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SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Professional Portfolio Abstracts: Jackie Gross, Ph.D.

2020-2021 SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

AUTHOR

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Introduction: My placement is with the Office of Research, Planning, 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 for four ACF program offices: the Office of Head Start, the Office of Child Care, the Children's Bureau, and the Office of Trafficking in Persons. OPRE conducts this work primarily through competitively awarded grants and contracts, including initiating new projects each year through solicitations. I was placed in the Division of Child and Family Development, where I worked on research and evaluation projects focusing mainly on Head Start/Early Head Start and child welfare. These portfolio entries provide an example of my contributions to each of the four major activities I supported during my placement: (1) grant management, (2) contract management (from processes leading up to the award of an anticipated new contract, to ongoing collaboration with current contractors and ACF program offices), (3) the creation/dissemination of written products such as research

briefs and reports, and (4) participation in workgroups.

Portfolio Entry 1: Early Care and Education Research Scholars: Head Start Dissertation Grants

Project Overview:

Background: The placement office sponsors the Head Start Dissertation Grant Program, which has been funded each year since 1998. The grant program provides support for dissertation research conducted by graduate students working in partnership with local Head Start/Early Head Start (HS/EHS) programs. The goals of the grant program are to: (1) build capacity in the early care and education field by supporting high-quality dissertation research and student-faculty collaboration and mentorship, (2) conduct rigorous research that has the capacity to inform HS/EHS programs, policies, and practices, (3) support active communication, collaboration, and partnership between early career researchers and HS/EHS programs, and (4) foster the exchange of current research, ideas, and information among research scholars, policymakers, and practitioners (see the OPRE website).

Goal(s): To serve as Program Specialist for the Head Start Dissertation Grant program and to serve as Review Director for the grant review panel.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Contributed to the development, drafting, and advertising of the grant program Notice of Funding Opportunity (NOFO), formerly known as a Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA).
- Served as Review Director for the grant review panel evaluating submissions to the NOFO, including selecting reviewers and panel chairs, supporting panel reviewers' understanding of the grant program and evaluation criteria, maintaining integrity of the review, providing panel oversight and support, reviewing and approving the final summary reports of submissions, and preparing the funding recommendation documents.
- Planned and facilitated grantee meetings and other professional development opportunities for the current research scholars.
- Assisted with ongoing management of current grantees, including providing grant oversight and support.

Activity Focus Keywords: Funding Opportunity Announcement (FOA), grant review, professional development
Policy Area Keywords: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Child Care Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start

Portfolio Entry 2: Financing Early Care and Education: Head Start's Role in State and Local Systems

Project Overview:

Background: The Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE; the placement office) released a Request for Information (RFI) to potential contractors related to an anticipated OPRE solicitation "Financing Early Care and Education: Head Start's Role in State and Local Systems." Interested bidders were asked to respond to the RFI to, in part, demonstrate their capability to perform the proposed work. The purpose of the proposed project would be to address key research gaps about how Head Start uses and/or participates in braided funding models (i.e., using more than one funding source), and how those models are implemented to provide high-quality, comprehensive early care and education (ECE) services to the community. Specifically, the goals of the work would be to examine the ways in which Head Start is integrated in or uses other ECE funding streams (e.g., CCDF, state-funded Pre-K).

Goal(s): To develop the draft Statement of Work for the RFI process and for which OPRE anticipates releasing a solicitation.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Researched the policy, programmatic, and research contexts for the proposed project, including a review of previous literature and relevant legislation, and identified research gaps.
- Developed the project description/background section of the draft Statement of Work as part of the RFI process.
- Assisted with refining the scope and research questions for the proposed project as part of the RFI process.
- Assisted with conducting market research to inform an acquisition strategy, including evaluating potential contractors' capability to conduct the work for which OPRE anticipates releasing a solicitation.

Activity Focus Keywords: Literature Review, RFI development, market research

Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Child Care Development Fund (CCDF), state-funded pre-kindergarten, braided funding, cost of care, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

Portfolio Entry 3: The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)

Project Overview:

Background: The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is a nationally representative longitudinal study on the characteristics, experiences, and development of Head Start children and families and the characteristics of Head Start programs and staff. There have been multiple cohorts of FACES since 1997, and the current cohort was launched in 2019 with changes to the study design that allowed it to provide more timely and ongoing information about Head Start program performance (i.e., a core set of data collection activities repeated over time to capture key characteristics about programs and families, in addition to special topics modules designed to respond flexibly to new policy and programmatic issues that arise). FACES data provide rich descriptive information about the population of children and families served by Head Start, including demographic characteristics, aspects of home environment, family outcomes, and developmental progress. In addition to providing information to program offices in the Administration for Children and Families (e.g., the Office of Head Start), FACES data are widely available to non-federal researchers for secondary data analysis.

Goal(s): To assist the federal project officer with the management of the FACES contract, including ongoing collaboration with the contractor, and to assist with the development of multiple FACES dissemination products such as research briefs.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Contributed to the development and dissemination of written products, including five research briefs presenting findings from earlier FACES data collection and the FACES 2019 User's Manual. One example is a research brief posted on the OPRE website about the gains in language and cognitive scores made by Head Start children in their first versus second years of Head Start.
- Assisted with plans to conduct new FACES data collection for a special topic examining Head Start programs' use of quality improvement funds made available under the Head Start Act in 2020.

- Attended and contributed to meetings with the contractor, including providing feedback on study design (e.g., instrument content, data collection plans).

Activity Focus Keywords: Data collection, disseminate findings, document review, written report
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation

Portfolio Entry 4: Early Learning and Development (ELD) Research Workgroup

Project Overview:

Background: The Early Learning and Development Research Workgroup consists of federal staff from the Departments of Education and Health and Human Services working on a variety of early childhood programs and initiatives across the federal government. The workgroup convenes on a monthly basis and aims to collaborate across federal agencies to advance the science, policy, and practice of early learning and development through (1) coordinated and collaborative research and evaluation agendas and (2) plans for effective dissemination and adoption of research findings. Part of its mission is to develop a comprehensive, shared understanding among federal partners by continuously disseminating information about ongoing initiatives and projects in order to inform recommendations for the coordination of early learning and development research agendas. The planning committee leads the workgroup and consists of staff from the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE), the Institute of Education Sciences (IES), and the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE).

Goal(s): To support the mission and goals of the Workgroup by serving on the planning committee.

Contributions of Fellow:

- Served on Planning Committee for the ELD Research Workgroup, including organizing and facilitating monthly Workgroup meetings, creating the agendas, and contributing to discussions of Workgroup initiatives and goals.
- Contributed to developing and writing the Workgroup mission statement.
- With support from the Workgroup, led the development and organization of and hosted a federal research briefing series that fulfills one of the milestones to implement President Biden's Executive Order on Supporting the Reopening and Continuing Operation of Early Childhood Education Providers. The goal for the series was to understand what is currently known about the COVID-19 pandemic's

impact on young children, their families, and the early childhood education workforce.
- Participated in Workgroup discussions around shared research topics (e.g., equity in early learning and development research).

Activity Focus Keywords: Cross-agency collaboration, disseminate findings
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Early Head Start, center-based child care, family child care, child welfare, public prekindergarten, prekindergarten to Kindergarten transition, IDEA, home visiting, pediatric primary care settings, early intervention, family engagement, dual language learners (DLLs), school readiness

Read more about Jackie's fellowship experience