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HEARING BRIEF

ESEA Reauthorization

SENATE HELP COMMITTEE HEARING ON ESEA REAUTHORIZATION AND EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION

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On Tuesday, May 25, the Senate HELP Committee, chaired by Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA) held its tenth and final hearing on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). This hearing focused on early childhood education and what Congress can do to ensure that more young children begin their education fully prepared to learn and succeed.

WITNESSES

- Barry Griswell, Board Member, Former Chairman and Retired Chief Executive Officer of Principal Financial Group, President of the Community Foundation of Greater Des Moines, and a Member of the Berry College Board of Trustees, Des Moines, IA
- Larry Schweinhart, President, High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, Ypsilanti, MI
- Robert Pianta, Professor of Education, University of Virginia, Charlottesville, VA
- Henrietta Zalkind, Executive Director, Down East Partnership for Children, Rocky Mount, NC

MEMBERS PRESENT

Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) and Senators Richard Burr (R-NC), Chris Dodd (D-CT), Patty Murray (D-WA), Sherrod Brown (D-OH), Bob Casey (D-PA), Kay Hagan (D-NC), Jeff Merkley (D-OR), Al Franken (D-MN), Michael Bennet (D-CO) and Bernard Sanders (I-VT).

OPENING STATEMENTS & DISCUSSION

Chairman Harkin opened the hearing by stating, “We know that learning starts at birth and preparation for learning starts before birth.” He went on to provide the alarming statistics that three-quarters of children age three to four do not have access to the early learning opportunities they need; and that by the time children from low-income families

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reach kindergarten, their achievement levels are an average of 60 percent less than their classmates from more affluent socioeconomic backgrounds. Noting that “a solid initial investment in our young children will save us countless billions in future spending on remedial education, criminal justice, health and welfare programs,” Harkin asserted that ESEA reauthorization offers an important opportunity to help states and school districts ensure that more young children are prepared to succeed in school through better alignment and collaboration with existing K-12 systems and clarifying and strengthening existing provisions in current law. In addition, he said it is important to better understand what educators, school administrators and parents need in order to effectively support and prepare young children to succeed. Harkin concluded his remarks by welcoming the witnesses and stating he was looking forward to hearing their views on how ESEA should be redesigned to incorporate early childhood education, even suggesting elementary education should be redefined to begin at birth.

Because Ranking Member Mike Enzi (R-WY) was unable to attend the hearing, Senator Richard Burr made an opening statement for the Republicans. He agreed with the Chairman on the importance of the hearing topic and stated that “quality early childhood education and childcare is essential to ensuring all children enter school ready to learn and succeed.” To support his argument, Burr highlighted the findings of the Abecedarian Project, a controlled scientific study of the potential benefits of early childhood education for poor children, which was conducted in North Carolina. Select children from low-income families received full-time, high-quality educational intervention in a childcare setting from infancy through age five, and progress was monitored over time with follow-up studies at ages 12, 15 and 21. The individuals who participated in this study demonstrated higher cognitive test results in addition to higher academic achievement than their peers. Burr also emphasized the need for all federal programs, such as ESEA, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Child Care Development Block Grant, Head Start and Early Head Start, to work together toward the unified goal of helping children succeed in school, college and the workplace.

WITNESS STATEMENTS

Barry Griswell

Griswell stated that because he grew up in a broken home, he felt very personally committed to improving the lives of young children; however, at today’s hearing he wanted to speak from the perspective of the business community and the need to make sound investments in the Nation’s future. Referencing a 2003 study by the Business Roundtable that concluded for every dollar invested in early childhood education, a return on investment of up to eight dollars could be expected, Griswell stressed that the “real answer to the future of our country is to make sure every child enters kindergarten ready to learn.” He believes the business community finally “gets it” and is “stepping up” because they accept the research and understand that the only way the U.S. can remain competitive in the 21st century is to invest in its human capital. Griswell concluded his remarks by stressing that collaboration among federal and state governments, higher education institutions and the business community is necessary so every child can be assured the opportunity to enter kindergarten ready to learn and develop.

Dr. Larry Schweinhart

Schweinhart explained that early childhood education programs include early elementary programs in schools as well as Head Start, Early Head Start and childcare programs in community agencies. To support the need to strengthen these programs, he pointed to several studies, including the HighScope Perry Preschool Study which Schweinhart directs, have found that high-quality early childhood education programs help children at risk of failure reach higher levels of academic and career success. Schweinhart also noted that high-risk children from early learning programs are much less likely to engage in criminal activity than their peers. Similar to previous speakers, he also stressed, “The economic returns to taxpayers on this investment are enormous.”

While recognizing the need for children to be ready for school, Schweinhart focused the remainder of his testimony on the need for schools to be ready for all children. With funding from the W.K. Kellogg Foundation, HighScope developed and validated a “ready school assessment tool,” based on the recommendations of the Ready Schools Resource Group established in 1998 by the National Education Goals Panel, to help schools and stakeholders measure the level of readiness in their school and discuss ways to improve readiness over time. Two key principles of ready schools include interactive child development curriculum and regular educational checkups. “With ESEA reauthorization,” Schweinhart asserted, “we have a rare opportunity to kick off a national ready school movement, not just as the latest educational fad but as well-defined program of educational reform.”

Robert Pianta

Agreeing with the speakers before him, Pianta stated that early education interventions targeted toward known early achievement and socioemotional gaps are “essential, not only to the developmental success of children, but to the economic and social health of communities.” However, the system of educational opportunities in place now through childcare, state-funded pre-K programs, Head Start and K- Grade 3 classrooms is so loosely organized and unconnected that the full benefits of these programs for all young children are not being met. Pianta stressed that ensuring quality of early childhood programs is an additional, ongoing challenge, which also works against the scaled-up potential of these opportunities. In addition, Pianta noted the need for improving the quality of the early education workforce. Currently there are large disparities in workforce preparation between elementary school staff and those who work in pre-school settings. Qualifications for each age group are different and complex. Consequently, young children experience a wide degree of variation from year-to-year and setting-to-setting in educators across the age three- third grade span. Teacher preparation and certification are critical and these programs, according to Pianta, can be measured, improved and made to have an impact. However, programs must be held accountable to strong standards and performance. Pianta views ESEA reauthorization as a critical time to align learning opportunities, standards, assessments and goals in early education with those in K-12.

Henrietta Zalkind

Zalkind provided an overview of the Down East Partnership for Children (DEPC), which was founded 16 years ago and currently serves nearly 18,000 children under the age of 8

in two high poverty North Carolina counties. DEPC has experience with a model of services that works in collaboration with two local school systems, early care providers, human service agencies and other community organizations. Annually, DEPC invests more than \$7 million into the local economy to support 20 programs at DEPC and in 10 other agencies and organizations, including health departments, libraries, school systems, departments of social services and other area non-profits. These programs are supported through a combination of local, state and private funds. Zalkind highlighted DEPC's three long-term goals used to guide their organizational and community efforts: 1) unique support for each child and family; 2) high quality early care and environments; and 3) access to coordinated community resources. She also stressed that building "ready schools" and "ready communities" that can successfully launch all children as learners, in addition to facilitating smooth and positive transitions to grade school, are key components of the DEPC model of services. Zalkind's specific recommendations for ESEA reauthorization are: promoting further investment in early care programs; supporting the creation of "ready schools" based on the HighScope model that have the capacity and resources for schools to be ready to meet the needs of all children; and investing in support for family-school-community partnerships.

MEMBER QUESTIONS

Chairman Harkin began the question portion of the hearing by asking each panelist if they were given \$1 of federal funds, how and where they would spend it. Harkin specifically wanted to know how much should be spent on education versus childcare programs? How much should be spent on early childhood versus K- grade 3 and/or secondary school students? He also asked if "new ground" should be broken to "forcibly move ahead" with a new focus on early education? Not surprisingly, the witnesses all thought that the dollar investment should be primarily put toward early education and agreed with Pianta's statement, "now is the time to do it." Griswell added that "someone needs to take leadership on this issue," and Zalkind believed that by investing the entire dollar in early childhood "you get more bang for your buck, and you won't have to spend as much in remediation in future years."

Senator Burr focused his questions on the need for more collaboration and coordination of programs and services. Zalkind agreed, stating "we work on coordination every day." Pianta argued that a "coherent approach" is needed which should include joint professional development and curriculum articulation among early, elementary and secondary school educators. Schweinhart added that a clear focus on cognitive, physical and socioemotional objectives are needed first, then policy can and should flow from this work.

Senator Brown noted that Ohio requires full-day kindergarten; however, many school districts are asking for waivers and eliminating early childhood programs due to budget and space constraints. He also spoke about a bill he is working on called the *Diploma Act* that will replicate the system of collaboration and coordination Zalkind described in her testimony. Brown asserted that the "school is the best vehicle to connect kids and families to resources they need." Pianta agreed saying it was necessary to "break down barriers to think outside the school walls" and that the development of a coordinated system should be envisioned as a "prevention paradigm."

Senator Sanders declared “the way we treat children in this country and the way we treat child care is a disgrace.” He noted his support for more funding for quality childcare and the impact of high rates of child poverty in the country on the ability to succeed in school. Griswell agreed, saying “this is about poverty and access.” Sanders also put the witnesses on the spot asking them if they believed that every child has the “right” to quality childcare similar to the right to a free education. Clearly a bit uncomfortable with the question, Pianta seemed to speak for all the witnesses when he said “the government should ensure it happens but not provide it.”

Senator Franken opened by stating that if “we’re really serious about not saddling our children with overwhelming debt in the future, we must focus on identifying resources that provide a return on investment,” such as early education. He mentioned a successful home visiting program in Minnesota called Dakota Healthy Families which he believes “pays for itself” in the number of child abuse cases it prevents. All the witnesses agreed that quality, evidenced-based home visiting programs focused on children age 0-3 and their families can be effective and that there are a number of these models implemented in communities across the country.

Senator Murray noted that she is the only member of the HELP Committee, who is a former early childhood educator, said that Washington’s strong investment in early childhood education is paying off. She asked the witnesses, however, what does “high quality” mean? The witnesses all agreed that programs that have qualified teachers who “know what their doing,” implement interactive curriculum, facilitate outreach to families and have clear goals are what they mean by high quality.

Senator Bennet asserted that Title I is not conceived as a “prevention paradigm” and wanted to know if the federal government should drive and incent more collaboration and cooperation between early education programs and the elementary grades. Pianta responded that the federal government must incentivize integration at all levels, and Griswell added that state and business leaders should take the lead locally.

Senator Casey asked the witnesses how and where should the HELP Committee build on the momentum and success of early childhood programs in the reauthorization of ESEA. Zalkind recommended “taking every opportunity you can within the law and don’t put resources all in one place, i.e., Title I.” Others spoke to the need to put resources in Title II as well so preparation and qualifications of early childhood professionals can be improved.

Senator Dodd reminded the panel that he wrote the Child Care Development Block Grant legislation 20 years ago, and added that he is very frustrated that more has not been done to update this law (the bill has not be reauthorized since 1996). He also announced that his subcommittee would be holding four-to-five hearings over the next six months on the status of the American child. Dodd asked Griswell, “why don’t business leaders get it” that investment early on saves money in the future? Griswell believes times have

changed and that business leaders really do understand the importance of investing early. He encouraged more outreach to the business community to build upon this momentum.

Senator Merkley stated his belief that more investment must be made in parent education. Zalkind agreed, but noted that “money for family support and preservation is hard to come by.” Childcare providers who have more experience with families must work together with teachers on this issue, but Pianta said that “capturing these connections...are not as easy to accomplish.” He added that early childhood educators don’t necessarily all need bachelor’s degrees but that “we need to develop what behaviors we want to see in early learning classrooms and then figure out the coursework that should be provided.” Schweinhart added that it is “all about developing relationships.”

Senator Hagan highlighted the Five Star Quality Rating system used in North Carolina, which she believes is a successful example of using state money to improve programs. Zalkind agreed that using a common set of standards is very helpful, but warned that quality “costs.” Pianta also warned that defining what a “star” means must be done carefully. Schweinhart added that supporting home caregivers is equally as important.

CONCLUSION

Chairman Harkin thanked the witnesses for their testimony and urged them to continue to forward additional ideas on ESEA reauthorization to the HELP Committee. He also stressed his strong belief that preschool programs be aligned to the elementary grades and that “he is determined to do something in ESEA on early childhood.”

More information on this hearing, including testimony and a webcast of the session, is available at: <http://help.senate.gov/hearings/hearing/?id=ac5e1b12-5056-9502-5d84-93f5a613d30f>.