices, such as the Office of Head Start (OHS). A common goal of these program offices is to serve children and families across the U.S. through programs designed to support their social and economic well-being. Therefore, the research conducted by OPRE has the potential to improve the lives of millions of families, and during my placement here, I've seen firsthand how OPRE works closely and collaboratively with the program offices to develop research agendas that are informed by their priorities.

For example, I had the opportunity to contribute to several research briefs written on findings from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), a nationally representative longitudinal study on the characteristics, experiences, and development of Head Start children and families. One of the briefs I contributed to describes the gains children made in language and cognitive scores across a year of Head Start. The brief presented findings that children entering their first year of Head Start made greater gains than children returning for their second year and explored potential explanations for these differences. I saw how this topic was selected and refined through many in-depth conversations between OPRE and the program office (OHS). More broadly, I've learned how topics for various briefs and new research projects can emerge from feedback from program providers or experts in the field about the need to understand a certain topic.

I also had the opportunity to contribute to a longstanding project examining the well-being of children and families involved with the child welfare system – the National Survey of Child and Adolescent Well-being (NSCAW). As a project that began in the 1990s, it has had to evolve and adapt its research questions to new socio-environmental circumstances, shifting policy and practice contexts, and the changing nature of the child welfare population. Through my work on NSCAW and other OPRE projects, I learned how much groundwork must be laid before research questions can even be conceptualized, let alone finalized. For

example, engagement of experts and stakeholders as a preliminary step in the research process can help narrow research priorities (e.g., by identifying conceptual priorities for the field at large or for specific groups of stakeholders), identify methodological feasibility and challenges (e.g., by considering alternative study design options), and determine how to maximize the utility/value of the research (e.g., by asking how the data will be used). These foundational activities are critical to ensuring that the correct questions are being asked to fit the current social, political, and practical contexts, and that everyone has a voice in the content of the research.

Finally, I couldn't mention *timely* research without acknowledging how research at OPRE and across the federal government can shed light on the effects of the COVID-19 crisis on children and families. As a fellow, I've had the incredible opportunity to directly respond to President Biden's Executive Order on *Supporting the Reopening and Continuing Operation of Schools and Early Childhood Education Providers*, through my involvement with an interagency research workgroup. With support from the workgroup, consisting of federal staff across multiple agencies in the U.S. Departments of Education and Health and Human Services, I'm leading the charge to organize and host a federal research briefing series that fulfills one of the milestones to implement the Executive Order. Our goal for the series is to understand what is currently known about the pandemic's impact on young children's social-emotional development and the mental health of their families and the early childhood education workforce (particularly the pandemic's impact on existing inequities and disparities), including strategies for mitigating the negative impact and promoting protective factors. In collaboration with the workgroup members, I helped select the research topic and identify experts to present national and statewide research findings to a federal staff audience.

Through these and many other experiences during my fellowship, I've gained a deeper understanding of how researchers can formulate useful, timely research questions for a variety of stakeholders: federal staff and program partners, policymakers, educators and providers, researchers and experts in the field, and the families participating in the research. I'm deeply grateful to SRCD and OPRE for this opportunity, as I can already see the ways in which it's made me a better, more well-rounded developmental scientist.

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