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# April 2008 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Michelle Mazzocco, Ph.D

2007-2008 Federal Congressional Policy Fellow

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As a midcareer academic on sabbatical, I pursued a SRCD Congressional Science Fellowship as a means to better understand how experts in science and policy can communicate effectively with one another. Having spent over ten years carrying out primary research in child development, I sought to understand what information reached policy makers, what routes that information followed, and what factors determined how or whether the information is acted upon. In particular, I wanted to witness the role of cognitive development research in education policy. Therefore, I am fortunate to be serving as a Congressional Fellow in the office of Senator Jeff Bingaman, a member of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pension (HELP), at a time when major education reauthorizations are in progress.

At the midpoint of my year in Senator Bingaman's office, I have already had opportunities to witness or participate in three major pieces of federal legislation at varying stages of the legislative process. During my first week in the office, the Head Start bill was reauthorized. This means that both the Senate and House had

passed their respective versions of the bill, reconciled their differences during negotiations, and produced a unified bill and corresponding conference report. Having just come on board, I had no role in this particular piece of legislation, other than attending the bicameral signing of the conference report. The signing occurred at the House of Representatives by members of the Senate HELP committee and members of the House Committee on Education and Labor. This was a momentous occasion for the individuals directly involved, but as a mere witness I could not fully appreciate the four year process leading up to the Head Start Improvement Act of 2007.

Opportunities to learn more about the legislation processes soon followed. When Senator Bingaman introduced a teaching standards bill, I wrote the accompanying floor statement, thereby participating in the initial stages through which an idea becomes law. Later, the bill was incorporated into draft legislation for which reauthorization discussions were beginning. I attended meetings on the Senate version of this reauthorization, and participated in discussions during which we labored over individual words and phrases, considered their corresponding policy implications and the potential unintended misinterpretations. Bipartisan discussions on the Senate bill were moving forward when the need for a conference report on yet another piece of legislation redirected congress members and their staffers towards another mission. This time, the meetings did not alternate between party-specific and bipartisan meetings, but instead alternated between bipartisan Senate-only and bicameral meetings of the House and Senate.

For many weeks, negotiations to reconcile the differences between the House and Senate versions of a bill have been the focus of my fellowship; this will continue for weeks to come. I have grown to appreciate that the process requires much time for the sake of thoroughness, fair debate, and compromise. I have also learned that these compromises are not always between Democrats and Republicans; they occur between House and Senate, or between states with conflicting needs and priorities.

My role as a fellow is not limited to staffers' meetings about specific legislation, but many activities center on gathering information relevant to those meetings. Research and communicating with experts includes interactions with expert analysts at the Congressional Research Services division of the Library of Congress. Another chief responsibility of a congressional staffer is to meet with constituents and advocates about any of a wide range of issues. By participating in these meetings and by attending congressional hearings, I have learned first hand how a vocal advocate can influence negotiation discussions.

By communicating with Senator Bingaman's field staff, I became familiar with Statespecific issues. In the fifth month of my fellowship, I was able to meet Senator Bingaman's New Mexico based staffers with whom I had only communicated by telephone and email, during the annual office retreat held in New Mexico. This two-day meeting was an invaluable opportunity to witness how a large Senate staff works together towards common goals, and stays abreast of one another's objectives and accomplishments. The annual retreat was followed by Senator Bingaman's Student Leadership Institute, an annual event during which local New Mexican high school students attend a town meeting to directly pose questions on any topic to the Senator, following a morning of classes led by staffers to acquaint the students with a wide range of policy issues and processes. Leading the class on education policy allowed me to convey what I had learned about policy making to an audience that was directly affected by decisions made by policy makers.

Among the many benefits of the fellowship that are immediately apparent to me is how the information I have gained will positively influence my future teaching and research. Although I was previously aware that an emphasis on policy implications is an important component of teaching any child development related course, my experience as an SRCD fellow has prepared me to more effectively address such information at a level appropriate for introductory, upper division, or graduate level classes. Indeed, I would like to develop a course on child development research and policy making in the near future. Likewise, as I plan the next renewal application for my ongoing research program, I not only have a greater appreciation for the most important policy-oriented questions germane to my particular research interests, but I am learning how to more effectively disseminate the eventual findings for both science and policy audiences. In other words, the SRCD fellowship has offered me a different perspective for thinking about what I have studied for many years. It has affirmed in me an appreciation for the importance of science in policy, and has been a powerful.