

Here, There, Everywhere

by Eric Karolak

“All of a sudden, early childhood education is really, really popular.” That’s how *New York Times* columnist Gail Collins opened a recent column.¹ And she’s right. Everywhere you turn, it seems, someone is saying something awfully nice about the importance of the early years. So, as program administrators, as teachers, as center owners — whatever your role in delivering the early childhood education programs everyone is now talking about — you need to consider where your voice needs to be heard and how your program and the families it serves might be impacted.

Hail Washington!

Two developments at the beginning of the year indicated the importance of the federal government, and the limitations of federal activity. In his State of the Union address, President Obama repeated his request to help states make high-quality pre-K available to every four-year-old. That he did this is a result of a large army of advocates — many of you — who have been effectively increasing the fever for early childhood education over many years. That same advocacy effort, now channeled into the “Strong Start” campaign, helped give

rise to the Strong Start for America act and other bills introduced in recent months: the ‘landmark’ legislation outlined in the last Policy Matters column and currently before the Senate.

A federal bill is a big deal, but many observers question whether Congress and the President — you know that’s a group of 536 people, right? — can find the common ground and the will to act together. Some say this will not happen before a major electoral change shakes up who those 536 are or alters the framework of the debates in Washington around what government should and should not do.

Many skeptics were surprised by another January development: the passage of the Omnibus Appropriations bill. That’s the fancy name for the bill that funds the government! First, coming just three months after the government shutdown over disagreement about spending, it was a noteworthy accomplishment. What was really impressive is that in setting spending priorities in this bill, Congress directed more than \$1 billion additional dollars to early childhood education. The lion’s share of that went to Head Start, and much of the increase, really, was funding to restore the ‘sequester’ cuts (that occurred after Congress failed to reach a budget agree-

ment back in 2011). Still, that this Congress and this President — all 536 of them — could agree to move all of those chips into the early childhood column was something to celebrate. How those dollars are to be spent may mean a lot for your program.

About \$500 million, is allocated to Early Head Start, which can be used for the Early Head Start/Child Care Partnerships the President proposed a year ago in the 2013 State of the Union. This is a good time to be exploring or strengthening your relationship with a ‘cousin’ program: “Child care center, meet the Head Start grantee. Head Start grantee, get to know a child care program.”

Another \$250 million, within the Race to the Top program, will go toward competitive awards for states to develop or



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expand state pre-K programs for the most vulnerable children. Is there a state-funded pre-K program in your state? Do you know its requirements? Can you meet them? Resources like the NIEER State Preschool Yearbook can help you get started, but in the end you'll want to develop relationships with pre-K leaders in your state or at the local school district.

Some States Can't Wait

Whatever happens or doesn't at the federal level, keep your eye close to home. The President, noting the year that had passed between his calls for universal pre-K in two State of the Union addresses, said "in the meantime, 30 states have raised pre-K funding on their own. They know we can't wait."

Governors and legislatures are making new or renewed commitments to expand pre-K. New state-funded pre-K programs were created in Hawaii and Mississippi last year. Governor Andrew Cuomo (D-NY) and New York City's new Mayor, Democrat Bill DeBlasio, were engaged in a healthy debate not over whether to invest in pre-K, but how to finance that investment. Okay, that's New York and both Cuomo and DeBlasio are liberals; but even in a state like Ohio, with a Republican Governor and conservative legislature, the biennial state budget included \$32 million new dollars for pre-K. Those funding decisions are, put another way, estimates of demand in your market. Whether you're a smart business person or a wise social entrepreneur, it makes sense to take note. Never mind that regulation and many program requirements follow from state agencies.

Is Yours a City on a Hill?

For some of you, the opportunities with the greatest potential may be closest to home. Cities have been leaders in the early education parade.

I remember being mildly surprised in 2006, as I began working with a fledgling coalition of advocates to win pre-K in Virginia, to discover there were viable local pre-K initiatives already underway. That year, voters in Denver passed a sales tax to fund preschool. Now, evaluations of the Denver Preschool Program show it reaches 70 percent of the city's four-year-old children, with 90 percent of participants leaving the program ready for school and outperforming their non-pre-K peers through second grade.

All across the country, cities have been fertile ground in the pre-K expansion for years, but lately the growth seems more vigorous. Last year, San Antonio, San Francisco, and Seattle logged significant early education 'wins.' These are not necessarily small programs either. "Pre-K for San Antonio" clocks in at over \$30 million. And many of these local initiatives, because they have been voter approved, carry significant political armor. As communities across the country grapple with school performance and jostle about civic pride, it's only natural that they look to local pre-K initiatives rather than wait on Washington.

Maybe now is a good time to talk to your Mayor about the early years or invite your school superintendent to visit your program. If they were to launch a new pre-K initiative, what would you want them to know?

Endnotes

1 Gail Collins, "How Preschool Got Hot," *New York Times*, January 29, 2014.

2 Visit the Denver Preschool Program website for encouraging news and details about how the program works: www.dpp.org

3 Daphna Bassok and Anna Rorem, "Working Paper: Is Kindergarten the New First Grade? The Changing Nature of Kindergarten in the Age of Accountability" (EdPolicyWorks,

January 2014), viewed online at http://curry.virginia.edu/uploads/resourceLibrary/20Bassok_Is_Kindergarten_The_New_First_Grade.pdf



What about “K”?

With all the flurry of new interest in early childhood education, and new steps being taken on pre-Kindergarten at different levels throughout the country, have you ever wondered, “What about Kindergarten?” The result of the nation’s original early education movement seems to have gone under the radar.

Recently, a new research paper appeared that had a lot of folks asking, “Is Kindergarten the new first grade?” Researchers from the University of Virginia found that Kindergarten teachers reported spending 25 percent more time teaching early literacy in 2006 as they did in 1998. As much as 7 hours per week was devoted to early literacy, and the added literacy time appeared to come from reduced instructional time on other academic subjects, suggesting that the focus on grade level reading by grade 3 may be behind the changes.

During the same time period, the percentage of Kindergarten teachers who agreed that students should start learning to read in Kindergarten jumped from 31% to 65%, and more reported they were teaching spelling and using standardized assessments in their classrooms.

But many *Exchange* readers live in school districts or states where full-day Kindergarten is not required or not funded at the same level as first grade. Of those who attend Kindergarten, about 3 out of 4 attend full-day, up from just over one-half in 1998.

The growing momentum of pre-K, as well as the movement toward implementation of the Common Core State Standards, seem to be contributing to changes in Kindergarten. In 2013, several states expanded full-day Kindergarten, and, at the end of the year, Governor Brownback of Kansas announced plans to channel more funding in that direction, a development I suspect we’ll see more of from other Governors and at the district level, too, this year. That makes sense. As we move ahead — however unevenly or incompletely — on the preschool front, we won’t be helping kids or families if the Kindergarten year becomes a kind of ‘gap year’ between early childhood and elementary school.