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Early Education Policy Update

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Ellen Fern and Audrey Busch

efern@wpllc.net

abusch@wpllc.net

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

This Week in Washington

There is nothing like a holiday to push the U. S. Congress to action. In organizing meetings in the House last week, new Chairmen were named for committees of keen interest to education advocates. As anticipated, Congressman John Kline (R-MN) will head the Committee on Education and Labor. Congressman Harold Rogers (R-KY) will take over the Chair of the Appropriations Committee.

Congress has a long list of unfinished business and a mere 9 more shopping days until Christmas. As a result, votes are finally being taken and negotiations are underway on many fronts—including a final FY 2011 budget. The outcome for education in this chaotic, crunch time environment, however, might not be as good as had been hoped for earlier in the year. The two chambers are currently on different paths trying to reach the finish line to pass a FY2011 budget. More specifically, last week the House narrowly passed a year-long Continuing Resolution (CR) which freezes FY 2011 discretionary appropriations at the FY 2010 level by providing \$45.9 billion less than the President requested for the year. While most education programs were level funded, particular programs were deemed “anomalies” and received adjusted funding levels to adapt to the demand in 2011. These anomalies included a \$314 million increase to Head Start to ensure the continued participation of all enrolled children; an increase of \$374 million to the Child Care Development Block Grant program; \$7.5 billion in additional funding for the Pell Grant Program; and \$550 million to support an additional round of funding for Race to the Top. The CR does not fund many well established smaller education programs where funding is authorized and directed by the Congress to specific entities—programs that in this fiscal climate have been deemed “earmarks”. It also level funds Title I, IDEA and all other programs that have not been eliminated entirely.

On the other side of Capitol Hill, the Senate released yesterday an Omnibus bill, and Christmas seemed to come early for most recipients of federal dollars. With an increase of spending totaling \$19 billion over the House CR but \$29 billion below the President's Budget Request, and the inclusion of earmarked programs, most early education advocates breathed a sigh of relief. This bill, having been negotiated with House appropriations staff, would provide \$300 million for an Early Learning Challenge Fund; a \$840 million increase for Head Start, including increases to improve the quality and oversight of Head Start programs across the country; a \$681 million increase for child care for low-income families; \$850 million for the Community Services Block Grant Program; \$39.254 for the Parent Information Resource Centers and \$60 million for Promise Neighborhoods. The Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee, Senator Daniel Inouye (D-HI) stated, "While I appreciate the work that the House has done in producing a full-year Continuing Resolution, I do not believe that putting the government on autopilot for a full year is in the best interest of the American people."

While Chairman Inouye claims he has the votes to pass the Omnibus, many are waiting anxiously as the next 72 hours will surely bring a firestorm from Republicans who have banded together to eradicate directed funding and shrink government spending. Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell (R-KY) has already publically opposed the bill and Speaker-Elect John Boehner (R-OH) has called for the President's veto of the bill. If Chairman Inouye succeeds, the Omnibus will then be sent back to the House where the measure will most likely pass on a party-line vote. WPLLC will be following this debate closely and providing updates as necessary throughout the next few days.

ED Announces New Discretionary Grant Priorities

Today the U.S. Department of Education (ED) announced a list of final supplemental priorities to be considered for discretionary grant programs beginning in FY 2011. The purpose of the list, which includes 16 priorities, is to focus federal funding on services that address the "greatest educational need." The individual priorities highlight varying aspects of three key areas: cradle-to-career educational reforms; addressing the needs of student subgroups; and working toward continuous systematic improvement. ED aims to improve the learning environment of all students so that they may exhibit improved academic achievement and lead America to reaching the goal set forth by President Obama of reclaiming the top spot among nations in the proportion of citizens who possess postsecondary credentials by 2020. To read the complete announcement, visit: <http://edocket.access.gpo.gov/2010/2010-31189.htm>.

The President Signs the Child Nutrition Bill

Flanked by First Lady Michelle Obama and U.S. Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, the President signed the *Health, Hunger-Free Kids Act*, S. 3307, into law during a ceremony at the Harriet Tubman Elementary School in Washington, D.C. on Monday. This bill was passed unanimously in the Senate but met resistance in the House among Democratic members because the offsets made to pay for the bill actually cut future funding for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP). In order to ensure the House passed this legislation, the White House promised to restore the cuts to the SNAP program. The Democratic Representatives are not alone in their concerns. The National School Board Association has voiced opposition, along with several other education-based organizations, regarding the undue burden this will place on schools during times when state and district budgets are already feeling squeezed. Advocates, however, highlight the fact that 115,000 more students will have access to school meal programs and red tape and paperwork will be reduced, making it easier for parents to enroll their children in these programs. In addition, higher nutritional standards will help ensure that kids have access to healthy food options; and communities and schools will receive assistance in setting up local

farm-to-school networks to ensure that more fresh local foods are used in school meals. Moving forward, the implementation phase will be the focus of all stakeholders involved and watched closely. For more information, visit: <http://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/BILLS-111s3307enr/pdf/BILLS-111s3307enr.pdf>.

Inclusion of Early Childhood Grants in New Literacy Program

A request for proposals for the Striving Readers Comprehensive Literacy Program will be released by the U.S. Department of Education's (ED) Office of Elementary and Secondary Education by February of 2011. Announced in late November, these discretionary grants will provide close to \$176 million to create "comprehensive literacy programs, advancing literacy skills, including pre-literacy skills, reading, and writing for students from birth through grade 12 including limited-English proficient students and students with disabilities." While only State Educational Agencies (SEAs) can apply, 95 percent of funds received by the state are required to be subgranted to local educational agencies and early childhood providers. SEAs will be required to allocate 15 percent of its funds for birth to pre-K programs; 40 percent for grades K to 5; and another 40 percent for grades 6 to 12. The total state grant allocation will range from \$10 million to \$50 million. Applications will most likely be due in the spring of 2011. For more information, visit: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/strivingreaders-literacy/applicant.html>