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August 2019 Spotlight on the SRCD Policy Fellow: Emily Ross, Ph.D.

2018-2019 Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow

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When I began my graduate school journey, I knew I wanted to conduct research that was not only informed by developmental science, but also relevant to policy-making for children and families. However, I saw time and time again how high-quality research did not seem to reach policymakers. I began to wonder— what does it mean for research to be policy-relevant? What are the pathways through which research gets into the hands of decision-makers? Who are the decision-makers, anyway? In addition, I knew that a significant amount of research is conducted within the government, but I was unsure about how research agendas were prioritized and what guided decisions to fund certain research topics over others. The SRCD Federal Policy Fellowship Program was the perfect opportunity to begin answering some of these questions.

Currently, I am finishing my first year as a SRCD Executive Branch Policy Fellow at the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE), which is situated within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families (ACF). OPRE is an independent research and evaluation

office that studies the efficiency and effectiveness of ACF programs and the outcomes of the children and families they serve. I work within the Division of Child and Family Development (DCFD), which primarily conducts research on programs housed in the Office of Head Start (OHS), the Office of Child Care (OCC), and the Children's Bureau. These programs – including Head Start and the Child Care Development Fund (CCDF) – provide services for underserved children and families to foster economic and social well-being, as well as promote school-readiness for young children.

Throughout this year in OPRE, I have had the opportunity to conduct research, disseminate findings through reports and briefs, and translate research for different audiences. Through these experiences, I learned about the multiple ways research is and can be used to inform policy and practice at the federal and state level. This is exemplified in our close work with our program partners, OHS and OCC. For example, I participate in weekly meetings between OPRE and the director and senior staff in OCC, where we discuss the current policy priorities of OCC (e.g., to improve the quality and access in child care; to better understand changes in the home-based child care market), what research might exist to inform their decisions, and what key questions still exist that might be developed into our next OPRE research projects. This iterative process ensures that OCC is kept up to date about key research evidence that might inform their work, while OPRE is made aware of the priority questions on which to focus the next round of research.

OPRE also works to inform policy and practice decisions by briefing our program offices about relevant research produced by OPRE or outside of the government. We write a monthly newsletter for OHS that summarizes and interprets recently published academic journal articles that may be of interest. We also set up separate briefings to do a deeper dive into the research. I had the exciting opportunity to brief the policy leadership in OHS about my own recently published article that examined the use of the CLASS® measure in the Head Start accountability system. This experience required me to reframe the research and step back for a more birds-eye view of how the findings were relevant and actionable for the program office. Through dialogue with the policy team, I gained insight into their deep knowledge of research, the trade-offs they must make when balancing priorities, and considerations about the timing for when programmatic change is possible.

Much of my work this year focused on supporting OPRE research projects. This research is conducted primarily through contracts, where OPRE develops research questions with input from the program offices and writes contracts to be bid on by a network of research firms. Once the contract is awarded through a rigorous review process, OPRE manages the research activities conducted by the research firm. This year, I

worked on developing three new projects for the next fiscal year, and I am taking the lead on one child care-focused study. In addition, I've contributed to five existing contracts, where I've worked on a range of tasks, from designing the second phase of a longitudinal, nationally representative study to editing final reports and briefs about key findings. These experiences have allowed me to expand my knowledge of different key areas in early childhood and the policies that guide them— for example, how states and communities are coordinating child and parent services to better serve families, and how center- and home-based child care markets have changed since the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) Act in 2014.

OPRE also aims to build research capacity in the field, which primarily occurs through the funding of grants. Each year, SRCD Policy Fellows serve as program specialists for the Head Start Scholars grant program, which funds one- or two-year dissertation research grants for graduate students doing rigorous research relevant to Head Start. This grant program also seeks to foster mentorship and create networking opportunities for students. I gained first-hand experience creating a funding opportunity announcement (FOA), managing multiple grant review panels, processing new awards, and planning the yearly grantee meeting. This experience was a wonderful way to continue to bridge the academic and government worlds of research, and I feel so fortunate to learn from a group of inspiring, emerging scholars conducting policy-relevant research.

I am honored to continue my fellowship for a second year and to learn from and work alongside my OPRE and program partner colleagues, who are truly dedicated to improving the lives of underserved children and families. I am indebted to our mentor and former SRCD Director for Policy, Dr. Marty Zaslow, and the entire policy team at SRCD, who ensure the fellows are as prepared as possible when we start our fellowships, and then continue to provide unwavering guidance. My first year in the SRCD Policy Fellowship and placement within OPRE has been an incredibly supportive and eye-opening experience, and I am excited to see what my second year brings.

Read about other SRCD Policy Fellows' experiences