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August 2011 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Elizabeth O'Hare, Ph.D.

2010-2011 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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I have had the privilege of serving as an SRCD Congressional Fellow this past year. My placement is in the office of Representative Rush Holt (D-NJ). Rep. Holt's district encompasses central New Jersey and includes Trenton, Princeton, and East Brunswick, among other towns and municipalities. In Congress, Rep. Holt serves on the House Education and the Workforce Committee and the House Committee on Natural Resources, where he is the senior Democrat on the Subcommittee on Energy and Mineral Resources.

Working in the House of Representatives has been a frenetic, challenging, and career-changing experience. This year has seen Congress narrowly avert a government shutdown, raise the debt ceiling amidst partisan rancor, and consider spending bills under open rules that make for marathon debates with hundreds of amendments. Just one year ago, I hardly knew what a spending bill was, much less the intricate aspects of legislative procedure and political communication! In fact, the most challenging aspect of my work as a Fellow has been bridging the cultural and linguistic gaps that exist between Capitol Hill and Academia. In the

laboratory, I was accustomed to precise measurements, reliability protocols, and the pragmatic writing common in scientific articles. Legislating is about balancing competing interests and effectively representing and serving one's constituents. As the use of the occasional rhetorical flourish indicates, it is more of an art than a science.

I am trained as a neuroscientist and my postdoctoral and graduate research used functional and structural Magnetic Resonance Imaging (MRI) to link age-related changes in brain structure with the development of reasoning and problem solving capacities in children and adolescents. Scientists come to Capitol Hill well versed in skills that are highly valued by Congressional offices. My years of designing and conducting neuroscience research allowed me to develop strong abilities in independent thought, problem solving, strategic thinking, fast-paced research and analysis, and written and oral communication. This skill set, combined with my scientific expertise in brain and cognitive development enabled me to contribute to Rep. Holt's legislative objectives in a variety of issue areas, including education policy, disability policy, and science education.

My activities as a Fellow have included drafting legislation to strengthen investments in early learning, and organizing a roundtable event in our Congressional district with Rep. Holt and members of the disability community. Perhaps the most exciting aspect of my fellowship has been staffing Rep. Holt during meetings of the Education and the Workforce Committee. Thus far, the Committee has considered three major bills related to the reauthorization of No Child Left Behind. In my role as a Fellow, I was responsible for researching these pieces of legislation and developing a legislative strategy for Rep. Holt. I would prepare briefing materials with relevant background information and suggested talking points. During Committee hearings, I would sit or stand on the dais, ready to answer any questions Rep. Holt might have. Having this front-row exposure to Congressional action on Elementary Education policy has been an unforgettable experience.

Society faces complex scientific and technical challenges on local, national, and international scales. Yet, too often, scientists and researchers lack the skills and opportunity to apply their technical knowledge and research experiences in support of policymaking. My experience as an SRCD Congressional Fellow has empowered me to be an active participant in policymaking. I am deeply grateful to SRCD for granting me this wonderful opportunity.