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SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Professional Portfolio Abstracts: Lorena Aceves, Ph.D.

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

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Introduction: This portfolio highlights the work of Dr. Lorena Aceves' fellowship year at the Administration for Children and Families' Office of Head Start (OHS). In the 2020-2021 fellowship year, Dr. Aceves has had the opportunity to work on a range of projects within the Planning, Oversight, and Policy (POP) division. These projects include research and policy analysis of Head Start work force recruitment and retention issues, research to policy and practice initiatives, dissemination of information and findings to OHS staff and beyond, data analysis of grant money awarded by OHS to Head Start grantees, and infusing an equity lens across diverse projects. All these projects demonstrate the complex and rewarding nature of working in a program office to gain experience in how research and policy intersect to guide change in practice. This experience at OHS reveals the important demands that program offices such as Head Start face, especially in the light of a pandemic, to continue to provide to services and care for children and families who need it the most. Finally, Dr. Aceves' briefly discusses how this experience has shaped her future career goals.

Portfolio Entry 1: Head Start Workforce Recruitment and Retention Policy Initiatives Sample Piece

Project Overview:

Background: One topic that is central in the policy division of the Office of Head Start is the recruitment and retention of the Head Start workforce. Head Start programs are facing many issues related to recruitment and retention of staff due to many factors, including low wages, barriers to accessing higher education, and issues related to staff well-being. To tackle this issue, the team at OHS has spent time examining past research on the state of the early childhood workforce to understand how these issues affect staff recruitment and retention.

Goal(s):

1. To learn how Head Start workforce recruitment and retention can be addressed by the Office of Head Start
2. To be aware of the trends of Head Start staff wages and turnover over the last 10 years
3. To address the equity issues facing the Head Start workforce
4. To synthesize how workforce issues in Head Start connect to those faced by the broader early childhood workforce

Contributions of Fellow:

- Conducted a literature review of past research focused on recruitment and retention among the early childhood education workforce
- Compiled research and information on this topic into a PowerPoint presentation for a for a high-level leadership meeting
- Reviewed brief authored by an OHS colleague on Head Start administrative data focused on this topic
- Conducted focus groups with Head Start Regional Program Mangers about issues the workforce is facing
- Co-authored policy memos on this topic
- Implemented an equity perspective to all these pieces within this larger project

Activity Focus Keywords: Policy Memo, Research Brief, Literature Review, Presentation

Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Workforce, Equity

Portfolio Entry 2: Scan of OHS-OPRE Relationship

Project Overview:

Background: The Office of Head Start (OHS) has an on-going relationship with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). This relationship is based within OPRE's role in conducting a variety of research studies on Head Start programs (i.e. BABY FACES and FACES). Staff at OHS interact regularly with staff at OPRE on many different levels to use research that comes from these studies to inform policies and practices that are implemented by OHS. This collaboration also involves making sure that OHS's priorities are being represented within Head Start focused research projects and any projects that could be useful for work conducted within OHS.

Goal(s):

1. To learn about how OHS staff use research conducted by OPRE in their work
2. To learn about how broader communication and collaboration between OHS and OPRE can be improved
3. To determine if there are additional strategies that could be implemented to improve communication and collaboration around research
4. To understand what practices have worked in the past to make communication and collaboration successful

Contributions of Fellow:

- Scheduled meetings with 16 folks across OHS divisions
- Conducted 30 minute interviews with each individual
- Compiled qualitative data from each interview
- Coded data and developed the main themes that arose in these interviews
- Created Summary Sheet of the main themes
- Created and presented a PowerPoint presentation highlighting the main themes to supervisors and other folks in OHS

- Participated in on-going small group conversations about strategies to improve communication and collaboration across offices

Activity Focus Keywords: Conduct Interviews, Data Analysis, Data Collection, Disseminate Findings, Presentation

Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Research-Practice Partnerships

Portfolio Entry 3: OPRE To OHS Research to Practice Newsletter Commentary

Project Overview:

Background: The Office of Head Start (OHS) has an on-going relationship with the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE). This relationship is based within OPRE's role in conducting the major nationally representative research studies on Head Start programs (i.e. BABY FACES and FACES). OPRE regularly shares research findings with OHS, and one of those ways is a monthly OPRE to OHS newsletter. In the effort to make the research findings more inviting and accessible to the diverse OHS stakeholders who receive the newsletter, our team has created a newsletter commentary. Every month, Dr. Aceves drafts a commentary for each monthly newsletter that translates research findings highlighted in each newsletter to plain language to reach a greater audience.

Goal(s):

1. To communicate research findings in plain language to diverse stakeholders
2. To increase the engagement in and accessibility of research across OHS staff
3. To improve the dissemination of research from OPRE to OHS

Contributions of Fellow:

- Reviews the overall monthly newsletter drafted by OPRE
- Writes the initial draft of the OHS commentary for the newsletter
- Provides feedback on content included in the newsletter

Activity Focus Keywords: Disseminate Findings, Research Commentary

Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Research-Practice Partnerships

Portfolio Entry 4: How Research Informs Policy and Practice in the Office of Head Start

Project Overview:

Background: The Office of Head Start is a prime example of how policy and practice come into play at a nationally recognized early childhood education program. Often times, folks in academia or other organizations beyond federal government are not familiar with the role of the Office of Head Start. This project provided an opportunity to share some basic information with research audiences about the Head Start program and how research, policy, and practice intersect in the work conducted by the Office of Head Start.

Goal(s):

1. To provide an overview of the Office of Head Start
2. To inform non-OHS staff about how research informs policy and practice at the Office of Head Start

Contributions of Fellow:

- Compiled basic information about the Office of Head Start
- Synthesized the diverse roles the divisions in OHS play
- Created the initial draft of poster for OHS co-authors
- Revised and updated poster based on feedback from OHS co-authors

Activity Focus Keywords: Disseminate Information, Presentation, Diverse Audiences
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Research-Practice

Portfolio Entry 5: Quality Improvement Funding Analysis

Project Overview:

Background: Congress appropriated $250 million in FY 2020 for the implementation of quality improvement activities in Head Start programs. The use of this funding must align with Section 640(a)(5) of the Head Start

Act. This particular appropriation of Quality Improvement funding was intended for use in on-going actives, with an emphasis from Congress on addressing trauma and implementing trauma-informed care in programs, with the goal of supporting children and families impacted by adverse experiences. All grantees received funding based on the number of children they are funded to serve, with a floor for funding for meaningful investments for small grantees.

Goal(s):

1. To determine how Head Start grantees proposed to use their allocated FY 2020 Quality Improvement funding
2. To understand what specific types of activities grantees proposed to implement using this funding

Contributions of Fellow:

- Used Head Start Enterprise System to review overview data and data for 220 Quality Improvement funding applications submitted by Head Start grantees
- Implemented a coding scheme to review application data using the activities outlined by OHS staff
- Compiled a data set of quantitative and qualitative data pulled from this grant application review
- Created a presentation highlighting high level findings on all 2187 applications and also findings from a more in-depth analysis of the 220 applications
- Presented findings to staff across the OHS POP, Program Operations, and TTA divisions
- Presented findings to Head Start regional program managers and Head Start leadership

Activity Focus Keywords: Data Analysis, Grant Review, Data Collection, Disseminate Findings, Presentation, Written Report

Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Grants, Funding Usage

Portfolio Entry 6: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Logo

Project Overview:

Background: In the last year, four work colleagues developed the Office of Head Start's Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion (DEI) commission. After their initial year of foundational work, they found it was important to bring

on a new cohort of individuals from all across Head Start to help their vision of the DEI commission come alive. I am honored to be selected to be a part of the inaugural cohort of the OHS DEI commission. The vision of the DEI commission is to “cultivate a work environment that promotes equity, celebrates and leverages diversity, fosters inclusion and belonging, and respects all perspectives, identities and experiences.”

Goal(s):

1. To plan events and programming for OHS staff on a range of DEI issues that affect our office
2. To develop materials for the DEI commission for marketing of the diverse programming hosted by the group

Contributions of Fellow:

- Created, designed, and won the logo competition for the DEI commission logo
- Developed marketing materials for event titled: How Covid-19 Impacted Head Start: Racial Disparities
- Helped organized plans for additional fall 2021 events

Activity Focus Keywords: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Programming, Dissemination
Policy Area Keywords: Head Start, Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion, Federal Workforce

Read more about Lorena's fellowship experience