



DECEMBER 2, 2009

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The following memo provides a summary of recent developments in public policy issues of interest to Early Childhood Advocates.

Healthcare Reform

Following passage of a motion to proceed to consideration of health care reform legislation before the Thanksgiving break, the Senate began their long awaited debate on H.R.3590, *The Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act*, this week.

Senator Barbara Mikulski (D-MD) offered the first Democratic amendment, a measure to guarantee women preventive care and screenings with no co-payment. Republicans selected as their first amendment a proposal by Senator John McCain (R-AZ) to send the bill back to the Finance Committee and remove \$400 billion in Medicare cuts. Additionally, Senators Byron Dorgan (D-ND) and McCain, among others, introduced an amendment to allow the reimportation of prescription drugs from Canada, a step they argue would cut prices, but which the pharmaceutical industry strongly opposes.

Early childhood advocates will continue to track the ongoing debate as H.R. 3590 includes authorization of \$1.5 billion over five years for a new voluntary home visitation program. As reported previously, the House approved bill, H.R. 3962, *The Affordable Health Care for America Act*, includes a similar provision of \$750 million over five years.

As of publication time, no votes have been taken in the Senate on H.R. 3590. While optimists still hold out hope for passage of this measure by the end of the year, a more realistic timetable for final passage of a bill is early next year.

Budget and Appropriations

Prior to the Thanksgiving recess the Senate passed the FY 2010 Military Construction and Veterans Affairs Appropriations Act (H.R. 3082). The measure joins three other bills—Commerce, Justice, Science; Defense and Transportation, Housing and Urban Development—that are ready for House-Senate Conference Committee negotiations. This leaves three spending bills, including the FY 2010 Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations bill, that still have not been scheduled for floor debate in the Senate. These bills will presumably be part of an omnibus spending measure that will have to be passed to complete the Fiscal Year 2010 appropriations process.

As the health care debate continues in the Senate, it becomes increasingly likely that an additional Continuing Resolution (CR) will be needed before the current CR expires on December 18. While initial hope was that an omnibus spending bill could be passed by mid-December, it now appears that a bill will not be complete until well after we ring in the New Year.

House Holds Hearing on Improving Literacy Skills

On November 19, 2009, the House Subcommittee on Early Childhood, Elementary and Secondary Education, chaired by Representative Dale Kildee (D-MI), held a well-attended hearing to review existing federal literacy initiatives and explore strategies for improving the reading comprehension skills of all children from birth through high school. The hearing also gave Representatives John Yarmuth (D-KY) and Jared Polis (D-CO) the opportunity to ask invited witnesses questions regarding their recently introduced comprehensive birth-grade 12 literacy bill, H.R. 4037, the *Literacy Education for All, Results for the Nation (LEARN) Act*. Subcommittee Chairman Kildee noted in his opening statement that while the federal government has invested in a handful of programs to provide intensive reading support for students, much more must be done. Ranking Member Mike Castle (R-DE) added that about 30 million people over the age of 16 “have trouble with basic reading and writing skills and cannot read well enough to fill out a job application, follow a prescription, or even read a simple children’s story.” He also claimed that the success of the Reading First program has been “astounding,” and said he was troubled that Congress has proposed eliminating funding for the program. In addition, both Kildee and Castle noted the importance of literacy and active learning in reading and writing across the age-span, which begins during the critical years of early childhood, continues during the elementary school years, and extends through adolescence through adulthood.

The hearing featured six witnesses, who represented various areas of expertise corresponding to the needs of students and teachers. All of the panelists agreed that literacy learning starts early and persists throughout life, and that young children need parents, caregivers and teachers who support their language and literacy development. Noting the recent data showing 69 percent of eighth graders and 65 percent of twelfth graders cannot read at or above grade level, Andrés Henríquez, Program Officer at the Carnegie Corporation of New York, highlighted the Corporation’s Advancing Literacy Initiative, which focuses on intermediate and adolescent literacy for students in grades 4 through 12. This also includes English Language Learners. Dr. Leo Gómez, Professor of Bilingual-Bicultural Education at the University of Texas Pan American College of Education, stressed that literacy skills are transferable from one language to another, and argued that receiving native language instruction is critical. In addition, several witnesses highlighted on-going, job-embedded professional development that appropriately incorporates teaching and learning with technology, as the best strategy for improving classroom instruction. Larry Berger, CEO and Co-Founder of Wireless Generation, testified that his company has “invented a better way to give classroom assessments and make data-based instructional decisions” thus helping educators teach “smarter” in the classroom. All of the witnesses, as well as the Members present, seemed to agree, literacy is the foundation of success to create highly literate, college-ready adults prepared to succeed in the 21st century. To review witnesses’ statements go to: <http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/2009/11/improving-the-literacy-skills.shtml>.

Secretary of Education Speaks at NAEYC Conference

Prior to the Thanksgiving recess Secretary of Education Arne Duncan spoke at the opening session of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Annual Conference to highlight the importance of early learning. Duncan began his speech by saying, “this is a unique moment in time when early learning is no longer an afterthought, but has come into its own and is recognized as the first and most critical stage in human development. Today we have a special opportunity to build a bigger, better coordinated system of early care and education.”

Duncan discussed the critical role of early learning in preventing academic achievement gaps, as well as the progress that has been made in the instruction of early learning. He also outlined steps that need to be taken to improve state and federal early learning programs in a variety of settings. Duncan said, “it is time to transform early learning from a system of uneven quality and access into a system that truly and consistently prepares children for success in school and in life. And it is time to learn from the success of high-quality programs—even as we take on the challenge of raising the bar for early learning programs in the 21st century.”

In addition, Duncan called for programs that focus on healthy children who have both social-emotional and emergent academic skills. “Care and education cannot be identified as separate entities when dealing with young children,” he said. He also called for better training to help preschool and kindergarten teachers deliver instruction to foster emergent math, literacy and science skills. To read his comments, visit <http://www.ed.gov/news/speeches/2009/11/11182009.html>.