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March 2017 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Elizabeth Day, Ph.D.

2016-2017 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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I have long been interested in the intersection between research and policy – when I learned about the SRCD Congressional Policy Fellowship as a second-year graduate student, I was disappointed I needed to wait two years to apply! My interest in research and policy originated from my work as a 5th grade teacher and grew through my work with the Indiana Family Impact Seminars as a graduate student at Purdue University. Family Impact Seminars bring researchers from across the country to speak to state legislators once a year on a topic selected by a legislative advisory committee. Through this experience, I learned about the challenges of bridging research and policy at the state level, and once I was selected as a Congressional Policy Fellow, I was thrilled to have the chance to see this process first-hand at the federal level. I currently serve as a fellow in the office of Senator Kirsten Gillibrand, and learn more each day about the role of research throughout the legislative process.

My responsibilities as a fellow are diverse, but all of my work centers on improving the lives of children and families. Early in the fellowship, I learned the intricate web of individual priorities, advocacy group goals, agency regulations, legislative processes, and over-arching politics that Senators and their staff must navigate on a daily basis to get things done. I am grateful that my office trusted me from the beginning and fully immersed me in each of these aspects of policymaking; I have met with New York constituents and groups on behalf of the Senator, reached out to agencies for technical assistance on legislation, and recruited support from across the aisle for Senator Gillibrand's legislation. I have had the incredible opportunity to see ideas turn into bills, revise legislative text to incorporate more research evidence, write memoranda for senior staff on education and child welfare issues, and write letters to agencies on behalf of the Senator requesting data that might be used to inform better policy. Each day brings new challenges and new learning opportunities, especially at a time when the political culture of Congress, and D.C. more generally, is undergoing immense change.

Overall, throughout this experience, I continue to develop a deep respect for the work of legislators, advocacy groups, and Congressional staff in their efforts to bridge research and policy, but more work needs to be done. Congressional staff are limited in time and resources to know the cutting-edge research happening across the country, just as researchers are limited in time and resources for translating research to support legislative needs. These gaps have become especially clear to me at the state level compared to the federal level, where resources are much sparser (Senate offices in DC have around 25 staffers along with additional regional staff, whereas State Senators in part-time legislatures may share one staff member between four Senators). Seeing these challenges on a daily basis inspires me to work long-term in a career that seeks to address these challenges at all levels of government.

Serving as an SRCD Congressional Policy Fellow was a goal of mine from early on in my graduate program, and I am incredibly grateful to have this opportunity. This experience has been instrumental in building my understanding of policy at the federal level that I hope to use throughout my career to bridge research and policy in order to build better policy for children and families.