

a new year: the outlook for child care legislation and funding

by Eric Karolak

January begins a new year — a new calendar, New Year’s resolutions, and new prospects for your family and your child care center or program. In the world of public policy, January 2010 finds us ‘in the middle’ — the middle of the federal fiscal (or budget) year, the middle of most states’ fiscal years, and the middle of the 111th Congress.

“Begin at the beginning . . .”

If this is the ‘middle,’ you might say last January was the beginning. Washington



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of quality early learning programs. ECEC members operate more than 7,600 centers enrolling more than 800,000 children in 49 states and the District of Columbia. Dr. Karolak previously led the National Child Care Information Center, the largest federal clearinghouse focused on child care and early education for low-income families. He has worked closely with states developing the technical aspects of child care assistance programs, quality rating systems, and partnerships across early childhood programs. He has conducted policy research and fiscal analysis in the areas of child welfare, child care, women’s labor force participation, and public housing, and has testified before several state legislatures and the U.S. Congress. Dr. Karolak also has served as an advisor to a national quality initiative, a non-profit child care center, a local government commission, and a metropolitan United Way.

welcomed a new Congress and a new Administration, which quickly set about grappling with the economy. The Administration moved boldly to prioritize early childhood education in the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA) of 2009, the ‘stimulus bill’ intended to jolt the economy out of its tailspin.

ARRA included more than \$5 billion in funding for early childhood education programs, including \$2 billion for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, which states use to provide subsidies for low-income families and to fund quality initiatives. Securing funding for child care in the stimulus was a major accomplishment.

Parents can’t work without child care, and federal stimulus funding made a huge impact in many states last year and continues to do so. ARRA funds are being used to avoid cuts in service, reduce waiting lists, increase state subsidy payment rates, and lengthen the period of time that parents can receive subsidies while looking for jobs.

Here’s to your health!

If you’ve followed the nightly news, you know that Washington has been consumed with health reform. Compre-

hensive health reform dominated much of the congressional calendar in 2009 as the Administration’s top domestic policy priority. Although the House passed a bill in September, the Senate worked into December on a proposal.

Many expect the Senate to pass a bill and the House and Senate bills to be reconciled, but it may be as late as February before the reconciled bill reaches the President’s desk. Health reform is a huge

What’s Ahead in Washington?

Congress may take up several issues that impact child care in 2010:

- Early Learning Challenge Fund
- Child Nutrition Act, including the Child and Adult Care Food Program
- Elementary and Secondary Education Act (No Child Left Behind)
- Temporary Assistance for Needy Families
- Child Care and Development Block Grant

undertaking and Congress is not likely to consider other major legislation until it has resolved this issue.

Moving objects ahead — be alert!

When health reform is resolved, Washington will turn to other priorities. Several 'reauthorizations' of existing legislation — in which Congress extends and modifies current programs — and at least one new initiative are among the 'moving objects' likely to receive some attention in 2010.

Early Learning Challenge Fund. Proposed in July as part of a much larger college loan reform bill, a new Early Learning Challenge Fund could make a big difference in those states selected to receive grants. If enacted, it would provide a total of \$1 billion per year in grants to challenge states to develop or strengthen comprehensive early learning systems for children birth to age 5 that include a number of features such as early learning standards, program quality standards, and improved supports to parents (see "Challenging States to Improve Quality: A New Federal Proposal," in the September/October 2009 issue of *Exchange*). The idea is to help selected states increase the number of low-income children in high-quality settings and thus address the achievement gap.

The Challenge Fund is part of the Student Aid and Financial Responsibility Act (SAFRA). It passed the House in September, but is on hold in the Senate until health reform is resolved. For the Challenge Fund to become law, the wider student loan reforms must win support in the Senate. Still, the priority placed on the Challenge Fund (and the college loan reforms) by the Obama Administration may mean the Challenge Fund could become a reality in 2010. If enacted, how many and which states would be awarded grants is up to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Education.

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Child Nutrition Act and the Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP). The Child Nutrition Act includes the federal school breakfast and lunch programs, and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) program. It's also the law behind CACFP, which provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks in child care, as well as training, technical assistance, and monitoring that support program providers.

Efforts are underway to strengthen and improve CACFP, as well as to increase access to the program (see the Policy Matters column in the July/August 2008 issue of *Exchange*). Because the Child Nutrition Act includes so many programs, many individual issue bills have already been introduced for consideration in the larger reauthorization package. One of these is S.2749, the Access to Nutritious Meals for Young Children

Act. House and Senate Committee leaders hope to complete work on the Child Nutrition Act reauthorization this spring.

Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). When ESEA was last reauthorized in 2002, it acquired the name 'No Child Left Behind Act.' As the primary federal K-12 law, it could have implications for early childhood education as well. Currently, states can choose to use 'Title I' funds for preschool, including in private settings like child care programs. Last year, the Obama Administration proposed carving out \$500 million of current Title I funding for public preschool, but the Congress did not include that in its budget.

ESEA reauthorization may be raised by the Administration, and some state and national groups have called for greater attention to

preschool funding. Whether that means a new federal pre-K program or just additional incentives to use Title I for preschool remains to be seen. Given the law's reach, completing ESEA reauthorization would be a major undertaking in 2010.

Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). TANF funds cash assistance and many other state programs, but it's also a significant source of child care funding with about \$3.3 billion in TANF funds transferred to child care in 2008 to help parents get and keep jobs. TANF reauthorization is due in 2010 and may affect changes in child care funding and eligibility.

Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG). CCDBG was authorized in 1996 with welfare reform and has been overdue for reauthorization since 2002. In 2008, the major national organizations joined together in creating an agenda and vision for CCDBG reauthorization (available online at www.nwlc.org/pdf/ChildCareAgendaSummary.pdf). Most agree that CCDBG needs significant reforms, on both the child care-as-work support side and the child development aspects of the program. But investing the resources needed to achieve reforms will be a challenge for reauthorization.

Zachary's Corner



Get ready

Predicting what legislation will move forward and how far this year is tricky. The midterm elections — all Representatives and one-third of Senators are up for re-election — mean it will be tough to get Congress to act on major legislation, especially if it increases spending.

In 2010, we'll need to join together to send a clear message about priorities for children, families, and the providers who serve them.