

Preschool Meets Child Care

by Joan Lombardi

As the national debate on education reform heats up, preschool has suddenly become a hot topic. For those of us who have been working on early childhood issues long before they moved to the front page, the attention is welcome. During Labor Day celebrations, we heard about working families. When school started, we heard about the need for preschool. We can no longer have a national debate on these issues as if they are separate and unequal. From World War II to welfare reform, child care has been viewed as a place to “put” children while their parents work. Nursery or preschool has been seen as a place where children go to “learn.” It is time we help others recognize that child care is an educational opportunity — a place to promote language, literacy, and a love of learning. For many young children, child care is a preschool.

Over the past few decades, we have seen tremendous growth in early childhood services. More than 10 million preschoolers in the United States have employed mothers. Almost half of these young children spend part of each week in organized programs including child care centers or family child care homes. Almost 2 million children with mothers not in the workforce also attend early childhood centers.

Ten years ago, the President and the nation’s governors signed the education goals, with school readiness heading the

list. The very next year, after many many years of debate, Congress passed and the President signed a child care bill. Although this was a big step towards helping low-income parents gain access to affordable services, the bill (and its 1996 successor) included very few provisions to promote quality — no one required literacy training for staff, there was limited attention to paying decent wages so we could recruit and retain qualified teachers. In fact, even basic health and safety protections were reduced to the bare minimum.

So here we are coming into an election year and everyone is concerned about early education. It is time for a national dialogue on this issue — but it cannot be separated from the needs of working families, and at the same time, it cannot be pitted against our strong belief in the importance of parents in the lives of young children.

The next century calls for new ways of thinking. How can we promote the early education of young children at home, in child care, and in other early childhood programs? How can we promote the best services not just for four and five year olds but for those infants and toddlers being cared for in centers and family child care by neighbors and by relatives? How can we ensure equal access to quality services for the children of low-income families, particularly now that their parents are moving from welfare to work? And above all, how can we make sure that Head Start, child care, and other early childhood issues remain bipartisan? All of us have to help this dialogue move forward as we go into the next phase of public interest in young children and their families in the decades ahead.

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