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January 2014 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Beth Meloy, Ph.D.

2013-2014 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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I came to SRCD with a strong desire to understand and unpack the connections between research, policy, and practice in the realm of child and family services. In addition to the doctoral training in child development I received at Georgetown University, I also earned a Master's in Public Policy which lead me to pursue research interests that were focused on improving services for children and families. Nonetheless, my understanding of how scientific research was used to inform public policy and how those policy decisions translated to programmatic changes that impact the lives of children and families was fuzzy at best. The SRCD Policy Fellowship experiences offered the perfect opportunity to gain clarity about the current process and formulate opinions about how the process might be improved to better serve children and families.

My first fellowship experience at the intersection of research and policy came last year, as a congressional fellow in Senator Al Franken's office, where I had the opportunity to write and introduce two pieces of legislation to improve early childhood education. Drafting legislation for Senator Franken was an amazing

and interesting experience. However, throughout the course of my year on the hill, I also learned that getting legislation enacted is—in and of itself—a small miracle following a long and arduous process with no guarantee of success. More surprising to me, was the realization that even after legislation is enacted, it is rarely closely connected to practical policy implications. This means that many of the policy decisions that have direct implications for children and families are passed down from Congress to the executive branch. As is the case with so many things in life, when it comes to policy—the devil is in the details. Following my desire to more fully understand the role of research in influencing both policy and practice, I sought out an experience that would get me closer to the intersection of research and practice, specifically. The opportunity to serve as an executive policy fellow in the Policy and Planning Division at the Office of Head Start has afforded me that opportunity and given me a new perspective that I believe will lead to a much more holistic understanding of the research to policy process.

After only three months in my position at the Office of Head Start, I can already say that the projects I am working on will have an impact on the children and families that Head Start reaches. I have been given the opportunity to work on interpreting legislation, responding to congressional requests, developing rules and regulations and disseminating this process and the results to a wide variety of audiences. My role in these projects has allowed me to work with experts in every area of early childhood education from professional development to human resource management to teaching practices that promote the development of early literacy, social emotional, math and even science skills. My new role has also allowed me to utilize the skills that I acquired as a congressional fellow—including a nuanced understanding of congress, the legislative process, legislative language, and politics. I am certain that my executive policy fellowship will continue to contribute to my development as an early care and education policy specialist, and will be an experience that will influence my work for years to come.

Being an Executive Branch Fellow is truly a privilege. I am incredibly grateful for the opportunity to grow as a researcher and policy maker that the fellowship has already afforded me and look forward to the many opportunities to hone new skills and learn new things that await me in the months to come.