

Key Questions for the Year Ahead

by Eric Karolak

The new year is finally here! Our resolutions are made and we're looking forward to what the year ahead holds for our programs and the children and families we serve. Some things are largely in our control — matters of will power or planning; others require us to be nimble in responding to changing conditions and competing priorities.

Now, with the federal budget process predictably off schedule and gridlock seemingly the normal traffic pattern in Washington, with the economy struggling and state governments reeling, it's hard to predict the future. Here are some



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key questions as we look to the public policy landscape in child care and early learning in 2012.

How Will ECE Fare in the States?

How will states treat early childhood education in the coming legislative sessions? From licensing requirements to quality initiatives, and funding levels to program requirements, state decisions often define the most critical parameters within which programs must operate. In 2011, many states' budgets were squeezed and governors and legislators made decisions that in turn squeezed provider and family budgets. From Arizona to North Carolina, and from Ohio to Georgia, we saw parents lose access to some of the best programs. Elsewhere quality initiatives were postponed, cut back, or eliminated.

Already Washington Governor Christine Gregoire's proposed supplemental budget reduced the Working Connections Child Care subsidy program by \$50 million, which will impact about 4,000 households. And in Florida, Governor Rick Scott presented a budget that pulls \$30 million in federal TANF money away from child care assistance, and cuts another \$21 million in state dollars from the School Readiness (child care subsidy) Program.

As state revenues continue to fall short, the outlook is uncertain for early childhood. Will decision makers remember our central role in job growth and school reform? Will they recognize how state investments are compounded by federal funding and how our centers' purchases and payrolls and our ability to help parents go to work and children prepare for school and life, generate an economic impact greater than most other programs?

Race To the Top Winners Announced!

Thirty-five states and the District of Columbia submitted applications for the Race to the Top — Early Learning Challenge, and 9 winning states were announced December 16 as we went to press: California, Delaware, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Carolina, Ohio, Rhode Island, and Washington. Grant awards varied by size of state and were capped at \$100 million over four years to strengthen state early learning systems. Visit www2.ed.gov/programs/racetothetop-earlylearningchallenge/index.html for a complete list of winners and to access their applications.

What Will 'Sequestration' Mean for Early Childhood Programs?

There's another question looming this year: What will be the effect on early childhood programs of the failure of the 'super committee'? *Policy Matters* has featured updates on the Budget Control Act of 2011 and the Super Committee it created to identify \$1.2-1.5 trillion in deficit reduction through 2021. The Super Committee failed to develop a proposal by its Thanksgiving deadline, triggering 'sequestration' — across-the-board budget cuts over the next 10 years. According to the Budget Control Act, these cuts will take effect in January 2013 and be split evenly between defense spending and non-defense spending, but key entitlement programs such as Social Security, Medicaid, and child nutrition, among others, will be exempt.

So, what will be the level of funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) and Head Start under sequestration? Both programs could face up to 8% cuts to discretionary funding, but some CCDBG funds and funds in other exempt programs that are used to pay for child care are exempt from cuts. Whether Congress will carry through with the Budget Control Act requirements or change the requirements as it moves forward with the Fiscal Year (FY) 2012 and FY 2013 budget and appropriations processes is unknown.

Will the Early Learning Challenge be Continued?

The Race to the Top (RTT) program is the Obama Administration's essential education initiative. Last summer the Administration announced it was reserving \$500 million of RTT funding for a special Early Learning Challenge (ELC) grant competition. More than 35 states and territories submitted applications, and winners of the four-year-grants received awards in December (see text box).

RTT-ELC is intended to develop successful state systems, support high-quality programs, promote early learning and development outcomes for children, strengthen the ECE workforce, and encourage ECE outcomes' measurement. A key metric for the program is increasing the number of low-income children in high-quality settings. With only a small number of winning grants, each capped by state size, the transformative promise of RTT-ELC will depend on whether it is continued in future budget requests, in appropriations by Congress, and in some form of authorization legislation.

The success of RTT-ELC in increasing the number of low-income children in high-quality programs also depends on how well Head Start and CCDBG, which help parents access programs and help providers deliver higher quality, fare in the competition for federal dollars.

Will Congress Reauthorize Key Programs?

Race to the Top is included in legislation to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) that made it through committee review in the Senate in November. Another question this year is whether Congress will be able to make progress on reauthorizing ESEA or other key early childhood legislation in 2012. From time to time Congress reviews and revises major programs it has authorized in past legislation. This is called 'reauthorization' and helps Congress assure that programs function as intended and reflect changing conditions and advancements in knowledge and understanding.

In the Senate ESEA bill, the nation's flagship K-12 law is revised to include a number of early childhood provisions, including joint professional development and a reciprocating requirement for local education agencies to develop

memoranda of understanding with Head Start grantees, as well as the RTT-ELC. However, the bill moved through committee largely backed by majority Democrats; and in the House of Representatives, where Republicans are in the majority, the approach to ESEA reauthorization is quite different. Finding consensus so that legislation makes it to the President to be signed into law will be a challenge.

In 2012, it will be five years since the last reauthorization of the Head Start Act and more than a decade since the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) was substantially reviewed. Bringing these laws up to date will take considerable negotiation, a strong interest in problem solving, and a real commitment to dedicating resources necessary to meet heightened requirements. Still, as described in the last issue, Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) is leading the effort of the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee to explore reforming CCDBG. Whether she can corral her colleagues behind a bill is something to watch for in the months ahead.

How Will ECE Figure in the 2012 Election?

2012 is an election year with the White House and control of Congress at stake, as well as many state gubernatorial races and legislative seats. On the one hand, this may make it even more difficult for leaders in Washington and elsewhere to come together, but elections also represent an opportunity to put child care and early learning front and center. It's too early to tell how ECE will figure in the campaigns, but the answer to this question may cast a long shadow on our field and its place in national and state public policy debates.

What Can I Do?

This may be the most important question of all in 2012: What is each of us willing and able to do to help legislators and other decision makers understand the real world impact of their actions (or inactions)? You can:

- Invite a state legislator into your program to show them what good things occur there every day that make a difference for a child and her family.
- Commit to look for and respond to e-alerts from a state association or national organization.
- Ask a question at a town hall or campaign event about the need for child care so parents can work and businesses can thrive.

Resolving to be informed and ready to respond, and to step up and share your knowledge and expertise on the value of early childhood education and how best to deliver it, are things largely within your control. In these difficult times, and with so much of our programming affected by decisions made in Washington and in state capitals, providers need to be united in concern for our industry and focused on being effective advocates.

Federal Funding

For the latest on Congressional work on investments in child care and Head Start, visit www.ececonsortium.org.