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Early Learning Matters - October 19, 2009

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Quote of the month:

"The sad truth is that the vast majority of children who start behind, stay behind, leading to an increase in our nation's dropout rate among low-income and minority students. This cycle of disadvantage affects us all."

--America's Early Childhood Literacy Jap, a report commissioned by Jumpstart, September 2009

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1. Early Learning Challenge Fund Making Progress in Congress

Perhaps the most ambitious early learning investment proposal in the last two decades has made it through the House of Representatives. The Early Learning Challenge Fund is designed to provide grants to states to increase comprehensive, high-quality early learning opportunities for children birth to age 5, with an emphasis on low-income children. The legislation would establish competitive grants to states to transform their early learning programs, to meet solid quality standards, and expand best practices.

The bill requires states that compete for the grants to outline what they will do to (1) improve the quality of programs serving infants, toddlers, and pre-k students; and (2) to increase the proportion of disadvantaged children in each age category who have access to high-quality full-day early learning programs.

U.S. House of Representatives passed HR 3221, the bill which includes the Early Learning Challenge Fund proposal, by a vote of 253 in favor to 171 against. Wisconsin representatives voted overwhelmingly for the bill, with 6 voting for the bill (Baldwin, Kagen, Kind, Moore, Obey and Petri), and 2 against (Ryan and Sensenbrenner). The early learning provisions are part of a larger bill, the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act of 2009, which includes reforms to the student financial aid system.

The Challenge Fund was originally proposed by the President. Then the House of Representatives passed a significant expansion of the President's proposal, providing mandatory funding of **\$1 billion per year** for eight years. It appears that the White House worked closely with key legislators on the House bill. The Senate is taking up the bill this fall. While significant progress has been made, with several major legislative efforts facing the Senate, including health care reform, the prospects for this bill are by no means certain.

The day before the vote, the First Five Years Fund sponsored a Washington, D.C. reception for Congressional leaders on to promote investment in early learning. The reception included a discussion with Nobel Laureate James Heckman, and Wisconsin reportedly had the largest delegation from any state at the event. Rick Phelps, Senior Vice President at M&I Bank in Madison was one of many hosts, which included Bill Gates, Sr., Susie Buffett, Goerge Kaiser, J.B Pritzker, and 24 other business and philanthropy leaders.

Early childhood experts, advocates and policymakers have tried to move a quality improvement budget for early care and education in Wisconsin, based on strong evidence of the benefits of early investments. The recently formed Governor's Advisory Council is planning a needs assessment and strategic planning to build an effective system for early childhood development. This bill could provide badly needed resources for improving early learning. If Wisconsin got 2 percent of the total annual amount reserved for state grants in the bill, it would amount to \$19 million per year, a significant boost in resources for early learning.

To view the exact language of the bill, go to <http://edlabor.house.gov/documents/111/pdf/legislation/StudentAidandFiscalResponsibilityAct.pdf>

To see NY Times coverage of the bill, go to: http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/20/education/20child.html?_r=2

2. Home Visiting Legislation Looks Promising in DC

Several versions of legislation to expand voluntary, evidence-based home visiting programs are under consideration in Congress. Research shows that voluntary home visiting services are an effective way to ensure that children have the opportunity to grow

up healthy, safe, ready to learn and able to become productive members of society. There has been significant attention to high-quality evidence-based home visiting from the President, others in the Administration, the Congress and from advocates.

The bills build off of previous bipartisan legislation, the Education Begins at Home Act, as well as President Obama's \$8.6 billion initiative to fund home visitation. Some of the legislation has been incorporated into health reform legislation, and many analysts believe that legislation will be the vehicle for home visiting in this Congress.

Recent developments have resulted in two approaches to home visiting legislation: a grant program for voluntary, high-quality home visiting; and a separate provision giving states the option of covering health-related home visiting services under Medicaid. A coalition in Washington is supporting these two complementary approaches.

In recent years, Wisconsin has made great progress in developing research-based standards, outcome measures, and training and technical assistance for home visiting programs. The number of home visiting programs has grown significantly, with funding from the state budget, state agencies, and local human services and public health agencies. Federal funding could help Wisconsin reach a much greater percentage of potentially at-risk children through home visiting.

While things look promising, home visiting needs to make through several stages to become law in this legislative session.

For more information on federal home visiting bills, go to:
http://www.clasp.org/federal_policy/pages?id=0015

To read an interesting paper on embedding home visiting programs within a system of early childhood services by Deborah Daro of the University of Chicago, go to:
http://www.chapinhall.org/sites/default/files/publications/Issue_Brief_R3_09_09_09_0.pdf

3. DCF Suspends 99 Child Care Programs Suspected of Fraud

The Department of Children and Families (DCF) has suspended 99 child care programs from the Wisconsin Shares programs suspected of fraud. DCF developed a set of red flags it uses to identify potential fraud, including

- Payments average more than \$11,000 per child care slot.
- The provider averages two or more children per slot
- The provider has a pattern of claiming overpayments
- The provider reports 100% attendance for all children receiving Wisconsin Shares
- The provider has very rapid revenue growth
- The provider is at or exceeds 100% capacity enrollment

- The provider receives unusually high subsidy payments

When several red flags are found for a child care program, it will be referred for investigation.

To see the October Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article on child care fraud, go to:
<http://www.jsonline.com/watchdog/watchdogreports/64331027.html>

To see the Legislative Fiscal Bureau summary on state action to address fraud in the Wisconsin Shares program, go to:

http://www.legis.state.wi.us/lfb/Misc/2009_09_23jFC_WI%20Shares.pdf

4. Mandatory Kindergarten Signed Into Law

Governor Doyle signed a new law in early October making 5-year-old kindergarten mandatory in the state. State law previously made school mandatory at age six, but kindergarten was optional. The law is effective beginning the 2011-2012 school year.

For more info, go to: <http://www.examiner.com/x-6489-Madison-Political-Buzz-Examiner~y2009m10d10-Wisconsin-governor-signs-mandatory-kindergarten-law>

5. In the News

Madison moves closer to 4K

Negotiators for the Madison School District and the teachers' union reached a tentative agreement that would allow the district to begin working toward the creation of a kindergarten program for 4-year-olds.

For more information, go to:

http://host.madison.com/wsj/news/local/education/local_schools/article_4595be6a-aa12-11de-a935-001cc4c03286.html

Business leaders support early childhood development

A Milwaukee Journal Sentinel article about the engagement of Wisconsin business leaders and philanthropists in early learning discussions:

<http://www.jsonline.com/business/59945157.html>

The business case for investing in America's children

Put out by the Partnership for America's Economic Success.

http://www.partnershipforsuccess.org/uploads/20090721_PAESBrochure.pdf

Early Ed Blog discussion of the future of Head Start

An interesting final article in a 7-piece series of the future of Head Start:

<http://www.newamerica.net/blog/early-ed-watch/2009/where-head-start-heading-three-potential-tracks-14757>

Can the right kind of play teach self control?

An article in the NY Times magazine:

http://www.nytimes.com/2009/09/27/magazine/27tools-t.html?_r=1

6. Check Out the WCCF Blog

Hey !!!--- Go to WCCF's Blog for the latest in children and family news:

<http://www.wiskids.blogspot.com/>

7. Support WCCF!

WCCF offers our e-materials and publications free of charge. We can't do it without your help. You can donate online:

<https://payments.auctionpay.com/ver3/?is=w043832>

Thanks for your support!