

We Do Big Things

by Eric Karolak

Earlier this week (as I write this in mid-February), President Barack Obama delivered the first State of the Union address of his second term. The 'SOTU' as it's short-handed in DC, is our annual moment of political pageantry, a high-profile speech that tends to be 'full of sound bites.' One of my favorites was from 2011, when the President picked up on the comment of a Pennsylvania businessman to push America's potential: "We do big things."

Early childhood providers know about doing big things: teaching children to read, to self-regulate, to play well together; keeping our programs and schools running and improving; helping parents be able to go to work, and helping supply businesses with the workforce of tomorrow. These are big things that strengthen our families, communities, and the nation.

A Big Proposal

This year's State of the Union will be remembered for the President's unprecedented focus on early childhood education and a proposal to do something big.

President Obama called on Congress to make "high-quality preschool available to every single child in America." The President pointed to the research showing that learning begins before school

entry, that the sooner children have quality experiences the greater the benefits down the road. He noted that the return on the investment in early childhood education is great, as much as \$7 for every \$1 spent, and that preschool can be expensive and out of reach, especially for the most disadvantaged children who would benefit from it the most.

We all know the drill, right? But this was the President speaking — and he was talking to more than 33 million viewers.

"We know this works," President Obama concluded. "So let's do what works and make sure none of our children start the race of life already behind."

Talk about doing big things!

And there's more — in the days following the SOTU, the President toured the country and made clear his was a comprehensive, birth through 5 vision of early childhood education. In addition to the Pre-K component, the President announced a new Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership program of competitive grants to support selected states and communities "that expand the availability of Early Head Start and child care providers that can meet the highest standards of quality for infants

and toddlers, serving children from birth through age 3." Funds would be awarded through Early Head Start and could be used "to enhance and support early learning settings; provide new, full-day, comprehensive services that meet the needs of working families; and prepare children for the transition into preschool."

The third part of the proposal is expanding the Administration's evidence-based home visiting initiative, through which states are implementing voluntary programs that provide nurses, social workers, and other professionals access to at-risk families in their homes and connect them to assistance that impacts a child's health, development, and ability to learn.

The White House shared added details in the days following the SOTU. The proposed universal Pre-K component,



Eric Karolak is Chief Executive Officer of Action for Children, the source for child care and early learning services in central Ohio. Prior to returning to his native Ohio, Dr. Karolak was founding Executive Director of the Early Care and Education Consortium,

a public policy alliance of thousands of early learning centers enrolling nearly 1 million children in all 50 states. From 2001 to 2006, he led the National Child Care Information Center, the largest Federal clearinghouse focused on child care and early education. He has worked closely with states developing the technical aspects of child care assistance programs, quality rating systems, and partnerships across early childhood programs. He has conducted policy research and fiscal analysis in the areas of child welfare, child care, women's labor force participation, and public housing, and has testified before several state legislatures and both houses of the U.S. Congress.

for example, would be a new federal-state partnership — a 50-state grant administered by the U.S. Department of Education (ED) to provide high-quality Pre-K for all low- and moderate-income four year olds from families at or below 200% of poverty” (\$39,060 for a family of three). The White House noted that “funds would be distributed to local school districts and other partner providers to implement the program” and the plan would offer incentives for states to broaden participation in their public preschool program for additional middle-class families, possibly served through a sliding-fee scale.

Also the Pre-K initiative would include “common and consistent standards for quality across all programs,” including: well-trained teachers paid comparably to K-12 staff, rigorous curriculum and effective evaluation, and comprehensive health services, among other things.

Under the proposal, ED also would offer incentives for states to expand access to full-day Kindergarten, currently available to about 6 out of 10 children nationwide.

All told, the President and his team have drafted a plan to establish a continuum of high-quality early learning experiences for a child, beginning at birth and continuing to age 5.

Questions and Actions

The President’s plan certainly counts as a ‘big thing,’ but it can’t be done without the Congress. Sometime in March, The White House will release its budget proposal, which will likely include substantial new investments for Pre-K, the Early Head Start-Child Care partnerships, and home visiting. But whether Congress will act on those recommendations is another matter altogether.

Questions have been raised from various quarters about the plan. Some Republican Members of Congress responded by noting that states are making progress on their own on Pre-K and asserting that there was a limited federal role in early education.

Even early childhood advocates have raised friendly questions about what the plan means for the future of Head Start as a federal-to-local program focused on four year olds, how the plan supports the diverse array of early childhood settings at different age levels, and what the plan will mean for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which funds child care subsidies for low-income families and quality improvements in the early childhood system.

These and other details of the plan are being developed in a time of tight financial constraints and tense political reali-

ties. But it’s exciting that early childhood is in the news and on the table in Washington.

As Linda K. Smith, Deputy Assistant Secretary and Interdepartmental Liaison for Early Childhood Development, at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services told me, “We’re entering an exciting and historic time for early care and education in our country. This week President Obama laid out a vision to ‘make it a national priority to give every child access to a high-quality early education.’ His vision builds a pathway from birth to school entry and includes home visitation, child care, Head Start and Early Start, and Pre-K. Now it will be up to us to make that vision a reality. In the coming months, we will be reaching out to engage the field in this work. We will need everyone’s support, great ideas, and collective ‘best thinking’ to guide us as we work to make the most of the opportunities before us.”

What Can You Do?

Talk about the importance of early childhood education — that it begins before children go to school, and that the sooner it starts the better off the children, their families, and our communities are.

Follow the developments on the Hill this Spring because historic proposals to do big things need lots of voices to become reality, AND because there are historic cuts looming over child care, Head Start, and other early learning programs.

Presidents may propose, and Congress may consider, but nothing big happens unless people make something of an issue.

Another ‘Big Thing’

One issue that just won’t go away is the threat of spending cuts. By press time, it appeared clear that Congress would not be able to make a deal to avoid the

Three Parts to the President’s Plan

- Providing high-quality Pre-K for all four year olds from families with incomes under 200% FPL (\$39,060 for a family of three).
- A new Early Head Start-Child Care partnership to extend the availability of effective early learning opportunities to children birth through age 3.
- Expanded evidence-based voluntary home visiting programs to enable nurses, social workers, and other professionals to connect families to services and educational supports.

across-the-board cuts known as ‘sequester.’ What little hope there may have been for a last-minute solution before the March 1 deadline seemed to evaporate when Congress left on recess February 15. From the defense industry to human services, efforts turned to strategizing how to get the \$85 billion in automatic spending cuts reversed as soon as possible after taking effect, keeping the damage to a minimum.

That’s \$85 BILLION.

This is a real issue — another ‘big thing’ with impacts to be felt all throughout our economy and society. For us, it means tens of thousands of children will lose access to child care programs and be cut from Head Start. Until the sequestration issue is resolved, it will be crucial for our field to stick together and to stick out our necks so that the big things we do for children, their families, and our communities continue to be done.

It Was 20 Years Ago Today

On February 5, 1993, President Bill Clinton signed the Family and Medical Leave Act (FMLA) into law. There’s no question that FMLA, which offered about half the total workforce access to as much as 12 weeks of unpaid leave, has changed employment law and the workplace over the last two decades. Through FMLA, more than 100 million employees have been able to care for newborns and newly adopted children, other family members, and themselves without risking their jobs.

But many find it surprising that since then there has been no new major federal initiative to help workers accommodate their family and work lives — even though about 70 percent of American children now live in households where every adult in the home is employed, and the work pressures on families have increased.

How do you see it? Do families need more supports? Should FMLA be extended to apply to workers at places of employment with fewer than 50 employees? Should *paid leave* be on the table? Has FMLA created challenges for employers or, on balance, strengthened the workforce? What about the effect on child care — do you see impacts at your program?