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October 2007 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Behnosh Najafi, Ph.D.

2006-2007 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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Another year of my fellowship has passed and I'm still learning a great deal. In my second year at the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), I anticipate extending my knowledge of how to oversee and assist in shaping research that is supported through our office in the form of grants and contracts awarded. As an OPRE representative on these grants and contracts, I will be able to draw from my knowledge base in order to inform research efforts that are likely to have ramifications for Head Start programming and policy decisions in the future. My other ongoing activities in the office include taking the lead in planning for a roundtable, which I think will allow me to experience first-hand one of the ways in which research can extend its reach to the world of policy and practice.

The links (and sometimes gaps) between policy, practice and research also become apparent as I take time to reflect on the processes of work found in both academic and federal settings. For instance, I have learned that no matter how noble the intentions of an academic may be their work will not have an impact on

programming and policy decisions unless their efforts are more strategic in scope. It is wishful thinking to simply add a paragraph or two at the end of a manuscript about the implications of a research project and hope that someone who can benefit from the research will do so. I have come to regard these last few paragraphs as “feel-good” yet ineffective approaches to linking research with practice.

I’ve also learned that sometimes in the world of policy relevant research, ideas can be very top-down in approach, which is a pattern that seems to correlate with how policy and programming decisions are often made. If indeed this is true for much of the time (I recognize that my views constitute only a one-person perspective with a limited field of view), what is urgently needed at the federal level are researchers and other stakeholders who are willing and able to represent the voices of low-income and ethnically diverse populations who may benefit from the research.

These are a few of the numerous reflections I have had in my time as a fellow and I’m sure to learn much more as the next year unfolds. I am thankful for this opportunity to grow and dramatically widen my perspective on how research is generated and used at the federal level.