Introducing the 2020–2021 SRCD U.S. Policy Fellows

The Society for Research in Child Development (SRCD) is pleased to announce the 2020-2021 SRCD U.S. Policy Fellows.

The SRCD U.S. Policy Fellowship Programs include placement opportunities in federal congressional offices as well as federal and state executive branch agencies. The purpose of the fellowship programs is to provide researchers with immersive opportunities to learn about policy development, implementation, and evaluation, and to use their research skills in child development to inform public policy at the federal or state level.

Learn more about the SRCD U.S. Policy Fellowship Programs

2020 - 2021 SRCD Federal Policy Fellows

SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellows
**Lorena Aceves, Ph.D.**

Dr. Lorena Aceves is an SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow with the Administration for Children and Families’ Office of Head Start (OHS). She is currently working on two main projects within OHS. The first project involves creating a seamless connection between OPRE’s Head Start research portfolio and the OHS Policy and Technical Assistance divisions, so that this research is more accessible for use within these divisions. Another important project she will be working on is focused on reviewing Head Start Regulations around teacher qualifications. This project will involve connecting with Regional Program Managers to learn about the issues they are facing with having qualified Head Start teachers and reviewing past research to understand the impacts of teacher qualifications on child outcomes. This combined effort will be used to inform a potential reauthorization of Head Start that could shift Head Start teacher qualifications. Dr. Aceves is a first-gen Latina scholar who recently completed her Ph.D. in Human Development and Family Studies at the Pennsylvania State University. Dr. Aceves’ research throughout graduate school focused on understanding how cultural, familial, and individual-level factors contributed to Latinx adolescent’s academic achievement and educational attainment. Her main goal with her research and now fellowship is to shed light on how to better support communities of color at the intersection of science and policy.

**Krystal Bichay-Awadalla, Ph.D.**

Dr. Krystal Bichay-Awadalla is a second year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on research and evaluation projects in the Head Start and Child Care portfolios at OPRE. Dr. Bichay-Awadalla is a developmental psychologist with a particular interest in the measurement of early care and education (ECE) quality, and understanding how contextual and child-level factors influence the development of social-emotional skills for children from low-income families. Dr. Bichay-Awadalla holds a Ph.D. and M.S. in Developmental Psychology from the University of Miami and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Virginia. Prior to joining OPRE, Dr. Bichay-Awadalla was a Graduate Research Assistant at the University of Miami, where she was involved in developing and evaluating interventions with teachers that were focused on effectively managing challenging behaviors in the classroom, as well as improving teacher-child interaction quality. She is committed to using research to improve programs and policies that support the well-being of children and families from low-income backgrounds. [Read about Krystal’s fellowship experience.](#)
Jackie Gross, Ph.D.

Dr. Jacquelyn (Jackie) Gross is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on research and evaluation projects in the Head Start and Child Welfare portfolios at OPRE. Dr. Gross is a developmental psychologist and received her Ph.D. and M.S. from the University of Maryland, College Park (UMD) and her B.A. in Psychology from Trinity University. Her research focuses on how family and environmental factors, in particular the parent-child relationship and parenting behaviors, influence children’s social-emotional development. Prior to joining OPRE, Dr. Gross was a Postdoctoral Associate at the Center for Early Childhood Education and Intervention (CECEI), where she worked on research and evaluations examining the impact of Maryland’s Preschool Development Grant programs on children’s school readiness, programs to improve the quality of family engagement in young children’s education across the state of Maryland, and the scope of early education experiences available to young children with disabilities in Maryland.

Ellen Litkowski, Ph.D.

Dr. Ellen Litkowski is a second-year SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on early care and education projects in the Head Start and Child Care portfolios at OPRE. Dr. Litkowski’s research investigates the underlying contextual and environmental factors that contribute to the development of children’s school readiness skills, including executive function, early mathematics, and early literacy. She is interested in understanding how children’s interactions with parents and teachers in their home and school environments can foster early learning and promote positive school transitions. Prior to joining OPRE, Dr. Litkowski was a Postdoctoral Research Associate at Purdue University in the Department of Human Development and Family Studies, where she worked with Indiana’s Department of Education to evaluate and redevelop Indiana’s kindergarten readiness assessment. She also previously served in the Literacy AmeriCorps of Palm Beach County, where she provided reading instruction and teaching assistance in a Head Start center. Dr. Litkowski holds a B.S. in Biology and English from Duke University and a Ph.D. in Educational Psychology from Georgia State University. Read about Ellen’s fellowship experience.
Parisa Parsafar, Ph.D.
Dr. Parisa Parsafar is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Child Development and Behavior Branch at the Eunice Kennedy Shriver National Institute of Child Health and Human Development, National Institutes of Health. Prior to starting her current fellowship, Dr. Parsafar was an SRCD Federal Policy Congressional Fellow in the Office of Senator Chris Coons where she worked on health-related policy issues. Dr. Parsafar is a developmental psychologist and received her Ph.D. from the University of California, Riverside (UCR). Her dissertation focused on the understanding of emotions in young children. At UCR, through an NSF grant, Dr. Parsafar collaborated with a professor of water economics and policy to investigate the role that children’s negative emotions play in shaping their thoughts about water contamination and their tap and bottled water consumption behaviors. She earned her M.A. in Psychology at New York University and earned her B.A. in Psychology at the University of California, Davis.

Frances Martínez Pedraza, Ph.D.
Dr. Frances Martínez Pedraza is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Policy Fellow in the Office of Child Care (OCC) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Her focus at the OCC includes understanding US territories’ child care program operations and policies and working on health and mental health promotion initiatives. Dr. Martínez holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Massachusetts Boston, and a B.A. in Psychology from the University of Puerto Rico, Rio Piedras Campus. Prior to the SRCD Fellowship, Dr. Martínez was a Postdoctoral Associate in the Center for Children and Families, Department of Psychology at Florida International University. Dr. Martínez’s research has centered on the dissemination and implementation of evidence-based mental health screening and intervention tools in Part C Early Intervention systems serving young children with developmental delays and their families. Her work has focused on strengthening workforce supports that are culturally grounded and contextually relevant with the goal of reducing racial, ethnic, socioeconomic, and linguistic disparities in early care and education access and quality. Dr. Martínez is committed to using research to inform child and family policies that promote equity and support the well-being of children and families living in poverty from racial and ethnically diverse backgrounds.
Alayna Schreier, Ph.D.

Dr. Alayna Schreier is a second year SRCD Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation (ASPE) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Her work at ASPE spans the early childhood and youth portfolios and includes work on Head Start, child care, and trauma-informed care. Prior to the SRCD Fellowship, Dr. Schreier completed a National Institute on Drug Abuse T32 Postdoctoral Fellowship in the Division of Prevention and Community Research, Department of Psychiatry at Yale School of Medicine. Dr. Schreier’s research has centered on at-risk and trauma-exposed children and families, with a specific focus on the contextual and systems-level factors that contribute to service system use, engagement, and mental health outcomes. Her research and evaluation work has been conducted in collaboration with Early Head Start and Head Start, Child Advocacy Centers, and community-based systems of care. As a graduate student, Dr. Schreier was a Doris Duke Fellows for the Promotion of Child Well-Being and a Head Start Scholar with the Administration for Children and Families. Dr. Schreier is a licensed clinical psychologist and received her Ph.D. in Clinical Psychology from the University of Nebraska-Lincoln. She also holds a B.A. in Psychology and Women’s Studies from the University of Michigan. Read about Alayna’s fellowship experience.

Dianna Tran, Ph.D.

Dr. Dianna Tran is a SRCD Federal Executive Branch Fellow in the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation (OPRE) in the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. She is currently working on research and evaluation projects in the Child Care and Head Start portfolios at OPRE. Dr. Tran holds a Ph.D. and M.A. in Developmental Psychology with a minor in Advanced Quantitative Social Science from University of Notre Dame, and a B.A. in Psychology from California State University Long Beach. Her graduate work focused on children’s socioemotional development, academic development, and ecological systems effects (e.g., parenting, extended family caregiving, poverty, cultural norms). Dr. Tran was also a Mirzayan Science & Technology Policy Fellow during spring 2020 at NASEM (National Academies of Sciences Engineering Medicine) where she worked with the Board for Children, Youth, and Families and the Forum for Children’s Well-Being. Dr. Tran is committed to translating and communicating research to inform policies that enhance the well-being of children and families.

SRCD Federal Congressional Policy Fellow
Christian Clesi, Ph.D.

Dr. Christian Clesi is a SRCD Federal Congressional Policy Fellow in the Office of Senator Bob Casey where he is currently working as a member of his Disability Policy team on the Special Committee on Aging. Dr. Clesi is a developmental psychologist and received his Ph.D. from the University of Alabama at Birmingham (UAB). Christian’s dissertation implemented and evaluated a psychoeducation program for parents and providers of people with Autism Spectrum Disorder. At UAB, Christian was also a LEND/UCEDD trainee at the Civitan-Sparks Clinics, where he completed interdisciplinary evaluations for children with concerns of developmental disorders. Dr. Clesi also worked to help establish the Alabama Regional Autism Network, a system designed to provide comprehensive care for the ASD community and to research and advise on state policy initiatives. He earned his M.A. in Psychology from UAB and his B.S. in Psychology from Birmingham-Southern College.

2020 - 2021 SRCD State Policy Fellows

*SRCD State Policy Pre-Doctoral Fellows*
Andrew (Drew) McGee
Andrew B. McGee (Drew) is an SRCD State Pre-Doctoral Fellow at the Office of Early Childhood (OEC) in the Colorado Department of Human Services (CDHS). Drew is involved in projects to advance the state’s early childhood care and education system and primary prevention work. Drew’s current work focuses on (i) work with the Families First Prevention Services Act for scaling prevention services across the state, (ii) reports and briefs related to ongoing data collection for a state-wide parent asset survey to inform program implementation, and (iii) integrating data for current Colorado legislation centered on early childhood mental health (ECMH) consultation. Drew is in his third year of the clinical child psychology doctorate program at the University of Denver, with a specialty in policy. Drew holds a B.S. in psychology from the University of Utah and an M.A. in psychology from Teacher’s College at Columbia University. He has on-the-ground experience in early childhood education, having served as a preschool teacher in a nonprofit mental health preschool day treatment program and a university-based childcare center. Drew has also conducted research in various settings, including the juvenile justice system, day treatment pre-kindergarten programs, and intervention studies. Read about Drew’s fellowship experience.

Wendy Wei, Ed.M.
Wendy Wei is a SRCD State Policy Pre-doctoral Fellow at the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care (EEC). At EEC, she is integrating data within the Programs Division to promote continuous quality improvement in early education and care settings and supporting the agency’s strategic planning efforts to identify indicators for tracking birth to Grade 3 success. Wendy is also a doctoral student at the Harvard Graduate School of Education under the mentorship of Dr. Dana McCoy and an Institute of Education Sciences (IES) Partnering in Education Research predoctoral fellow. Her research interests lie at the intersection of early childhood development and policy. Specifically, she is interested in understanding how contextual factors promote children’s access to high-quality early educational experiences and their developmental outcomes, as well as examining the predictors and consequences of early school attendance. Prior to the doctoral program, Wendy was a program assistant at IES in the US Department of Education. She received her B.S. in Human Development from Cornell University and a Ed.M. in Human Development and Psychology from the Harvard Graduate School of Education.

SRCD State Policy Post-Doctoral Fellow
Dr. Jennifer Finders is a SRCD State Policy Post-doctoral Fellow in the Indiana Family and Social Services Administration (FSSA), Office of Early Childhood and Out of School Learning (OECOSL). Her research focuses on understanding and promoting school readiness among children from socioeconomically disadvantaged backgrounds with the overall goal of informing early education programs and policies. Dr. Finders completed a Ph.D. and M.S. in Human Development and Family Studies and a B.S. in Psychology at Oregon State University. She was previously a Post-doctoral Research Associate at Purdue University in Human Development and Family Studies where she collaborated with faculty to evaluate the effectiveness of Indiana’s state-funded prekindergarten program. Dr. Finders is currently working on several projects at OECOSL that aim to expand access to high-quality early care and education across the state and leverage Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security (CARES) Act funding to support child care providers during the COVID-19 pandemic. She is dedicated to translating research into evidence-based policies and practices that will ultimately improve the lives of children and families. Read about Jenn’s fellowship experience.