



APRIL 14, 2010

Ellin Nolan and Ellen Fern

enolan@wpllc.net

efern@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

The Congress returned to the Nation's Capitol on Monday after a much needed two week recess. The long and contentious debate surrounding healthcare reform had frayed nerves and intensified partisan disagreements. It is hoped that the next six week work period will be productive and somewhat friendlier as the to-do list is long and the number of legislative days remaining on the calendar surprisingly short. Education policy was front and center with four hearings on the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) scheduled and Secretary of Education, Arne Duncan, set to appear before the Senate Labor, Health and Human Services and Education Appropriation (LHHS) Subcommittee to defend the Department of Education's FY 2011 budget proposal.

The first hearing this week before Chairman Tom Harkin (D-IA) of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions (HELP) Committee focused on strategies to turn around the lowest performing schools across the nation. Witnesses talked of the unique challenges facing rural communities and large urban districts. They were united in their view that one size does not fit all and that successful interventions require accurate diagnosis of the problem and adequate resources to address the pressing needs. Harkin asked repeatedly about the needs of very young children. He quizzed the witnesses and the audience about the need to totally revise our public schools to take into account the needs of children not from Kindergarten but from birth. It was clear by the end of the hearing that early learning will be a top priority for the Committee when the actual rewrite of the ESEA gets underway.

When Secretary Duncan appeared before the LHHS Subcommittee on Wednesday morning early learning again took center stage. The Secretary told the Subcommittee Members he would be submitting an addendum to his FY 2011 budget request for the Department of Education asking that funding be provided for the Early Learning Challenge Program. He told the Subcommittee he had hoped that funding would be provided as part of the reconciliation bill, but unfortunately it was deleted at the 11th hour. Subcommittee Chairman Tom Harkin assured the Secretary he would do what he could to meet this request. Harkin again repeated his suspicion that as a Nation we would be unable to close the achievement gap and prepare all children for college and careers until we invest more in early learning programs.

The Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education

The New America Foundation's Education Policy Program and Next Social Contract Initiative recently released a new policy report that argues for a fundamental rethinking of public policy related to children's primary years in education, starting at age three and reaching up through the third grade. This report, *A Next Social Contract for the Primary Years of Education*, co-authored by Lisa Guernsey, Director of the Early Education Initiative at the New America Foundation, and Sara Mead, former Senior Research Fellow, advocates for a “next social contract” – a new system of public policies that foster a more seamless system connecting districts, schools, Head Start and independent centers of early learning (like preschools or high-quality child care centers). It recommends a “PreK-3rd” approach that includes voluntary universal pre-kindergarten programs, full-day kindergarten, and high-quality standards and curriculum for pre-k through the third grade. It also requires parental engagement and highly qualified teachers who share data and professional development strategies within and across grades. Jacqueline Jones, Ph.D., Senior Advisor to the Secretary for Early Learning at the Department of Education (ED), also spoke in support of the policies put forth in the new paper and explained that through her position at ED, she was working very closely with her counterpart at the Department of Health and Human Services to establish a more coordinated and seamless system of federal funding streams and services for young children and their families. She noted that “we’ve called out early learning in its entirety” in programs such as Race to the Top, i3 and Promise Neighborhoods. Admitting, however, that there is more work to do, she noted that she is now focused on how to further emphasize early learning in the reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Jones also suggested that the federal government can provide incentives to states to experiment with new models of delivering services in a coordinated way by aligning instruction and standards and budgeting for a PreK-Grade 3 model. Robert Dugger, Ph.D., Chair of the Advisory Board for the Partnership for American Economic Success, also offered his support for a new Social Contract noting that involving parents is critical in reform, along with implementing proven practices with quantifiable goals and built in performance measures. For more information on this event visit:

http://www.newamerica.net/events/2010/nsc_primary_years_of_education

Pre-K Now Issue Brief on Engaging Families Released

Highlighting activities in several states that excel in reaching out to parents of young children, Pre-K Now has developed an issue brief on the topic titled, “Engaged Families, Effective Pre-K”. The report offers examples of how states can successfully encourage early childhood programs to develop strong relationships with what are recognized as children’s first and most important teachers—parents. Pennsylvania’s Office of Child Development and Early Learning was spotlighted for employing a special assistant whose exclusive role is finding ways to enhance family support services and enhance outreach to young families. Florida is recognized for making family engagement a core competency in pre-K teacher and administrator preparation programs. In addition, Georgia is praised for preschool and kindergarten programs that include children and families in year-long transition activities that incorporate classroom visits. The study is available at http://preknow.org/documents/FamilyEngagement_Feb2010.pdf.