

**MARCH 3, 2010**

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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**

Jobs, tax extenders and healthcare continue to take center stage in Washington this week. Earlier today, the Senate passed a bill which will provide about \$140 billion in extensions of expiring unemployment aid and tax provisions by a vote of 62-36. Democrats have called the package a “necessary step” as part of the economic recovery. The bulk of the bill's cost, about \$80 billion, goes toward prolonging increased levels of federal unemployment aid and COBRA healthcare benefits for the jobless through the end of December.

While the bill extending expiring tax provisions passed on a bipartisan vote today, the atmosphere in Washington, D.C. remains heated. The possibility of moving an education bill looks to some like a collegial act. Last week, Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) joined his House counterpart George Miller (D-CA), Chair of the Education and Labor Committee, in announcing a series of seven hearings on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) and his intent to mark up a bill by the end of May. At every turn there is mention of a bipartisan process to craft a new ESEA bill and as long as that is the goal, the reality of passing a bill may actually be achievable. Absent a bipartisan effort, the challenge of meeting such an ambitious timetable is enormous.

### **Health Care Reform**

As part of a White House strategy to mount an offensive against health insurance rate increases, President Obama began the week by launching an attack on health insurers. Obama and HHS Secretary Kathleen Sebelius staged a two-pronged attack on Monday. Secretary Sebelius sent a letter to health insurance chief executives and President Obama delivered a speech castigating insurance companies 22 times, according to the *Washington Post*. “How much higher do premiums have to rise,” the President demanded, “before we do something about it?” The tactic is clearly part of a renewed effort aimed at gathering more public support for a health care reform bill.

The President also continued to make it clear that the reconciliation bill is, in his view, a fine vehicle to move a health care reform package forward. Calling it a “simple majority” bill, it is a procedure that avoids the threat of a Senate filibuster and allows legislation to be enacted with 51 votes rather than a super majority of 60—an impossibly high bar at the moment for the Democratic majority.

That does not make passing health care reform legislation an easy task. Reconciliation legislation must either spend or save federal funds or be subject to a challenge, so both sides of the aisle will be combing through the bill for any language that violates that requirement. This makes “next steps” and legislative timing the subject of many rumors on and off Capitol Hill. While the White House has put pressure on Congress to pass a health care overhaul bill before the Easter Recess, House Majority Leader Steny Hoyer (D-MD) and Senate Finance Committee Chairman Max Baucus (D-MT) have distanced themselves from that timeline and will not commit to passage by this time. The question remains then will Congress give the President an Easter basket filled with a final health care reform bill or one with rotten eggs?

## **ED Announces RTTT Finalists**

On March 4<sup>th</sup>, the Department of Education announced that 15 states and the District of Columbia are finalists in the first round of the Race to the Top’s competition for a portion of the program’s \$4.35 billion. “These states are an example for the country of what is possible when adults come together to do the right thing for children,” Secretary of Education Arne Duncan said of the announcement. The finalists are Colorado, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Kentucky, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, and Tennessee.

States competing for Race to the Top funds were asked to complete an exhausting application that documents past education reform successes and outlines plans to: extend reforms using college and career-ready standards and assessments; build a workforce of highly effective educators; create educational data systems to support student achievement; and turn around their lowest-performing schools. As early childhood advocates will recall, the Race to the Top application also included an invitational priority to expand statewide longitudinal data systems to include or to integrate data from early childhood programs. Additionally, the application included an invitational priority to address how early childhood programs, K-12 schools, postsecondary institutions and workforce organizations will coordinate to improve all parts of the education system and create a more seamless P-20 route for students.

To select the finalists from, the field of 41 competitors, panels of 5 peer reviewers independently read and scored each application. The panels then met in February to finalize their comments and submit scores (each State's score is the average of the five independent reviewers' scores). Comments from Secretary Duncan on a conference call related to the announcement suggested that the applications of the 16 finalists all scored 400 points or higher out of a possible 500 points. The finalists have been invited to make an in-person presentation in mid-March and will face questions from the reviewers who evaluated their applications. Secretary Duncan will then be given a list of the scores—from high to low, and he will select the winners of Phase I of the competition and announce them in April. Those who are not selected can apply in Phase II of the competition—those applications are due June 1.

Given New York’s struggle to strengthen its data that links students to teachers and remove limitations on charter schools, some were surprised to see it among the finalists. The same is true for Kentucky, since that state has no charter school law. Observers have also noted that Colorado is the only western state to rank among the finalists, and that many of the finalists are southern, right-to-work states. Secretary Duncan acknowledged that coincidence—but asserted it was just that. He also said that the number of winners announced in April could very well be in the “single digits”, but would not discuss what the size of the possible awards might be.

There will certainly be much dissection of the finalists and their applications in coming weeks. For more information on the announcement and ED's process, which they assert is a model for transparency in competitive grant processes, visit:  
<http://www2.ed.gov/news/pressreleases/2010/03/03042010.html>.

### **Child Nutrition Programs Examined at Hearing**

On March 2<sup>nd</sup>, the House Education and Labor Committee held a hearing on strengthening the federal nutrition and school meal programs. "Children who are served healthy and balanced meals are better poised for success in school and in life," said Committee Chairman George Miller (D-CA). "Making sure children have access to the foods they need well before they enter kindergarten will be critical as we work to improve our federal child nutrition laws this year." Improving the federal school meal and child nutrition programs is one of four key strategies of First Lady Michelle Obama's "Let's Move" campaign to end childhood obesity within a generation. Expert witnesses gave the panel a number of perspectives for consideration. Dora R. Rivas, President of the School Nutrition Association, asked Congress to help improve children's access to the school meal programs and to support high quality nutrition. Carolyn L. Morrison, President of the National Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) Forum and CEO of Child Development Services, Inc. spoke about Child Nutrition Programs (specifically CACFP) in a number of settings—before- and after-school programs, childcare and Head Start programs, and others, and urged increased reimbursement for the program providers who serve meals to their participants. Kiran Saluja, Deputy Director of Public Health Foundation Enterprises, Inc., focused on her work with the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. She said the nation can prevent childhood obesity by ensuring children are breastfed from birth to at least 6 months, and recommended strengthening that portion of the WIC program. Lucy Gettman, Director of Federal Programs at the National School Boards Association, talked about local control in nutrition initiatives. Gettman asserted that federal programs must allow for local differences in tastes and resources, and said local authorities should be able to shape the content of their programs. For more information on the hearing, including testimony, visit:  
<http://edlabor.house.gov/hearings/full-committee/>.

### **NGA Calls for Creation of Early Educator Professional Development Systems**

Recently the National Governors Association released a new issue brief titled, "Building an Early Childhood Professional Development System," that outlines the potential professional development for early educators holds for improving the effectiveness of the early childhood workforce. A growing body of child development research, neuroscience, and program evaluation demonstrates that high-quality early childhood care and education programs improve school readiness and later outcomes for young children. This is especially true for children in low-income families. According to the brief, research also shows that qualified and well-compensated care providers and teachers are the cornerstone of high-quality early childhood programs. However, the majority of professionals who make up the current early childhood workforce are not adequately prepared. The brief found that attracting and retaining well-qualified early childhood professionals continues to be a challenge across all types of early childhood care and education programs. The report provides strategies for building a statewide system of professional development for all program staff and personnel who work with young children, including: 1) coordinate early childhood professional development policies; 2) implement research-based standards for early childhood professional development; 3) ensure access to professional development opportunities; and 4) gather and use data on characteristics of the early childhood workforce to improve professional and program quality. To read the brief,

visit

<http://www.nga.org/portal/site/nga/menuitem.9123e83a1f6786440ddcbeeb501010a0/?vgnextoid=99f95aec12596210VgnVCM1000005e00100aRCRD>.