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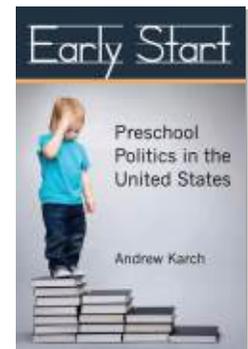
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6 | Policy Stability and Political Change in the 1980s

The fragmentation of early childhood policy in the United States can be traced to developments in the late 1960s and early 1970s, especially Nixon's veto of the Comprehensive Child Development Act. The veto was a critical juncture not only because it dashed the hopes of those who wanted a larger role for the national government. It also caused those advocates to engage in venue shopping, an attempt to move the debate to more favorable institutional terrain. Their tactical shift produced numerous short-term victories, from the political solidification of Head Start to the creation of several state-level programs. These short-term victories, ironically, created additional long-term hurdles to their objectives, hurdles that advocates were unable to overcome. In fact, the heritage of this venue shopping was a more splintered and fragmented coalition supporting major policy change. Rising enrollment in early childhood programs of various types, the creation and expansion of state programs, and the growth of Head Start shifted the political terrain on which later congressional debates occurred.

The 1980s were not a period of major change in early childhood policy at either the national or the state level. The issue fell off the congressional agenda in the early part of the decade, and when Congress devoted more attention to it in the late 1980s, ambitious and incremental reform proposals did not make much legislative progress. Several policy changes occurred at the state level, but most state programs remained limited in scope. They served a targeted clientele and did not adopt the comprehensive approach to child development that had been popular during the late 1960s and early 1970s. Examining the limited changes of the 1980s is analytically useful, however, because it illustrates how the politics of early childhood policy had shifted in subtle ways.¹ Advocates of greater public investments made limited progress partly because they were unable to coalesce into a unified force for policy change.

Congressional Politics: Critics Coalesce and Supporters Split

After the demise of the Child Care Act of 1979, congressional interest in early childhood education and care fell dramatically. The presence of Republican Ronald Reagan in the White House represented a seemingly insurmountable obstacle to major policy change, and retrenchment replaced expansion as the overarching objective of policy reform. Programs like Head Start were not immune from the administration's efforts to reduce spending on social programs. Head Start supporters thwarted a proposal to turn the program over to the states and a drive to undercut its national leadership. The program's budget survived virtually intact, but Head Start was forced to serve more children while cutting back on its hours, services, and technical assistance.

Head Start's ability to resist any more dramatic changes was attributed to a combination of "the dedicated federal agency staff who remained to administer the program; the increasingly sophisticated organization of Head Start directors, parents, and staff; the resulting bipartisan support in Congress; and the well-publicized research on the effectiveness of Head Start and "Head Start-like" programs" (Zigler and Muenchow 1992, 193). Working with program administrators and such organizations as the Children's Defense Fund, the National Head Start Association emerged as "a force with which all politicians must contend" (Zigler and Muenchow 1992, 210). Its mobilization and largely successful defense of Head Start illustrates the political significance of policy feedback.

In terms of early childhood policy more broadly, the 1980s were a period of minimal policy change. In 1990, one advocate of reform lamented, "The primary problem, in my opinion, is that in the 1980s early education was removed from . . . the nation's agenda."² Most of the nation's political and intellectual energy focused on the "excellence" movement, an effort to raise educational quality through various changes in elementary and secondary education.³ Policy discussions regarding children who were too young for formal schooling focused on custodial child care rather than educational programming. The Reagan administration successfully advanced a combination of tax cuts and tax breaks that sought to "facilitate parent choice and spur child care initiatives in the private sector" (Michel 1999, 256). These policies were especially helpful to middle-class women who needed care upon entering the labor force and were capable of the financial planning the policies required.

Partisan politics undermined more-ambitious initiatives. Republicans

called for state and local control, flexible solutions, and “reasonably firm” answers to questions about the impact of child care, in advance of further national government involvement (Hatch 1982, 258). Democrats generally envisioned a more expansive role for the national government and described child care as a “necessity for families of all types of conditions” (Kennedy 1982, 261). This stalemate was not broken until Republican presidential candidate George H. W. Bush proposed a national child care program during the 1988 campaign, and Congress endorsed the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act two years later. The legislation funded child care subsidies for low-income working families and other efforts to improve program quality (Cohen 2001). It required every state to develop a child care plan for working families and galvanized a series of public and private activities in the states, while distributing most of its funds to parents through vouchers (Lombardi 2003, 40).⁴

Short-term political forces helped prevent major change, yet several long-term forces were also influential. Congress, particularly the House of Representatives, had changed significantly in the decade since comprehensive child development legislation was first proposed. These reforms, such as the Subcommittee Bill of Rights, created a more diffuse power structure that increased the time and effort required to enact legislation. Brademas noted that the changes had made “all the more complicated the task not only of the president but of the leadership of the House in putting together majorities for both domestic and foreign-policy legislation” (Brademas 1987, 126). Critics argued that the reforms made Congress “dramatically less effective and accountable” (Frum 2000, 280). Those who desired a more expansive role for the national government in early childhood policy faced a challenging institutional environment.

Long-term shifts in the political terrain, especially in the interest group universe, were especially significant. The political heritage of Nixon’s veto included a mobilized opposition movement and a fragmented supporting coalition. Blocking the comprehensive proposals of the 1970s was a key learning experience for opponents of national government involvement. By the early 1980s, the opposition was “tough and well organized” (Beck 1982, 309). It included such organizations as the National Coalition for Children, the American Conservative Union, the Moral Majority, the Heritage Foundation, the Eagle Forum, and the National Conservative Research and Educational Foundation. Observers were struck by the “promptness with which opposing groups organize when child care legislation is under consideration” (Grotberg 1981, 11). Their political engagement meant that a stealth campaign like the one conducted on behalf of

the Comprehensive Child Development Act was no longer possible. Opponents were too well organized for that strategy to work.

Furthermore, divisions within the early childhood policy community hamstrung supporters of national government intervention. The developments of the 1970s meant that “active political support for child care [was] more splintered and more difficult to mobilize than it was a decade ago” (Beck 1982, 308). Political frustration was one source of this fragmentation. In addition, since the early 1970s, the private sector, religious organizations, and state and local agencies had sought to meet the increased demand for programs serving young children. Their efforts expanded the range of stakeholders with an interest in early childhood policy.

These stakeholders held competing views about whether and how the existing policy repertoire should change. In defending their prerogatives, they sometimes undercut the effectiveness of reformers whose objectives they claimed to share. The subsequent “rifts between public and private provision, and among the clients and advocates of different kinds of care, created a divided constituency” (Michel 1999, 278). The existence of new subnational early childhood programs exacerbated this fragmentation and created another set of actors with an interest in maintaining existing arrangements. When Congress returned to the issue in the late 1980s, divisions within the early childhood policy community dampened the prospects for either comprehensive or incremental change. The fate of two unsuccessful initiatives from the late 1980s illustrates how the politics of early childhood policy had shifted over time. The coalitions on both sides of the issue had changed so substantially that the obstacles faced by advocates of increased government intervention were higher.

Smart Start: The Community Collaborative for Early Childhood Development Act of 1988

In the late 1980s, members of Congress introduced several bills on early childhood policy. Smart Start: The Community Collaborative for Early Childhood Development Act, introduced by Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA) in 1988, was especially noteworthy because its ambitious scope resonated with the comprehensive legislation of the 1970s. Congress did not endorse Smart Start, an outcome that did not surprise its sponsor.⁵ Its provisions, its failure to gain enactment, and the arguments advanced by its supporters all resonated with earlier congressional debates. Those areas of overlap, however, mask crucial differences in the politics surrounding Kennedy’s proposal. Growing enrollment in preschool programs, the cre-

ation and expansion of state programs, and the political solidification of Head Start helped change the terms of the congressional debate. The diverse witnesses who testified on Smart Start pledged fealty to its overarching goals, but they also worried that its adoption would negatively affect their prerogatives.

Smart Start was an ambitious piece of legislation whose emphasis on universal access to comprehensive preschool services resonated with the proposals of the early 1970s. Kennedy said that its main objective was to “make early childhood development programs universally available to the nation’s four-year-old children.”⁶ Most witnesses focused on its educational component, but Smart Start sought to promote good nutrition and parental involvement and to provide prenatal and diagnostic services on a full-day, full-year basis. The bill reserved at least half of its slots for children in families with incomes below the poverty line. Children in families with incomes under 115 percent of the poverty line would receive services at no cost, while eligible children from families with incomes above this benchmark would be subject to a sliding fee scale. Smart Start called for up to \$500 million in government funds in its first year of operation, with that figure rising to \$750 million and \$1 billion in subsequent years. Senator Robert T. Stafford (R-VT), a member of Congress since 1961, noted that Smart Start constituted a sharp shift from the congressional agenda of the early 1980s: “I recall that several years ago the options put forward for serving the young were primarily grounded in employer incentive programs. Much has changed. Now we in Congress are seeing major legislative initiatives designed to expand services to preschool children.”⁷ Senate hearings on Smart Start therefore provide a good analytical opportunity to examine whether and how preschool politics had changed since the early 1970s.

The witnesses who testified on behalf of Smart Start made claims that echoed those made by their predecessors in the 1970s. They highlighted trends in the American labor market and in preschool enrollment. Increased participation in the labor force by the mothers of young children, they argued, meant that “the demand for good day care far exceeds the availability of good day care.”⁸ One witness noted that from 1970 to 1985, rates of participation in the labor force by mothers with children under the age of five had risen from 30 percent to 54 percent, while preschool enrollment rates among children whose mothers were not in the labor force had increased from 37 percent to just over 50 percent.⁹

These figures suggested that preschool attendance was an increasingly standard part of American life, which caused some witnesses to focus on

equity concerns. One witness lamented the existence of a “two-tier system” in which children from lower-income families were less likely to enroll in high-quality preschool or child care programs.¹⁰ This concern helps explain why Smart Start reserved at least 50 percent of its program slots for children in low-income families. Some supporters claimed that these children were at risk for later school failure and were therefore especially likely to benefit from preschool enrollment.¹¹

Many witnesses portrayed early childhood programs as cost-effective investments. This argument was not new, but during the 1980s, it was ubiquitous. Supporters cited successful examples like the Perry Preschool Program and compared them to “a vaccine to help ensure healthy development of many children and youth.”¹² Senator Jeff Bingaman (D-NM) claimed, “Several studies have documented that every dollar spent for quality preschool education can return up to \$6 in lower cost for later education, for public assistance and for the criminal justice system. Even with our current budget deficits, I do not see how we can afford *not* to invest in quality education and child care.”¹³ This high rate of return was contingent on the existence of quality options, but few witnesses added this important caveat.¹⁴ Instead, they claimed that every dollar invested in Smart Start would pay for itself over the long term.

The political terrain on which the debates of the late 1980s occurred differed in several important ways from that of the 1970s. In an editorial calling for increased public investment, the *New York Times* asserted that attitudes about children had changed dramatically since Nixon’s veto, making it possible “to identify and energize a potential coalition on behalf of early childhood intervention.”¹⁵ Indeed, the witnesses who testified on behalf of Smart Start were strikingly diverse. Kennedy claimed that the appearance of business leaders, government officials, educators, and advocates at one hearing reflected a “spirit of community and cooperation, which is the basis of this legislation.”¹⁶

The engagement of the business community was especially important. The Committee for Economic Development issued a policy statement entitled *Children in Need: Investment Strategies for the Educationally Disadvantaged*. Several witnesses mentioned the report. Owen Butler, vice-chairman of the organization, chaired two subcommittees on early childhood education, visited twenty-three states to meet with individuals and groups working on the issue, and appeared before Congress to discuss Smart Start. He said, “The single most important investment that the nation can make for its future is to provide comprehensive preschool preparation for every educationally and economically disadvantaged child in

the country.”¹⁷ Smart Start supporters treated this strong endorsement from a business group as further evidence that early childhood programs should be viewed as cost-effective investments.

Several other constituencies appeared at the hearings, suggesting widespread interest in early childhood policy. One hearing featured a bipartisan panel of governors who had been involved in early childhood education. Several educational associations also appeared. For example, the National Association of State Boards of Education (NASBE) had convened its National Early Childhood Education Task Force in 1988, and an NASBE representative discussed what it had learned at hearings in Atlanta, Chicago, Boston, and San Francisco.¹⁸ Other witnesses represented groups whose members worked with young children and their families, such as the National Alliance of Pupil Services Organizations.¹⁹ Another witness appeared on behalf of the National Black Child Development Institute, which was leading the Ad Hoc Day Care Coalition, a group of more than seventy organizations seeking to expand access to quality child care programs.²⁰ This coalition resonated with the one that Marian Wright Edelman led in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

It is tempting to describe the expanding range of constituencies with an interest in early childhood policy as a resource for advocates of expanded public investment, as the *New York Times* did in the aforementioned editorial, but doing so overstates their cohesiveness. While state officials, Head Start supporters, and the educational community agreed on the merits of expanded access to high-quality early childhood programs, they advanced competing visions of how to achieve that goal. Their main areas of disagreement illustrate how the existing policy repertoire constrained the options available to national lawmakers during the late 1980s.

Several lawmakers and witnesses argued that any increased policy reform should, in the words of New Jersey governor Thomas H. Kean, “build on what we’ve got.”²¹ Testifying before Smart Start was formally introduced, Kean advised, “Don’t create new mechanisms and new bureaucracies. . . . I would rather see you put your energies into nurturing these proven winners than proceed with a bill that departs from the basic principles which have already proved successful.”²² Several senators expressed similar views. Kennedy explained, “Basically, my vision of Smart Start is that it is really a funding stream to build on existing agencies that are providing services within the community.”²³ When another witness expressed concern that Smart Start would have a negative impact on Head Start, Kennedy responded, “We build on those types of programs which have

been effective for preschool children. We're not trying to reinvent the wheel."²⁴ Senator Claiborne Pell (D-RI) argued that Smart Start would enable existing programs like Head Start and the Chapter I Compensatory Education Program to reach a greater percentage of eligible young children: "We must be very sure as we go along that we build on the already-proven successes of the programs in being. What we need here is a tremendous infusion of funds for this very good objective."²⁵ Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) said, "Smart Start . . . is intended to build upon already existing programs to upgrade their services, extend their hours. Obviously, we don't want to duplicate programs if they already exist. That would be a waste of money."²⁶

Many witnesses also argued that Smart Start should build on existing programs. The president of the National Education Association claimed, "The most prudent investments build on existing programs."²⁷ A representative of the National Association for the Education of Young Children used language echoing that of Senator Kennedy: "Given the tremendous need for services that exists, particular care must be given in both planning and implementation stages to avoid overlap and duplication of services. . . . Resources are too desperately needed within the field to spend money on reinventing the wheel."²⁸ The prominence of this theme suggested a consensus that Smart Start should not create a new program from scratch.

Witnesses disagreed, however, about the specific direction Smart Start should pursue. By 1988, the national government and many state governments allocated funds to early childhood programs, while community-based organizations and private-sector entities across the country provided preschool services. As a result, the witnesses representing these varied constituencies had different things in mind when they asked the senators to build on existing programs. The need for better coordination and program integration came up repeatedly. Even more revealing, however, is the fact that diverse witnesses who embraced the overall objectives of Smart Start nonetheless viewed it as a potential threat to existing programs.

The governors who appeared before Congress hoped Smart Start would provide additional funding for but refrain from onerous mandates on state programs. They claimed that state governments, unlike other jurisdictions, were capable of marshaling the resources necessary to ensure that child development efforts were well coordinated and cost effective. They argued that the national government should be relegated to a support role. Minnesota governor Rudolph G. Perpich, a Democrat appearing

on behalf of the National Governors Association, focused “on how your early childhood legislative proposal can best assist and encourage our efforts on the state level.”²⁹ Perpich seemed to find a receptive audience. During his opening statement, Senator Kennedy had explained that he had asked the bipartisan panel of governors “for their ideas about how we can best complement the early childhood education programs in their states.”³⁰

The fact that state officials lobbied for additional funds and authority is unremarkable, but it represented a sea change from the debates of the early 1970s. Recall that state officials felt excluded from the debate over the Comprehensive Child Development Act. Seventeen years later, the governors were consulted before similar legislation was introduced. Furthermore, Congress seemed to heed their requests. At a subsequent hearing, a witness praised Smart Start by saying, “[It] is dedicated to quality. It has the appropriate regulations. It is also building on state initiatives. . . . And that is a really valuable thing.”³¹

What explains this remarkable shift in the role of the states? The states were seen as integral players in early childhood policy partly because of their history of activity. Some of this activity dated back to the early 1970s, while some of it was of more-recent vintage. During an exchange with Perpich, Senator Orrin Hatch (R-UT) noted that the states “haven’t sat around waiting for the federal government to come up with solutions.”³² Other witnesses also highlighted recent developments at the state level. One explained, “You could make [an] argument that since states have already begun, why create another agency to deliver educational services? It seems to me, that would be a replication of effort.”³³ Another noted, “The individual states have already begun to move aggressively in the direction you propose. Your proposals, if adopted, will encourage all states to move and will greatly expand the programs in states and cities where movement had already begun.”³⁴ Another witness praised Smart Start for its deference to the states: “Rather than attempting to impose a new uniform federal program, Smart Start builds on the active efforts of 23 states which have already begun preschool initiatives in the 1980s.”³⁵ Smart Start was often described as a partnership between local, state, and national governments, a portrayal that would not have applied to the Comprehensive Child Development Act.

Another key concern was the relationship between Smart Start and Head Start. Smart Start supporters often invoked Head Start in claiming that the wider availability of preschool access would benefit children. Some Head Start supporters worried, however, that Smart Start would di-

vert resources from a program they regarded as successful. The president of the National Head Start Association said, “We are concerned about the possible establishment of two federal funding streams. . . . [The] solution of taking money from Head Start and giving it to Smart Start is exactly what we fear.”³⁶ Responding that Smart Start sought to support and enhance Head Start, Dodd acknowledged, “I appreciate your concern, because it is one expressed by an awful lot of people. In fact, I had that initial concern. Because I think Head Start has been so successful that I did not in any way want to see it diminished at all, or eroded, through well intended legislative efforts that would distract dollars from a very worthwhile, proven, successful program.”³⁷

Indeed, the possibility that the existence of Smart Start would have negative consequences for Head Start arose repeatedly. Pell described himself as “very concerned that these efforts not diminish successful existing programs such as Head Start and Chapter I.”³⁸ A witness representing business and professional firms in Colorado noted that Head Start reached “far too few children and parents who are clearly eligible. . . . [Head Start] must not be neglected by the Congress, even as you make additional forward movement with other proposals.”³⁹ In addition to concerns about Smart Start’s potential financial impact on Head Start, there was a possibility that the programs would compete for personnel. Staffers at Head Start centers and other community-based organizations generally received lower wages than public elementary school teachers, and some witnesses worried that these professionals would leave Head Start once they fulfilled Smart Start’s training requirements. One witness explained, “As public-funded programs come in, if they act as a drain to teaching staff, it can be a very serious problem in terms of what local communities are sometimes facing.”⁴⁰ The mobilization of Head Start supporters illustrates how existing arrangements constrained the options of those who favored policy change. Because Head Start was generally viewed as successful, senators emphasized how Smart Start would complement it and facilitate its expansion. They did not want to be perceived as promoting legislation that would potentially lead to its demise.

Finally, the educational community endorsed Smart Start and other early childhood initiatives but was an ambivalent ally. Governor James Blanchard of Michigan, a Democrat, described “elements in the education community that won’t support a major, new initiative in preschool until they receive what they feel are an adequate sum of dollars for their programs.”⁴¹ Educators worried about possible competition for scarce public funds, and the issue of administrative responsibility also provoked ten-

sion. The tension surrounding prime sponsorship had helped derail the comprehensive legislation of the 1970s. Reprising that debate, several witnesses insisted that Smart Start should give school systems the primary responsibility for running early childhood programs. The president of the National Education Association, noting that the schools offered safety, trained personnel, and facilities, argued “that the programs should not duplicate what we are offering in the public schools.”⁴² Albert Shanker of the American Federation of Teachers described prime sponsorship as an area of concern and said that state and local education agencies should be given administrative priority. He argued that “the education community at all levels has the major role to play in a new program such as Smart Start.”⁴³

Other witnesses were skeptical of ceding too much control to the public schools. They questioned whether public schools provided an appropriate pedagogical environment for young children: “[S]chools have not been known for allowing children a lot of freedom. And young children need that opportunity. . . . [T]hey learn in an active way, not sitting passively behind the desk.”⁴⁴ The arguments advanced on both sides of the debate reflected tensions within the early childhood policy community. These tensions made coalition formation and maintenance difficult.

In sum, Smart Start’s ambitious scope and lack of success resonates with the comprehensive legislation of the 1970s. In the intervening years, however, shifts in the policy and political landscape had created fissures within the early childhood policy community. Representatives of state governments, Head Start, and the educational community appeared before Congress in an attempt to move the legislation in their desired direction, sometimes contradicting one another in the process. They endorsed the general idea of policy change but sought to prevent the creation of new programs that would impinge on their existing prerogatives. The existence of a diverse range of early childhood programs represented a political constraint for those who wanted to alter the status quo. This feedback dynamic made it more difficult to mobilize the support necessary to navigate the legislative process.

The Prekindergarten Early Dropout Intervention Act of 1988

Members of Congress considered several proposals that were less ambitious than Smart Start. Senator Lawton Chiles (D-FL) introduced the Prekindergarten Early Dropout Intervention Act of 1988, which would have authorized grants to local educational agencies, community-based orga-

nizations, and nonprofit private organizations that operated early intervention programs for dropout prevention. The main goal of the legislation, according to Chiles, was “to reduce the number of children who later drop out of school by providing high-quality early education which focuses on the development of language and cognitive skills.”⁴⁵ It would have provided twenty-five million dollars to programs for three- and four-year-olds. The Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources held a hearing on the bill in May, but the chamber took no further action. Despite its limited legislative progress, the Senate testimony illustrated four important features of the debate over early childhood policy in the late 1980s.

First, early childhood education was increasingly viewed through an economic lens and framed as an investment. Multiple witnesses cited its cost-effectiveness. A major theme of the hearing was that every dollar spent on preschool would pay for itself by reducing long-term spending on various government programs. One witness said of high school dropouts, “Many of these children will, of course, drop out of school, but they will not drop out of our lives. They will linger to haunt our pocketbooks, if not our individual or collective consciences. They will . . . fill our welfare rolls and our jails.”⁴⁶ An academic researcher claimed that early childhood programs would reduce spending on the criminal justice system, welfare, and special education and would increase the taxable earnings of older youths.⁴⁷ Other witnesses cited the results of the Perry Preschool Project and the recent report by the Committee for Economic Development in their calls for massive investments in prekindergarten and child care. Committee chairman Edward Kennedy summarized this line of argument: “We have benefited in recent times from the very convincing evidence that this investment in early intervention—and it is an investment—has enormous potential.”⁴⁸

Second, the bill’s supporters generally envisioned a circumscribed role for the national government. A representative of the American Federation of Teachers argued that “there is a federal role in providing leadership and support aimed at stimulating additional early childhood education services.”⁴⁹ Another witness explained, “One of the things that excites me about this bill is that it suggests that state and local agencies really do need to take a very strong role in implementing appropriate programs.”⁵⁰ Multiple witnesses described the national government as an agenda-setting force that could highlight the significance of early childhood programming or as a potential funding source. Program development was generally viewed as something that was better left to service providers or state

and local officials. Kennedy noted that national officials had “a lot to learn from the local experiences,” a sentiment that was not expressed during the hearings of the late 1960s and early 1970s.⁵¹ The Prekindergarten Early Dropout Intervention Act envisioned a demonstration project in which the national government would fund local projects and assess them to determine which ones merited expansion. This objective was less ambitious than the goals espoused by Smart Start and the comprehensive legislation of the 1970s.

Third, several witnesses characterized program coordination as crucial in light of the shifting programmatic terrain of early childhood policy. Describing a prekindergarten program in Florida, one witness noted, “Interagency cooperation, with Head Start, Title XX, church and private day care facilities, has improved markedly [and] resulted in joint efforts to improve programs and share information and resources.”⁵² Other witnesses focused on the need for coordination between prekindergarten and Head Start. Chiles explained, “We see literally jealousies between people who are involved in Head Start and the educators on the other side, and many times there are overlapping bureaucracies and jurisdictions.”⁵³ A representative of the American Federation of Teachers expressed concern “about the relationship between these programs, Head Start, and other existing early childhood programs.”⁵⁴ A witness representing the American Association of School Administrators (AASA) was blunter: “AASA does not believe it is necessary to create a new early childhood educational structure. Existing programs should be supplemented, not supplanted.”⁵⁵ This testimony suggests that existing stakeholders viewed the creation of new programs as potentially threatening. Program coordination was not only a bureaucratic problem to be addressed during implementation. It also represented a political hurdle to policy change. Existing providers wanted to expand access to preschool services but were wary of new programs that might encroach on what they perceived to be their turf.

Fourth, the question of service delivery continued to divide the early childhood policy community. Given the incremental nature of the measure being discussed, it is especially striking that witnesses zeroed in on the issue of administrative responsibility. The Prekindergarten Early Dropout Intervention Act would have enabled community-based organizations and other nonprofit organizations to receive grants for early childhood education, and the educational community reacted warily. Noting that the proposal called for local matches and additional resources, they argued that local educational agencies possessed financial resources that they could dedicate to early childhood programs. A representative of the

American Federation of Teachers argued, “We believe that at the local level the mechanism for choosing the administering agency should emphasize the local education agency exclusively.”⁵⁶ The AASA representative said, “We maintain that governance should be in the hands of local school boards where early childhood programs are provided.”⁵⁷ Head Start centers, community-based organizations, and other providers found such proclamations troubling. Even in the context of incremental reform, the question of service delivery generated open hostility among different constituencies in the early childhood policy community.

Summary: The Changing Congressional Politics of Early Childhood Policy

The 1980s were a difficult period for advocates of a more expansive role for the national government in early childhood policy. Both comprehensive and incremental proposals failed to make much legislative progress. It was a decade “when all social service programs in this country were cut and were at risk.”⁵⁸ Retrenchment replaced expansion as the overarching goal of policy change, and defenders of programs like Head Start focused on consolidating their earlier gains.

By the late 1980s, the rhetoric and the politics of early childhood policy had changed significantly. Supporters increasingly portrayed program expansion as a cost-effective long-term investment as they lobbied for a relatively circumscribed role for the national government. Changes in the political terrain were even more important than these rhetorical shifts. In the years since Nixon’s veto, constituencies including the public schools, Head Start centers, and private service providers had developed stakes in this policy arena. They mobilized to defend their prerogatives whenever Congress considered changes to the status quo. Intramural squabbles within the early childhood policy community emerged in the context of both ambitious legislation, such as Smart Start, and incremental proposals, such as the Prekindergarten Early Dropout Intervention Act of 1988. While they were not the only factor that caused these bills and others like them to make limited progress, they represented a significant hurdle to policy change.

While major legislative proposals languished, the tax code continued to evolve in significant ways.⁵⁹ By the end of the 1980s, the child and dependent care credit amounted to 30 percent of qualifying expenses for those with adjusted gross incomes of ten thousand dollars or less. The credit amount then fell by a percentage point for each two thousand dol-

lars of adjusted gross income over ten thousand dollars, until it bottomed out at 20 percent for taxpayers with adjusted gross incomes greater than twenty-eight thousand dollars. The maximum amount of qualifying expenses to which the credit could be applied was twenty-four hundred dollars if one child was involved and forty-eight hundred dollars if two or more children were eligible. The maximum credit ranged from \$480 to \$720 annually for taxpayers with one eligible child and from \$960 to \$1,440 for taxpayers with two or more eligible children.⁶⁰ In the eyes of its supporters, the tax credit facilitated parental choice and enabled various nongovernmental providers to deliver the desired services. It facilitated “a healthy pluralism of child care providers [and did] not create a monopolistic bureaucratic system.”⁶¹

The political dynamics surrounding early childhood policy in the late 1980s illustrate the constraining effect of the existing policy repertoire.⁶² Such stakeholders as state government officials, Head Start supporters, and the operators of public- and private-sector programs repeatedly told national lawmakers that they should build on the existing system. Testifying in 1990, the president of the California Child Care Resource and Referral Network asked Congress to “use our experience and our knowledge [and] learn from our mistakes and successes. We implore you to build on what we’ve got in California, and now elsewhere in the country; that you will build on a model that works.”⁶³ This type of lobbying effort was not unique to the early childhood policy community. In the early 1980s, one study of American education policy noted that a “major effect of federal [education] policy has been, for better or worse, to establish certain dependencies, interest group structures, and action channels across local, state, and federal levels” (Elmore and McLaughlin 1983, 320). In the context of early childhood education, these developments contributed to the fragmentation of a potential coalition supporting major policy change. Constituencies that agreed on the desirability of program expansion failed to coalesce around a specific proposal, in part because they viewed the creation of new programs as a political threat. Moving the issue onto the congressional agenda proved significantly easier than did altering the status quo.

The Education Reform Movement and Early Childhood Policy in the States

The contours of education policy shifted dramatically during the 1980s, especially in terms of intergovernmental relations. Organizations of local

administrators, teachers, and school board members had traditionally dominated education policymaking, with state governments concentrating on such tasks as enforcing minimum standards for teachers and facilities. The 1980s, however, were a period of centralization during which state governments exercised considerable authority. This shift “was led by a ‘new breed’ of governors who became far more involved in shaping local education policy than in years past” (Fusarelli 2002, 140; see also Wong 2008). Inspired by several critical studies of American public education, including *A Nation at Risk*, many of them made education their top legislative priority.

The need for reform was often portrayed as an economic necessity during an era of rapid globalization. Governors and other state officials argued that stronger schools would attract businesses and jobs, because they believed that businesses valued educational systems that produced well-trained workers and provided quality schools for employees’ families. An economic recession and fear of increased economic competition from such countries as Japan contributed to the appeal of education reform, especially, but not only, in southern states (McDermott 2011). For example, the Education Commission of the States proclaimed, “Increasing economic competitiveness from foreign countries has stirred interest in greater *productivity* and in *talent development*. . . . International competition requires higher achievement for all students.”⁶⁴ More-demanding school curriculums, stricter requirements for teachers, minimum competency tests for high school graduation, and a variety of other reforms were portrayed as ways to compete in the global economy. This “new politics of education productivity” affected how people discussed education reform and their perceptions of what was at stake (Cibulka 2001).

Two important political shifts accompanied the emergence of education reform as an electoral issue. The first shift was the heightened involvement of the business community. Many business leaders felt a strong stake in education reform and made a concerted effort to set the political agenda and influence policy decisions. The second shift was the more prominent role of national organizations and networks. The Education Commission of the States, the National Conference of State Legislatures, the Council of Chief State School Officers, and the National Governors Association all accelerated their education policy activities during the 1980s (Mazzoni 1995). Their involvement meant that even though many important policy changes occurred at the state level, “a national discussion shaped the way the problem was framed and the specific solutions were advocated” (Cib-

ulka 2001, 25). Beginning in the early 1980s, the influence of national and international forces grew considerably (Mazzoni 1993).

The primary impact of the education reform movement was felt at the elementary and secondary levels, but it also aroused interest in early childhood education. The imposition of more-stringent standards generated a need for more remedial programs and a rationale for compensatory pre-kindergarten programs. The results of the Perry Preschool Program reinforced this rationale by suggesting that low-income and disadvantaged children would benefit from early childhood education (Grubb 1987, 19).⁶⁵ In combination with the growing prevalence of working mothers and an emerging emphasis on moving welfare recipients into the workforce, the education reform movement placed early childhood policy on the political agenda.

At least eleven states enacted some form of early childhood education between 1979 and 1987, and others used existing school-aid mechanisms to fund such programs in the schools. Several states formed commissions to study the options available to them (Grubb 1987, 1). It is important not to overstate the importance of these early childhood initiatives, however. They were generally limited in scope. Beginning in 1984, for example, school districts in Minnesota offered its Early Childhood Family Education program to all families with children under age five. The program included parent discussion groups, home visits, parent-child activities, health and developmental screenings for children, and information about community services. In 1984, all school districts in Missouri were required to offer similar services through the state's Parents as Teachers program. Arkansas created the Home Instruction Program for Preschool Youngsters in 1986. It offered home visits from paraprofessionals and group activities for the parents of at-risk four- and five-year-olds.⁶⁶ Supporters of greater public investment praised these initiatives but noted that they fell far short of a comprehensive approach.

Several factors prevented the adoption of more-expansive programs, including their potential cost. Such exemplary initiatives as the Perry Preschool Program had high operating costs because they exhibited high adult-child ratios and employed staff with strong educational credentials. Policymakers therefore faced a trade-off between cost and quality: the most beneficial early childhood programs were likely to be very expensive. With finite resources, officials knew that high-quality programs would not be able to reach all of the young children who would potentially benefit. Universal, high-quality programs were not financially feasible. State pro-

grams varied their services, operating hours, staff salaries, and other features in order to accommodate these fiscal realities (Grubb 1987).

Divisions within the early childhood community represented a second obstacle to a more expansive approach. Diverse groups lobbied for expanded access and funding, but they remained wary of one another. For example, virtually every major professional organization affiliated with the public schools endorsed universal schooling for four-year-olds, but their endorsements generated limited enthusiasm from groups representing child care providers and minority children. The National Association for the Education of Young Children and the National Black Child Development Institute believed that traditional child care was incompatible with traditional kindergarten or first-grade education and felt that programs serving preschoolers should not fall under the aegis of the public school bureaucracy (McGill-Franzen 1993, 8). Educators downplayed the developmental content of early childhood programs, and early childhood professionals argued that the schools were too rigid and didactic to serve a younger constituency. This split led one observer to claim that “the real question for future policy is not whether these differences exist, but whether they can be contained and narrowed—whether educators and early childhood advocates can reach some compromise” (Grubb 1987, 29). Differences in teaching philosophies contributed to turf battles that prevented the supporters of expanded preschool services from organizing themselves into a unified and effective political force.

In September 1989, the early childhood community received a boost when President George H. W. Bush called a meeting with the nation’s governors to develop a plan to improve public education. The president, members of his cabinet, and the governors addressed several topics as they met for two days at the University of Virginia. Before the summit, the president of the Education Commission of the States described early childhood education as a potential discussion topic. He hoped that the summit would reset and refocus federal spending on early childhood and clarify the roles of the states and the national government. He argued that the “federal government must get its act together since multiple departments presently have differing approaches.”⁶⁷ The executive director of the National Association of State Boards of Education said, “We are especially excited about the focus on goals for the nation and the states, and the attention given to early childhood education.”⁶⁸

As the summit concluded, President Bush and the governors issued a joint statement in which they committed themselves to developing a de-

defined set of national education goals, to building a federal-state partnership based on flexibility and accountability, and to restructuring education in all states. The statement highlighted early childhood education at several points. The “readiness of children to start school” was the first item listed in its section on performance goals. The financial role of the national government was “to promote national education equity by helping our poor children get off to a good start in school.” The statement urged that “priority for any further funding increases be given to prepare young children to succeed in school.”⁶⁹ The education summit, which drew significant publicity as only the third time in American history that the president called a meeting with the governors to discuss a single major issue, devoted considerable attention to school readiness and, by extension, to early childhood policy.⁷⁰

In sum, many states attempted to increase the number of children enrolled in early childhood programs during the 1980s and early 1990s. They funded prekindergarten programs, supplemented Head Start, or did both. The number of states providing education-related services to prekindergarten-aged children nearly tripled from 1979 to the early 1990s.⁷¹ Policy initiatives for three- and/or four-year-olds were endorsed by education commissioners and gubernatorial panels in such geographically and politically diverse states as California, Connecticut, Kentucky, Massachusetts, Michigan, New York, North Carolina, and South Carolina (McGill-Franzen 1993, 4–5).

Even after this period of activity, however, the reach of state early childhood education programs remained limited. By the mid-1990s, twenty-five states funded their own programs, five supplemented Head Start, and nine did both. Most state-funded prekindergarten programs reached a limited clientele. The Arkansas Better Chance program, for example, served at-risk or poor three- to five-year-olds. Michigan spent \$42.6 million to support school districts operating comprehensive compensatory education programs for educationally disadvantaged four-year-olds in 1994–95. In 1993–94, Oregon spent \$24.5 million to support the needs of low-income three- and four-year-olds, early childhood special education services, and preschool children with disabilities. In most states where such services were offered, spending on prekindergarten programs represented 2 percent or less of total state school aid.⁷² Nationwide, publicly sponsored programs served only 8 percent of the approximately eleven million American children who attended preschools or some form of child care facility.⁷³

Conclusion: Policy Stability and Political Change

For the most part, the 1980s were a period of limited policy change. Many congressional initiatives were considered but ultimately rejected, and the state programs that gained enactment were mostly targeted programs that were narrow in scope. The most significant shifts in early childhood policy had to do with the political dynamics surrounding the issue. More constituencies viewed themselves as stakeholders, and they mobilized both to voice their support for increased public investment and to protect their existing prerogatives. As the episodes profiled in this chapter make clear, it became increasingly difficult to construct a coherent coalition supporting major policy change. The political landscape began to shift in the late 1980s and early 1990s, however. The education summit drew heightened attention to the issue of school readiness, and a handful of developments at the state level suggested that more-profound changes might be in the offing.