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# Changing Seasons

by Eric Karolak

Recently, I was working in our garden, gathering the last offerings of the 2011 season and preparing the ground for next year's plantings. This was a hard year, unusually wet where we live, and we planted the garden in a new location. Now we have to think about next year: what plant varieties to try, whether to change our gardening habits, and what to do with that one section that's (figuratively) 'gone to pot.'

In some ways, we're in a season of change at the national level in early childhood. Some things are wrapping up while some developments aim to prepare our 'field' for improvements in the next year and beyond, just as a garden plot is readied for the next planting season. Change is in the air, and there's hope of renewal, but what changes and how much renewal aren't a given. We'll all need to think smart and work hard to prepare for the future.

## Federal Funding Forecast Uncertain

The federal fiscal year began on October 1 and, as happened last year and for several years now, it began without Congress completing work on a budget and the dozen spending bills required to run the government. Instead, with only days to spare, the Congress passed a

'Continuing Resolution' (CR). The CR extends the FY2011 spending authority for the federal government until all parties can agree on what should be the funding levels for FY2012.

This isn't exactly a new story. The FY2011 appropriations bills weren't passed on time either, and a government shutdown was avoided in April at the 11th hour, after several CRs kept the government in business while leaders worked towards a final deal.

In a 'normal' year, the President presents a budget plan in February, the House and Senate prepare budgets in the Spring and start work on a set of a dozen appropriations bills to implement that budget. And those appropriations bills are passed before the new fiscal year begins on October 1.

This year is anything but normal. The debt ceiling deal — formally, the Budget Control Act of 2011 — clouds the federal funding landscape. The Act created a Joint Select Committee, a 12-person 'super committee,' to develop legislation by November 23 that would reduce projected annual deficits by \$1.2-1.5 trillion through 2021. The Super Committee can choose to reduce the debt any way it likes: cuts to military spending, to entitlements like Medicaid, or to discretionary programs like early childhood funding. It

can also change the tax code. Whatever the mix of approaches it recommends, the Committee's legislative proposal will be fast-tracked so Congress can pass it before the end of the year, another requirement of the Budget Control Act.

If the Joint Select Committee — evenly split among Democrats and Republicans — *doesn't* succeed in creating a legislative package that both the House and Senate can pass and the President can sign by the end of the year, then automatic, across-the-board budget cuts over the next 10 years will kick in. These cuts will be split evenly between defense spending



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and non-defense spending, but will exempt key entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicaid, and child nutrition, among others.

So, what will be the level of funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start? Until the Super Committee completes its work, the federal funding picture is very difficult to predict.

In September, the Senate and House Appropriations Committees released FY2012 spending bills. Both maintained CCDBG at FY2011 funding levels, and both increased Head Start by an amount that would keep classrooms that were opened with funds from the 2009 stimulus bill (the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act) operating into 2012. In the Senate, funding was included to continue the Race to the Top program, including the Early Learning Challenge. However, before these bills could be passed into law, the clock ran out and Congress opted for the Continuing Resolution to keep the government — including child care subsidies and Head Start grant awards — going through November 18. Now, in a real sense, everyone waits on the Super Committee's work.

### Reform in the Air

While the forecast is uncertain for federal funding, the White House and some on Capitol Hill are looking to reform early childhood in the longer term.

Over the summer, the Administration announced that \$500 million of the \$700 million funding for its flagship education reform effort, Race to the Top, would be reserved for a special Early

Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC). This set off a flurry of discussion and planning as most states expressed an interest in competing for the new funds.

Although *Exchange* went to press before the October 19 application deadline (and it may be as late as December before winning states will be announced), RTT-ELC likely will prompt states to develop, expand, or strengthen quality rating and improvement systems, and to introduce or expand kindergarten entry assessments to improve school readiness.

RTT-ELC selection criteria encourages states to approach reforms systemically, to leverage other federal funds, and to squarely put the focus on quality and accountability. Still, funding is capped and even the largest successful states will receive no more than \$25 million per year for four years.

On Capitol Hill, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) is leading an effort to explore reforming CCDBG. Sen. Mikulski is chairwoman of the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, which held a hearing examining quality and safety in child care on September 8. I was a witness at that hearing, along with Donna Bryant of the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and Charlotte Brantley, who heads up the Clayton Early Learning program in Colorado.

At that hearing, the first focused exclusively on CCDBG in several years, we discussed with committee members a number of reforms including quality

rating and improvement systems, training requirements, annual licensing inspections, and comprehensive background checks. Yet, repeatedly, the discussion came back to financing. It's difficult to imagine growing quality at the program level — in centers and family child care homes — without paying more for higher quality care. Senator Mikulski said she recognizes the poor fiscal conditions in Washington and throughout the country, and remains committed to trying to identify reforms in child care that can be accomplished in the current environment.

### Storm Cloud Ahead

How much progress anyone can make in the coming months is likely to be affected by the political storm looming on the horizon: the 2012 Presidential election. As sides square off with just a year to go, everything gets viewed through the lens of the election and whether a proposed change is perceived to benefit one side or the other. This will make it challenging to move legislation affecting early childhood education — not to mention bills addressing far more contentious issues.

Like the proverbial silver lining, the election season ahead also offers an opportunity for advocacy. It will be important to elevate child development and early learning among election issues, to make clear the importance of child care to our economic recovery, and to make sure candidates don't forget our youngest citizens. Perhaps it's time to go out and turn over some ground, to plant a few seeds, and see if we can't produce a bigger crop of champions for early care and education.

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