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2026 SRCD Federal Policy Fellow Spotlight: Jess Sullivan, Ph.D.

AUTHOR

Jess Sullivan, Ph.D.

State Policy Fellow at the New York Office of Children and Family Services Division of Child Care Services
Professor of Psychology at Skidmore College

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

A: I contribute to initiatives in the NYS OCFS Division of Child Care Services. For example, I have worked alongside parents, child care providers, and stakeholders to begin to develop a statewide definition of 'high quality' child care. I have also worked on a report assessing the feasibility of universal after-school programming in New York. In addition to these larger projects, I have provided analytical assistance on others' projects, I have used my academic training to develop slides and messaging to communicate about policy to a broader audience, and I have used my expertise in child development to help select children's books for the New York State Literacy Trail!

Q: What is something you learned in the last month *outside of your field*?

A: As part of my fellowship, I was asked to write about the history of child care regulations in different regions of the state. Doing this has required reading history and legal texts, and conducting other forms of primary source research. This sort of project is more traditionally 'academic' than the others that I've worked on, but it has both (a) increased the depth of my understanding of child care policy in the state and (b) allowed me to spend some time learning about child development using methods outside of my field of training.

Q: What interested you in becoming an SRCD Policy Fellow?

A: As a mid-career psychology faculty member, I had become increasingly interested in developing a research program and teaching portfolio that could support positive change in the world. My students were hungry to find ways to use their skills to improve child care, education, and child-facing policy, but I had limited experience in doing these things myself. I realized that if I wanted to help my students change the world, I needed new tools and experiences myself. The SRCD Policy Fellowship allows me to receive substantial training at the intersection between research and policymaking, while my placement has allowed me on-the-ground experience working with policymakers.

Q: What has been your favorite aspect of SRCD's fellowship? Please explain why.

A: I've loved getting to work with and know the amazing people doing child care policy work in New York. I've been blown away by how welcomed I've felt, and by how fun it has been to talk about child-facing policy with so many people. I've learned more about how the child care system in my state works (and changes!) in the last two years than I did in over a decade of being a parent and professor of child development. And, even better, I've gotten to know the humans behind those systems in a way that I never would have outside the fellowship.

Q: Why should someone else apply for this fellowship?

A: This fellowship is such a unique opportunity. It allows you to get hands-on policy experience, while placing you in a supportive network of other fellows and SRCD staff. One thing that I love about this fellowship is that it provides outstanding professional development no matter what your path looks like after the fellowship.

Q: What do you like to do in your free time?

A: When I'm not playing with my kids, I'm planting my giant garden, rock climbing, or hiking the Catskills and Adirondacks!