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2023 SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Spotlight: Tanya Tavassolie, Ph.D.

Tanya Tavassolie is an SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the Office of Head Start (OHS).

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In a few sentences, what is your role at the agency you work for?

I work at the Office of Head Start (OHS). My fellowship straddles the Policy, Oversight, and Planning (POP) division and the Comprehensive Services and Training and Technical Assistance (CSTTA) division.

To ensure a smooth experience for grant recipients, OHS collaborates across the office to coordinate efforts and as a fellow I have the privilege of being a part of this interdisciplinary work. Each week, I work with a team of OHS staff and external contractors to think through the details of implementing new protocols for collecting classroom quality data from Head Start programs. Additionally, I co-facilitate a national

subcommittee with several contractors and regional staff who provide training and technical assistance (TTA) to Head Start programs to help coordinate the roll out of TTA for Head Start grant recipients. This has been particularly rewarding to see how TTA is deployed on the ground in response to a specific policy change.

How do you think the fellowship has helped further your career?

Going into the fellowship, I didn't quite know which direction I wanted my career to go in. My background is in applied developmental psychology, so I always knew I wanted to stay in the applied space, but I didn't know which type of organization I wanted to work for. After arriving at OHS and seeing how research and developmental principles are put into practice and translated for policy makers, I have realized how much I love this work and would like to remain in the policy implementation space. This fellowship has been an absolute gift for my career. I have discovered exactly where I want to be. I am forever grateful to SRCD for accepting me into this fellowship and awarding me with this opportunity that profoundly influenced the direction of my professional career.

What words of wisdom might you pass on to someone who is interested in SRCD's fellowship program?

I would say to keep an open mind and come in willing and open to learn about what the agencies processes are. Your job as a fellow is to assist with the priorities of the agency and to conduct high-quality work. Keeping an open mind about the projects you work on, the topics you cover in your portfolio, and the tasks you are given will allow you to gain a breadth of experience that makes your fellowship experience much richer. Embrace every opportunity you have as a fellow to engage in topics that might be outside of your comfort zone, and make sure you are seeking out opportunities that are interesting to you as well.

What piqued your interest in working in policy?

After graduate school, I was a postdoctoral research associate at University of Maryland for three years. During my time there, I was working on a contract with Educare DC as their local evaluation partner. Educare is a local Head Start center in Washington, DC that serves children ages birth to five and their families. I spent my days at the school providing research and data support, conducting child assessments and classroom observations, and integrating administrative data and implementation data to provide the program with ongoing continuous quality improvement guidance. I loved this job and especially loved when I got to work directly with educators to help translate what research and data meant for them. After working there for

three years, I decided that I wanted to learn more about the early childhood system more broadly and specifically, to learn more about how policymakers think through the early childhood system and how they structure and implement policies to support the system. That led me to apply for the SRCD Congressional Policy Fellowship where I learned how the legislative branch structures policies, and subsequently, I applied for the SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellowship where I learned how agencies implement the laws that are passed by Congress. It's been a fascinating journey and I feel like I have finally found the place I'm meant to work.

Why should someone else apply for this fellowship?

If you are interested in how your research applies beyond the walls of the laboratory or university, then I would highly recommend considering this fellowship. I was always interested in how research gets used by others and how researchers can make their work more applicable and relevant for policy and practice, so I always knew this fellowship would be right for me. There are so many ways that research gets used and understood by various audiences. When researchers work side-by-side with policy makers and practitioners, we get to learn how research gets interpreted and what questions are most relevant for different audiences. This fellowship awards researchers with this experience. If you are curious about how developmental principles, research studies, and policy analyses get used by policymakers and federal agencies, then this fellowship is right for you!

What do you like to do in your free time?

I mostly spend my free time hanging out with my two young kids, my partner, and my dog. We fill our days with attending birthday parties, playing outside at local parks, or spending time with friends. But I always enjoy when I get to see my girlfriends, meet up with my book club, or watch my favorite shows!