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Early Education Policy Update

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

This Week in Washington

As the March 4th expiration date for the continuing resolution (CR) approaches, Members of Congress are finally getting down to the business of writing a budget for FY 2011. Though the Senate remains in a “wait and see” mode, Republican leaders in the House announced that overall spending for the fiscal year that began on October 1, 2010 will be reduced by \$43 billion—9.3% below the previous year. The new allocation for the Labor, Health and Human Services and Education budget is slightly better—a cut of 7.3% below the amount in the current Continuing Resolution (CR). Budget Committee Chair Paul Ryan (R-WI) acknowledged that this cut is less than promised on the campaign trail, but he called it “the first step in restoring the trust of the American people and rebuilding the American economy.” Appropriations Committee Chairman Hal Rogers (R-KY) also announced that the spending bill that will be presented to House Members this week for debate will cut funding at all federal agencies and said, “These cuts will not be easy, they will be broad and deep, [and] they will affect every congressional district.” Emphasizing this point, he said the new CR will “make the largest series of spending cuts in history.” Needless to say, these actions gave pause to all education advocates.

As if the budget news were not bad enough, on the other side of the Capitol, the Senate agreed to pay for the repeal of a troublesome provision in the Health Care Reform bill by giving the Administration the authority to rescind \$40 billion in unobligated FY 2010 appropriations as they see fit. Appropriators were particularly outraged that their colleagues ceded the authority to determine government spending priorities to the executive branch. This followed the defeat of an amendment to repeal the Health Care Reform Act, which failed on a predicted party line vote. Though the Senate has not yet acted on the expiring CR, it is anticipated that the Omnibus spending bill that failed last winter will serve as the chamber’s initial negotiation position. Senate Appropriations Committee Chairman Daniel Inouye (D-HI) made news last week when he announced that the CR for FY 2011 would not contain earmarks—a move that had been anticipated for FY 2012, but not the current year.

The President’s comments in his State of the Union address regarding the need to reauthorize the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) in the current Congress seemed to spark the interest of authorizers last week. A bi-cameral, bipartisan meeting with education leaders and

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the administration about a timetable for the reauthorization was held on last Wednesday, and the following day House Education and the Workforce Committee Chair John Kline (R-MN) announced that the first hearing of the 112th Congress on the topic would take place Thursday, February 10th. In the Senate, advocates are discussing their priorities with Members and staff in anticipation of Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee Chairman Tom Harkin's (D-IA) intention to introduce a reauthorization bill this spring.

HHS Releases the SIR on Home Visiting Grant Funds

On Tuesday, February 8, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released the Supplemental Information Request (SIR) that provided instructions to states on completing the last step necessary to receive home visiting grant funds that are authorized through a provision in the Patient Protection and Affordable Care Act of 2010 called the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting Program. This program will provide \$1.5 billion over five years to states to fund evidence-based state-wide home visiting models. These mandatory funds are not subject to annual appropriations, and will flow through the Health Resources and Services Administration (HRSA) in the Department of Health and Human Services. Models that met HHS's evidence-based criteria include: Early Head Start – Home Based Option; Family Check Up; Healthy Families America; Healthy Steps; Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters; Nurse-Family Partnership; and Parents as Teachers. There is still an opportunity for other models to appeal HHS's decision and request reconsideration by submitting evidence that refute the initial findings. All appeals, however, must be made within the next 45 days. Overall, the recently released document provides instructions for States on completing the last step necessary in order to receive home visiting grant funds. This entails submitting an updated state plan for a state home visiting program. This updated state plan is due within the next 90 to 120 days. For more information, visit: <http://www.hrsa.gov/grants/manage/homevisiting/>.

PAT Coordinator Featured in ED Blog

On February 3, an entry in the Department of Education's blog was submitted by Erin Garner, a Parents as Teachers Coordinator in Leander, Texas. Garner detailed teaching strategies parents can use to teach their child letter recognition. Promoting parents as a child's first and best teacher, she emphasized that "learning begins at home." To read this blog entry, visit: <http://www.ed.gov/blog/2011/02/teaching-expert-offers-pre-k-strategy-for-parents-name-envelopes/>.

ED Proposes PIRCs Received a One-Year Extension

On January 14th, the Federal Register published a notice from the U.S. Department of Education proposing an extension of the Parent Information Resource Center grants. The proposal cited "initial logistics delaying the start of projects," and the fact that "another year of funding would allow for full implementation and evaluation" as reasons for the extension. Currently, the fate of 60 out of 62 centers depends on Congress' approval of this one-year extension. Sixty of these grants are in the final year of their five-year grants; two are in their fourth year. The timing could be perilous, however, since this request comes at a time when the FY2011 and the FY2012 budgets are facing cuts. The Elementary and Secondary Education Act, the statute which authorizes PIRCs, asserts that within the 30 percent of the PIRC budget used on early childhood parent education, at least 50 percent must be used to work with low-income families. While PIRCs represent one of the largest federal investments in parental engagement, in such fiscally stringent times, no program is safe from budget cuts. If the extension is not granted, however, PIRCs can "apply for a no-cost extension for carryover funds", according to Project Director Debbie Ellis. This would allow additional months of work and is a small bit of good news. Given that extensions for the Comprehensive Centers program were granted last year, the

Department of Education seems confident that an extension will be granted to the PIRC program. Greater concern among PIRC stakeholders exists around potential budget cuts for FY2011, which has yet to be resolved. For more information, visit:
<http://www.federalregister.gov/articles/2011/01/14/2011-805/proposed-waiver-and-extension-of-project-period>.