

Time for a Strong Start

by Eric Karolak

Sometimes it feels like we've been waiting forever for early childhood education to be prioritized in our nation's policies and spending plans.

My daughter was born the year Congress created the federal child care program in welfare reform; she's planning college visits now. An entire childhood has passed since Congress last reviewed and revised the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). Too many children with much greater needs have been waiting too long for Washington to act.

Now, in less than a year, we've seen major proposals introduced in Washington, DC. Last February, the President spoke at length about the value of early learning in the annual State of the Union Address, and in the spring outlined a major new initiative in his budget proposal.



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public policy alliance of thousands of early learning centers that together enrolled 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.

Then, in September, Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), chair of the Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, led the introduction of a bill to reauthorize CCDBG with significant changes that promote early learning as a goal of federal child care assistance, as well as helping parents get and keep work.

Now, there is what some are calling landmark legislation to prioritize early learning opportunities, birth through age 5, similar to the President's proposal. Good things are stirring in our nation's capital!

Landmark Legislation

Landmarks, by definition, stand out from the usual. They don't come around every day. They're significant. And now, fingers crossed, one might be upon us.

In mid-November, following on the heels of the government shutdown, the Strong Start for America's Children Act was introduced by Senator Harkin, Representative George Miller (D-CA), and Representative Richard Hanna (R-NY). The bill builds on the framework President Obama outlined in the State of the Union Address and focuses on four goals over a 10-year horizon:

- Funding high-quality preschool programs serving low- and moderate-income families

- Increasing the quality of infant and toddler care
- Supporting quality improvements to child care programs
- Continuing support for the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program.

Highlights of the 80-page bill include:

- Providing funds for states to make pre-kindergarten available to four-year-old children from families with incomes at or below 200% of the federal poverty level (FPL), and encouraging states to spend their own funds to support pre-kindergarten for young children from families with incomes above 200% FPL.
- States could provide sub-grants to local providers, including school districts and community-based providers such as child care and Head Start programs, which meet a set of standards including teachers who hold bachelor's degrees, teacher salaries comparable to those for K-12 teachers, and a full-day schedule among other things.
- Establishing a new federal-state partnership with formula funding for four-year-old prekindergarten to all eligible states, based on each

state's proportion of four-year-olds under 200% FPL; up to 20% of these funds in the first four years could be used to improve quality (e.g., providing scholarships to help teachers complete college).

- Requiring states to provide matching funds equal to a progressively increased percentage of their federal funding in the bill (increasing from 10% match in the first two years to 100% match in year eight and after).
- Permitting states to use up to 15% of their funds for high-quality early care and education for infants and toddlers from families earning 200% FPL or below in full-day, full-year programs.
- Authorizing a new Early Head Start partnership with child care centers and family child care homes to improve the quality of care for infants and toddlers.

It was impressive to see an array of congressional leaders, from the House and Senate, Democrats and Republicans, standing with leaders from law enforcement, the military, and business, as well as early learning advocates as the bill was introduced.

Representative Richard Hanna (R-NY), the lone Republican lawmaker at the event, explained his position: "High-quality early learning guarantees a reduction in spending on entitlements, welfare, and incarceration. It also lowers obesity rates, helping to reduce health care costs. By focusing on early education we can begin to break the back of intergenerational poverty, producing more taxpayers and a more competitive America through a better educated, growing middle class."

Fiscal Cloud, Silver Lining?

Whether and how much of this landmark proposal becomes reality is up in the air, air that's clouded by the

ongoing argument in Washington over the size and scope of the federal government.

The deal ending the government shutdown in October included extending current appropriations through a 'continuing resolution' and appointing a select group of lawmakers to develop a budget agreement by mid-December. Led by Senate Budget Committee Chair Patty Murray (D-WA) and her House counterpart Rep. Paul Ryan (R-WI), the Murray-Ryan conference committee's recommendations were passed by the Congress as *Exchange* went to press.

The Murray-Ryan deal set the government's spending level at \$1.012 trillion for the current fiscal year (FY2014) and \$1.014 trillion for next year (FY2015), the mid-point between the competing proposals of the House Republicans and Senate Democrats. That's the 'top line' number only, and the deal doesn't set spending levels for individual programs like Head Start. Although having a healthy top line number makes it a little easier to maintain or increase funding for individual programs.

By setting spending levels for two years, the deal means we're more likely to see a return to a more typical budget and appropriations process, less likely to see another shutdown over spending levels.

The deal also restores almost 90% of the sequester cuts to non-defense discretionary spending in 2014. The sequester cuts grew out of another budget showdown in 2011, and the second round of across-the-board sequester cuts were set to take effect in January 2014. These cuts would have been harmful to child care and Head Start programs and the families we serve.

Next, the Appropriations committees in each chamber must come to agreement on how to set funding for specific pro-

grams, which will need to be finalized prior to January 15, 2014.

And soon after, we'll hear what the President thinks is possible for early learning: tune-in to the State of the Union Address, scheduled for January 28, 2014.

In the meantime, we can make a difference by joining the Strong Start for Children campaign and by winning over more parents, business people, civic leaders, and others with whom we connect every day in communities across the nation. Google "Start Strong for Children Campaign" and follow the links to national organizations leading the campaign.

New Research on Costs and the Workforce

Child Care Aware of America has released the 7th edition of its annual report on what child care costs American families. The report shows that child care costs continue to be significant, outpacing the cost of college in 31 states.¹

An important driver in the price of child care is labor, and new federally-funded research provides a close look at what the early childhood workforce looked like in 2012.

The National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE) sampled 10,000 individuals "representing about 1 million center-based classroom staff, as well as about 1 million paid and about 2.7 million unpaid individuals regularly providing home-based ECE to children other than their own."²

The comprehensive approach they took has yielded solid information and findings some may find surprising:

- 53% of center-based early care and education providers have at least an associate degree.

- The median income for a full-time center-based provider is just \$22,000 per year and 24% of providers report having no health insurance.
- Nearly 75% of center-based teachers and caregivers work full-time, and half have more than 13 years' experience in the field.

Appearing so close in time, these reports put in relief an incongruous truth: as expensive as child care is for families to afford, most early childhood workers are under-compensated. And yet the ECE workforce has demonstrated its commitment to the work and to investing in themselves. Maybe it's time for Washington to step up and support the caregivers and teachers at the heart of our programs?

Endnotes

1 Parents and the High Cost of Child Care: 2013 Report, Child Care Aware, 2013. Viewed online at www.usa.childcareaware.org/costofcare. The comparison is for infant care in a center and tuition and fees at a public university.

2 Number and Characteristics of Early Care and Education (ECE) Teachers and Caregivers: Initial Findings from the National Survey of Early Care and Education (NSECE), NSECE Research Brief, OPRE Report 38, October 2013. Viewed online at www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/number-and-characteristics-of-early-care-and-education-ece-teachers-and



Affordable Care Act Update

Last year saw the launch of the healthcare.gov website and the further implementation of the Affordable Care Act (ACA), the health insurance reform law passed in 2010 and often referred to as Obamacare. The website, through which individuals can search for insurance options and apply online for coverage in the government-sponsored marketplace, got off to a shaky start on October 1. Now that it's operating better — I checked in the first week of December — you'll want to make use of it and the opportunities it offers.

If you're an employee in an early childhood program, and especially if your employer does NOT provide insurance, visit the healthcare.gov website to see what insurance options are available and whether you can lower your costs.

If you're an employer, especially if you've not previously been able to offer a health insurance benefit, you may be able to find an affordable plan through the website's SHOP Marketplace for small businesses (under 50 FTE in 2014, under 100 in 2016).

Employer or employee, I'd like to hear from you about your experience. Are you able to afford insurance benefits you've not had before? Is the coverage better than what your options were a year ago? As an employer, have you made adjustments to prepare for the implementation of ACA? What does it mean — for you, for your family, or for your business? Please email me at ACAfeedback@yahoo.com. Thank you!