



## Policy Update

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Jennifer Castagna  
[jcastagna@wpllc.net](mailto:jcastagna@wpllc.net)

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

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### **This Week in Washington**

Snow is piled high the Nation's Capitol and it will take many sunny days for Washingtonians to see their sidewalks and fully recover from the mighty blizzard of 2010. Congress found itself frozen out last week, as the federal government closed for an unprecedented four out of five days. That did not stop the Senate from trying to come up with a jobs bill that would show the public they do know what the number one concern of the Nation might be (jobs), and that they can actually play well with others. Majority Leader Reid (D-NV) announced the details of a surprisingly small, bi-partisan jobs plan on Thursday evening. By Friday morning, Republicans were complaining that the announcement was premature and the bill was moving too quickly. It seemed the short-lived détente would be coming to a close. Perhaps this week's President's Day Recess will give cooler heads time to prevail. The bill is modest in scope but, according to Reid, is just one of many jobs measures that the Congress will unveil in the months ahead.

On the budget front, Education Secretary Arne Duncan was forced to cancel an appearance in the House of Representatives last week before the Budget Committee during which he would have explained and defended the Administration's FY 2011 education spending plan. This hearing has been rescheduled for February 25<sup>th</sup>. In the Senate, the Secretary is scheduled to appear before the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriations Subcommittee on March 17<sup>th</sup>. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sebelius already testified before committees in both the House and Senate before the big snowstorm. She appeared before the Senate Finance Committee to discuss the health care proposals in the President budget request, and then testified before the House Energy and Commerce Committee on FY 2011 funding proposals for the Department of Health and Human Services.

### **Health Care Reform**

Health care reform discussions have made little progress as all eyes are on the upcoming bipartisan, bicameral health care summit proposed by President Obama. While many Republicans view the summit, scheduled for February 25, as "political theater," the White House has said that it hopes for true give-and-take negotiations and is challenging congressional

Republicans to put forward their own healthcare reform plan before next week's summit. In a on the announcement of the proposed summit, House Republican Leader John A. Boehner (R-OH) said that he looks forward to the discussion, and that he is "pleased that the White House finally seems interested in a real, bipartisan conversation on health care. . . . The best way to start on real, bipartisan reform would be to scrap [the House and Senate] bills and focus on the kind of step-by-step improvements that will lower health care costs and expand access."

Many argue that the real question has become whether House and Senate Democrats will be able to reach agreement on a health care reform proposal in time for the summit. According to reports, Representative Chris Van Hollen (D-MD) said of his Democratic colleagues in the House and Senate, "We are very close to having ironed out the differences." There have also been reports that the White House will post the text of a proposed health insurance reform package online before the summit. While it is not known if the President has a clear strategy for how to proceed, it is expected that the health care summit will be a first step to reviving health care reform legislation.

### **Sebelius Testifies on Health and Human Services Budget and Health Care**

On February 3<sup>rd</sup>, Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) convened a hearing to host Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Secretary Kathleen Sebelius and examine health care proposals in President Obama's FY 2011 budget request. At the hearing, Baucus reaffirmed his commitment to passing a comprehensive health care reform bill and focused the discussion on reform's potential to create jobs, provide assistance to small businesses and strengthen our economic recovery. "Getting health care reform passed will lower the rate of increase in health care costs and that's going to mean employees will see higher wages. Health care reform really is a job creator – and it helps businesses and employees keep jobs," Baucus said. Baucus and Sebelius also discussed specific proposals in health care reform legislation to help small businesses provide quality, affordable health care coverage to their workers and to find ways to bring down administrative costs and reduce fraud and waste throughout the health care system.

The next day, Sebelius appeared before the House Energy and Commerce Committee to discuss the proposed FY 2011 HHS budget. House Energy and Commerce Chairman Henry Waxman (D-CA) opened the hearing by saying, "The budget strikes a careful balance—helping unemployed families by creating jobs and protecting them against the loss of health insurance; investing in next-generation health care technologies; and taking steps to reduce the deficit while protecting the most important investments." Specific to investments in early childhood programs, Sebelius noted that the HHS budget seeks to increase economic security for families and open up doors of opportunity to those Americans who need it most. Related to improving the well-being of children, Sebelius said, in part:

"The Budget provides critical support of the President's Zero to Five Plan to enhance quality early care and education for our Nation's children. The Budget lays the groundwork for a reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant and entitlement funding for childcare, including a total of \$6.6 billion for the Child Care and Development Fund (discretionary and entitlement child care assistance), an increase of \$1.6 billion.

These resources will enable 1.6 million children to receive childcare assistance in FY 2011, approximately 235,000 more than could be served in the absence of these additional funds.

The Administration's principles for reform of the Child Care and Development Fund include establishing a high standard of quality across child care settings, expanding professional development opportunities for the child care workforce, and promoting coordination across the spectrum of early childhood education programs. The Administration looks forward to working with Congress to begin crafting a reauthorization proposal that will make needed reforms to ensure that children receive high quality care that meets the diverse needs of families and fosters healthy child development.

The Head Start program, run by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), will serve an estimated 971,000 children, an increase of approximately 66,500 children over FY 2008. Early Head Start will serve approximately 116,000 infants and toddlers, nearly twice as many as were served in FY 2008. The Budget includes an additional \$989 million for Head Start to sustain and build on these historic increases enabled by Recovery Act investments. The increase includes \$118 million in funds to improve program quality, and the Administration plans to implement key provisions of the 2007 Head Start Act reauthorization related to grantee recompetition, program performance standards, and technical assistance that will improve the quality of services provided to Head Start children and families.

To continue to fulfill the President's commitment to improving the development, safety, well-being, and permanency of children and youth in foster care, adoption assistance, and guardianship assistance, the Budget includes a proposal to extend by an additional six months, through June 2011, the temporary FMAP increase for foster care and adoption assistance provided by the Recovery Act. This extension will result in an additional \$237 million to States for maintaining critical services to vulnerable children and youth.

The Budget includes an extension of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant and related programs, including the Contingency Fund and Supplemental Grants, through FY 2011. The Budget also incorporates the Healthy Marriage and Responsible Fatherhood grant funding into a new \$500 million Fatherhood, Marriage, and Families Innovation Fund. The fund will provide competitive grants to States to conduct and rigorously evaluate comprehensive responsible fatherhood programs and new demonstrations geared towards improving child outcomes by improving outcomes for custodial parents with serious barriers to self-sufficiency."

### **Early Childhood Groups Applaud FY 2011 Budget; Raise Some Concerns**

Since the release of the President's FY 2011 Budget for the Departments of Health and Human Services and Education, children's advocacy organizations have conveyed strong support for the budget proposal's significant increased investments in our nation's children. According to First Focus, discretionary spending on programs that impact children would see a \$6.12 billion total increase over last year's levels, an increase of 7.2%. Specifically, First Focus estimates that total discretionary funding on children would be increased from \$84.79 billion to approximately

\$90.91 billion. In a statement, Bruce Lesley, President of First Focus, said, “These programs are sound investments that make a tangible difference in the lives of children by starting them off on the right foot.” Those sentiments have been echoed by early childhood stakeholders who have voiced support for increases in spending on Child Care and Development Block Grants, Head Start, Early Head Start, as well funding for new programs, such as, the Early Learning Challenge Fund.

Lesley noted though that not all early childhood programs would benefit from the boost, saying, “Some key children’s programs were reduced or underfunded.” For instance, the proposal suggests flat funding for the preschool formula grants under IDEA Part B, Section 619 at \$374.1 million, and grants for early intervention services to infants and families under IDEA Part C at \$439.4 million. Additionally, Parent Information Resource Centers would be consolidated into a broader program. In the upcoming week, First Focus will host a briefing to bring together early childhood organizations to discuss further how federal programs that improve the lives of America’s children’s are faring in comparison to all other programs in the federal budget. The FY 2011 budget process is just getting started, so the community has much work ahead.

### **Committee on Early Childhood Mathematics Discusses Recommendations**

Last month, the Committee on Early Childhood Mathematics, a research committee formed by The National Academies, hosted a briefing to examine research and policy recommendations for improving math skills among young children. The briefing followed up on a report on math by the Institute of Education Sciences titled, “Achievement Effects of Four Early Elementary School Math Curricula.” Acknowledging that many U.S. children start school with weak math skills, the report examined findings from first graders in 39 schools to determine whether some early elementary school math curricula are more effective than others at improving student math achievement and closing the gap.

Representatives from the Committee stated that young children from low-income families are more likely to be less exposed to “math training” at home. Additionally, panelists noted that with only 40 percent of kids ages 3 and 4 in formal preschool or day care, it is crucial for parents to introduce math within the home. The Committee had several recommendations on how to improve math curriculum and instruction, including: 1) Increasing the amount of coursework, particularly in learning numbers and geometry, that children experience during preschool; 2) Providing professional development to teachers to help them understand math itself, the teaching-learning paths that children take when learning math, and how to teach with an awareness of those learning paths; 3) Providing more informal resources to parents so they can better emphasize mathematical concepts (e.g., “Did you eat half your pizza?” “Do you have both of your socks?”) at home. Panelists at the event were hopeful that an increased focus on early math skills would result in better achievement in math later on in school.