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Early Start

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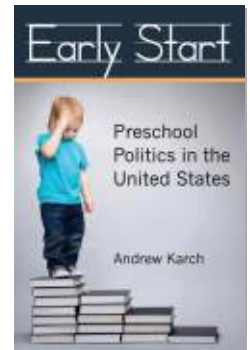
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7 | The Congressional Heritage of a Critical Juncture

During the past fifteen years, national and state officials have devoted substantial attention to early childhood policy. After chronicling the demographic, intellectual, and political forces that returned the issue to the political agenda, this chapter focuses on the congressional developments of the late 1990s and early 2000s. During the last two decades, Congress has held many hearings on early childhood policy and considered numerous legislative proposals. Its activity resulted in limited policy change, however, and evinced little interest in an expanded role for the national government.

The primary focus of contemporary congressional discussions illustrates how the legacy of previous policy decisions constrains the options available to reformers. Instead of recapitulating the debate over comprehensive programs, Congress paid more attention to program coordination. The creation and expansion of early childhood programs at the state and national levels led to concerns about duplication and inefficiency. Program coordination not only invoked administrative concerns. It also reflected the political challenges involved in altering existing arrangements. Governors and state officials, Head Start supporters, and various educational and professional associations viewed themselves as having a stake in the education and care of young children.

These constituencies agreed on the merits of investing additional public resources, portraying additional spending as a cost-effective investment in the country's future. They also agreed that national lawmakers should build on existing programs rather than implementing new initiatives. Each of them had programmatic turf to defend, however, and they reacted warily to proposals they perceived as encroaching on their prerogatives. As a result, translating increased interest in early childhood into concrete policy change proved difficult. Even when the different groups

agreed that changes were desirable, they could not agree on the form those changes should take.

Increased Interest in Early Childhood Education

Early childhood policy gained heightened prominence in the late 1990s. Scholars attributed this “surge of interest” to such forces as female employment patterns, neuroscience research, and a political emphasis on school readiness (Clifford et al. 2005, 127). In some ways, these forces were analogous to the demographic, intellectual, and political factors that placed early childhood policy on the national political agenda in the 1960s. Indeed, the rhetoric used to justify attention to this policy arena resonated with the claims of an earlier era.

Changes in the American workforce contributed to the renewed interest in early childhood policy. The percentage of mothers working outside the home rose sharply between the Second World War and 1970, and this trend continued for the next quarter century. By 2000, 53 percent of married mothers with infants, 59 percent of unmarried mothers with infants, and more than 60 percent of mothers with children under age three were in the labor force.¹ Supporters of government intervention argued that officials should accommodate this trend rather than debating its desirability. One report explained, “These changes are unlikely to be temporary shifts in social and economic patterns. . . . Employed parents, and young children needing high-quality early care and education options, are a fact of life in today’s world.”² Labor force participation patterns were described as one of the “contemporary realities” that justified doing more for young children than American society had done in the past.³ They did not necessitate a specific course of action but “generate[d] pressure for schools to deal with day care, early childhood education, after-school care and proposals for new school calendars.”⁴

Intellectual trends also contributed to the renewed interest in early childhood policy. In the late 1990s, supporters of program expansion invoked neuroscience research to make the case for additional public investment. They argued, “A steadily growing body of scientific evidence [suggests] that the quality of young children’s environment and social experience lays the groundwork for success in school and has a decisive impact on children’s lives.”⁵ It was discovered that the fetal brain begins early in pregnancy to form the trillions of brain cell connections it will use during its lifetime. This rapid development continues through a child’s

early years and does not begin to taper off until around age eleven. The plasticity of the brain meant that early positive experiences could help facilitate future learning and cognition. Negative environments would have the opposite effect, but their impact could be mitigated if such conditions were reversed.⁶ Scientists found that “countless potential connections may wither away or never form at all” without a healthy prenatal environment and appropriate sensory input starting at birth.⁷ One supporter concluded, “The brain, that great plastic vessel of expanding knowledge, is a wondrous device that undergoes exponential growth in the earliest years at a rate unequalled at any later age. Opportunities not exploited during the preschool years may be lost forever” (Maeroff 2006, 36–37). This melodramatic language was fairly common.

By emphasizing the significance of a nurturing and stimulating environment during the early years and suggesting that the absence of such an environment would produce “long-term costs to children and society,”⁸ neuroscience research provided preschool supporters with another item for their rhetorical tool kit. To them, the research findings “looked like nuggets of pure gold” (Kirp 2007, 100). They argued that custodial programs were insufficient to facilitate brain development and that only educational programs would have a positive impact. Thus intellectual forces played a crucial role in raising the public profile of early childhood policy. One scholar describes a “near-consensus that the academic research on brain development in infants has been enormously influential at focusing attention on the importance of a child’s experiences in the early years on subsequent development” (L. White 2004, 670).

The education reform movement and the related emphasis on “school readiness” increased the prominence of the economic rationale for investing in early childhood initiatives. Proponents argued that the long-term benefits individuals gained by attending a high-quality preschool program redounded to society as a whole in terms of reduced spending on welfare and criminal justice programs and the existence of a well-trained workforce that was better able to compete in the global economy. Some economists portrayed high-quality early childhood education as a smart public investment that would produce a strong return. Their findings enabled preschool supporters to “appeal directly to pocketbook interests” (Kirp 2007, 92). For example, New York lieutenant governor Betsy McCaughey Ross argued that an expansion of prekindergarten would lead to reduced state spending on special education.⁹ Arguments about the cost-effectiveness of preschool were common by the late 1990s.

Indeed, advocates focused intensely on the economic benefits of early

childhood spending.¹⁰ They argued that preschool attendance would help ameliorate disparities in school readiness among children of different ethnicities and socioeconomic statuses and that children who entered kindergarten “ready to learn” would be less likely to need remedial services. Supporters cited the North Carolina Abecedarian Project, the Perry Preschool Project, and the Chicago Child-Parent Centers as examples of cost-effective preschool programs. Colorado governor Roy Romer, a Democrat, explained that he had “become increasingly convinced that the early childhood years represent a significant opportunity to implement public policy actions that can help us address some of our most pressing social problems—school dropouts, welfare dependence, crime and youth violence.”¹¹ Many preschool supporters shared his views.

Early Childhood Policy in the 1990s: Heightened Salience but Limited Change

The demographic, intellectual, and political forces described in the preceding section helped place early childhood policy on the national political agenda in the 1990s. Despite heightened interest in the topic and the inauguration of President Bill Clinton, the nation’s first Democratic chief executive in more than a decade, no major shifts in national policy occurred. The Clinton administration “strongly support[ed] early childhood intervention strategies” (Wong 1995, 30). It “placed a high priority on steady increases in early childhood funding.”¹² Its most important programmatic innovation was Early Head Start, a federally funded community-based program for low-income pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers. Secretary of Health and Human Services Donna Shalala formed an advisory committee in 1994 to design Early Head Start, which “evolved out of Head Start’s long history of providing services to infants and toddlers.”¹³ The program served children under the age of three and represented an extension of what already existed, rather than a new policy direction. The creation of Early Head Start epitomized the trajectory of early childhood policy during an era of heightened political salience but incremental policy change.

The absence of innovation was not due to a lack of interest. Goals 2000, the 1994 reauthorization of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, declared that by the year 2000, all children in the United States would enter school ready to learn. Legislators and executive branch officials at the national level concentrated on the relationship between student

achievement and what happened before children entered school, leading to a heightened focus on early childhood education. For example, the U.S. commissioner of education statistics described early childhood education as a “critical area of focus.”¹⁴ Several corporations expressed an interest in the education of young children. For example, DuPont offered financial incentives to encourage child care programs in Delaware to pursue accreditation through the National Association for the Education of Young Children, because it believed that the existing state licensing requirements were minimal. The corporation hoped that the incentives would “communicate the message that [it] believed in the importance of good-quality care.”¹⁵

In 1997, the White House hosted two conferences on early childhood policy. The first, entitled “What New Research on the Brain Tells Us about Our Youngest Children,” focused on recent advances in developmental neuroscience. It sought to bring heightened attention to the educational content of programs serving young children. The second conference was a multidisciplinary, multiday affair that was intended to galvanize nationwide interest in the education and care of young children. It seemed successful initially. According to David Kirp (2007, 150), the conference caused attendees to consider “expanding Early Head Start and Head Start to include working- and middle-class families, or helping parents to become better consumers of child care, or adopting nationwide quality standards, or maybe even enacting a version of the fabled 1971 [Comprehensive] Child Development Act.”

It did not take long, however, for this enthusiasm to evaporate. Advocates grew frustrated with the pace of change, arguing that lawmakers had not done nearly enough to pursue their school readiness goals. One activist complained, “It would be as if we had declared our national intent to go to the moon and back in a decade but had not created NASA or a new space center to make sure that it happened.”¹⁶ The absence of major new funding or major new programs frustrated those who had expected the 1990s to be a more auspicious era.

Program coordination was a major stumbling block, due to the existing maze of competing programs administered by different agencies at different levels of government. According to the Government Accountability Office, the national government administered approximately ninety early childhood programs through eleven agencies and twenty offices by the late 1990s.¹⁷ In 1997, slightly over half of the federal funds devoted to early childhood were administered by the Department of Health and Human Services, the Treasury Department was responsible for approximately

one-fourth of the funds, and the Department of Agriculture and Department of Education were each responsible for about one-tenth of the funds.¹⁸ This extraordinary range did not include the rising number of programs administered by subnational governments. Major programmatic change would therefore require the administrators and constituencies who benefited from existing arrangements to set aside their jurisdictional turf battles and work together. Although many of them acknowledged the desirability of better coordination, they could not agree on how best to achieve this objective.

In 1999, a Senate committee held two days of hearings on program coordination in early childhood education. Senators and witnesses described jurisdictional conflicts among existing programs and lamented their effects. According to Senator Richard Durbin (D-IL), “Some of the agencies involved here and some of the people involved here, despite their best intentions, get caught up in a mind set, a turf battle, jurisdictional problems. . . . That is a recipe for duplication and inefficiency.”¹⁹ Senator George Voinovich (R-OH) pointed out that a key hurdle to program coordination was the fact that the disparate government agencies involved in early childhood did not share the same goals. For example, the Department of Education prioritized school readiness to a greater extent than did the Department of Health and Human Services.²⁰ Like his Democratic colleague, Voinovich worried that the multiplicity of existing programs was inefficient. He said, “I cannot believe that out of all of these education programs that we have got up here, there are not some of them that ought to be closed down or, in the alternative, the money that is being spent could be better allocated into something that is going to provide a better return in terms of investment.”²¹ It was easier to draw rhetorical attention to the shortcomings of the status quo, however, than it was to address them.

The relationship between Head Start and other early childhood programs drew special scrutiny. A representative of the Department of Education described the challenges involved in coordinating Head Start and the Child Care and Development Block Grant. She explained, “A lot of our work . . . is about how to work with both communities and states in building partnerships across those two pieces.”²² Successful collaborations had occurred in some states. Voinovich described how the expansion of Head Start in Ohio was made possible by locating Head Start centers and child care programs “at the same place so you do not duplicate the physical facilities.”²³ The sharing of facilities represented a basic form of coordination, however, and most observers hoped for more-extensive collaboration.

The relationship between Head Start and the public school system also received substantial attention. Tensions between these two constituencies dated at least to the mid-1970s, when the American Federation of Teachers proposed a universal system of preschool run under the auspices of the public schools. Head Start supporters were wary of this administrative prescription and worried that the schools would not offer developmentally appropriate programming. This disagreement represented a crucial hurdle to program coordination and arose repeatedly in the late 1990s. Durbin asked witnesses to discuss “this whole question of whether or not integrating [Head Start] into the school system is really putting a clash between two cultures that have been created over the last three decades.”²⁴ Many witnesses provided anecdotal examples of collaboration and suggested that the two constituencies were taking steps to confront the issue. They nevertheless acknowledged that significant gaps remained and that more work needed to be done. One witness pointed out that Head Start leaders tended to view themselves as offering a comprehensive child development program that included educational services, whereas school leaders tended to view themselves as part of the educational system.²⁵

The hearings focused on program coordination at the national level, but several witnesses claimed that the issue was also relevant in the states. Senator John Edwards (D-NC) explained, “I have been in a bunch of Head Start centers, and I have been in a lot of Smart Start centers, and I had this visceral reaction that there is very little coordination.”²⁶ He was troubled by program overlap and service gaps, and his observations are especially striking because the state-level Smart Start program to which he referred was often portrayed as exemplary. Coordination across government levels was a related issue. One Department of Education official explained that her agency wanted to help states and local communities provide high-quality early childhood education. When she convened meetings with various stakeholders, however, she often found that they were suspicious of one another: “There was a lot of discomfort initially. People [felt] they were going to lose their identity and might even lose their funding.”²⁷ Taking the time to overcome these initial suspicions was essential because “the personal relationships really matter in order to get past the turf battles and the other obstacles. People need to know each other and be able to pick up the phone to talk to each other.”²⁸ Systematically addressing the shortcomings of the status quo proved difficult despite this heightened emphasis on program coordination.

In sum, a supportive presidential administration and multiple conferences on early childhood education produced minimal policy change at

the national level. A crucial obstacle to more-encompassing changes was the difficulty of bringing together a unified supporting coalition. The programmatic fragmentation that characterized early childhood policy meant that multiple stakeholders had turf to protect. They reacted warily to proposals to change the status quo (even if these proposals sought only to coordinate existing programs), because they feared that change would negatively affect their administrative prerogatives or their budgets. Fragmentation among the early childhood policy community was not, of course, the only obstacle to major policy change. The Republicans who took over both houses of Congress after the 1994 midterm elections viewed the retrenchment of government programs as a top objective. It is therefore revealing that similar issues emerged as stumbling blocks once Republicans controlled Congress and the presidency in the early 2000s.

Early Childhood Programs and the Presidency of George W. Bush

By the early 2000s, there was bipartisan agreement that early childhood programs merited increased public investment. Democrats and Republicans pointed to neuroscience research suggesting the long-term significance of children's experiences before the age of five and agreed, in broad terms, about its policy implications. At a February 2002 hearing on early childhood education, Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT) asserted, "We are no longer arguing about the science of this. . . . As far as I am concerned, that debate is over with."²⁹ An exchange between conservative Republican Christopher Bond (R-MO) and liberal director Rob Reiner encapsulated the emerging consensus about the need for greater government involvement. As the hearing concluded, Bond acknowledged its consensual tone, "I mentioned to Rob Reiner that it is unfortunate that we agree on everything, because this place thrives on controversy. . . . If there is not a fight, it does not get covered, and I do not see anybody picking any fights today."³⁰

This emerging consensus did not lead to major policy changes, however. Republicans and Democrats focused on different dimensions of reform, and activists and other stakeholders offered their own policy prescriptions that rarely matched those of the officeholders they lobbied. During the presidency of George W. Bush, Congress held numerous hearings on early childhood policy. The hearings focused on school readiness, cognitive development, public-private partnerships, preschool access,

program quality, and other issues. Most participants agreed that policy change was desirable, but they disagreed on the proper course of action.

Two issues proved especially controversial. First, the proposals of the early 2000s reignited the long-standing debate over the appropriate educational content of programs for children under five. Several initiatives emphasized early literacy and were criticized for neglecting other dimensions of child development. A second divisive issue concerned the appropriate way to address program fragmentation. There was nearly unanimous agreement that the existing system was fragmented and that such fragmentation was counterproductive, but proposals to integrate services aroused the suspicions of existing stakeholders.

Cognitive Development and Early Childhood Education

The signature education initiative of the early 2000s was the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB). The central pillar of NCLB was accountability, which it sought to achieve through an extensive system of testing and a requirement that all schools, districts, and states make annual progress toward the goal of bringing all their students at least to “academic proficiency” by the end of the 2013–14 school year.³¹ Although NCLB focused on elementary and secondary education, it had ramifications for early childhood policy because some members of Congress viewed its application to pre-school education as a logical extension.

Two other features of NCLB were relevant to early childhood policy. The first, the Early Childhood Educator Professional Development Program, provided competitive grants to partnerships providing high-quality professional development to early childhood educators working with children from birth through kindergarten entry who came from low-income families in high-need communities. The second, Early Reading First, sought to enable children to start school with the skills they needed to become proficient readers. Early Reading First targeted children from low-income families and awarded grants directly to a variety of early learning programs, including Head Start and private child care providers.³²

Shortly after signing NCLB into law in early 2002, President Bush launched his initiative Good Start, Grow Smart. This proposal sought to strengthen the academic focus of Head Start programs, encourage states to develop quality criteria for early childhood programs that were aligned with their K–12 standards, and expand research into effective prereading and language curricula and teaching strategies. One administration offi-

cial explained, “The goal is to use the findings of scientifically-based research, particularly in the area of reading, to strengthen the education component of federal early childhood programs so that such programs effectively help prepare children for success in school.”³³ With its focus on early literacy, the goals of Good Start, Grow Smart resonated with those of NCLB.

Even before the launch of Good Start, Grow Smart, the Bush administration had evinced a preference for programs that prioritized cognitive development. In February 2001, First Lady Laura Bush unveiled an initiative called Ready to Read, Ready to Learn, which “helped put early learning into the national spotlight.”³⁴ Its two main goals were “first, to ensure that all young children are ready to read and learn when they enter their first classroom; and second, to help our Nation recruit the best and the brightest to become teachers, especially in classrooms in our most impoverished neighborhoods.”³⁵ Reading skills and teacher recruitment would play prominent roles during subsequent congressional discussions. During the summer of 2001, the White House brought together hundreds of educators, researchers, librarians, business leaders, and federal officials for the Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development. At the summit, the administration announced the formation of an interagency task force “that will work to determine the best ways to ensure young children enter school ready to learn,” and the secretary of education announced a plan to overhaul Head Start by placing a heightened emphasis on the development of literacy and prereading skills.³⁶ These diverse initiatives shared a focus on early literacy.

Critics of the administration’s initiatives asserted that early childhood programs should pursue broader objectives. They favored a “whole child” approach that incorporated social and emotional development in addition to prereading skills. Edward Zigler explained, “If we want a nation of readers, we have to look beyond teaching phonics. We have to look at the whole child, the parents, and at all of the people and experiences that make up the child’s early learning environment.”³⁷ Another congressional witness made a similar appeal. He noted that behavioral problems compromised the learning of many young children and argued, “If we really want to enhance children’s readiness for school, then we must pay as much attention to the development of their social and emotional competence as we do to their cognitive and linguistic abilities. . . . Knowing the alphabet on your first day of school is not enough if you can’t sit still or control your temper in the classroom.”³⁸

Critics did not dispute the significance of cognitive development but

argued that focusing exclusively on literacy would be myopic if programs did not address children's physical, social, and emotional development. Others worried that the accountability provisions of NCLB would trickle down to preschool-aged children and claimed that such testing would be counterproductive. One critic claimed, "People worry for good reason about subjecting children to experiences that really could be harmful and certainly would not enhance their cognitive development."³⁹

The disagreement about the appropriate educational content of early childhood programs recapitulated a long-standing controversy about what such programs should accomplish. Some viewed them as custodial programs designed to assist working parents, while others viewed them as a means of facilitating child development. Even popular programs like Head Start were affected by this ongoing debate. In 2003, the Bush administration introduced a standardized assessment that was to be given to all Head Start students twice a year. Early childhood experts contended that the test was an inappropriate tool and would produce data of questionable usefulness due to its focus on letter, number, and word recognition. Congress ultimately halted the test in 2007 (E. Rose 2010, 206).

Head Start supporters frequently reminded other interested parties that the program pursued nutritional, social, and other goals in addition to its educational objectives. During a hearing on the appropriate role of the national government in early childhood education and care, Christopher Dodd noted that the balance between developmental and other goals varied across existing programs. He lamented that developmental standards had not been included in the Child Care and Development Block Grant program, explaining that "any effort we made to set additional developmental standards or qualities that teachers ought to have and so forth . . . was vehemently opposed at the time and has been over the years."⁴⁰ His observations highlighted how long-standing divides within this policy arena had hardened over time, making policy change even more difficult. Those with a stake in the status quo viewed potential changes with suspicion, a feedback dynamic that affected the reauthorization of Head Start.

Program Coordination, Block Grants, and Head Start

By the early 2000s, Democrats and Republicans agreed that program fragmentation represented one of the most glaring deficiencies of the status quo. The gradual evolution of early childhood policy had created a plethora of funding streams and programs, many of which served narrow con-

stituencies. Senator James Jeffords (I-VT) explained, “Currently, parents must work through a maze of programs and an array of funding streams to learn about or gain access to quality early care and education programs. And, what we don’t need is another narrowly tailored program which only addresses the needs of a few and provides few dollars.”⁴¹ Many congressional witnesses used similar language as they lamented this fragmentation. Rob Reiner described the existing system as a “haphazard, underfunded, incoherent approach that does not meet the needs of this vast majority of our nation’s youngest children.”⁴² Edward Zigler said that the “variable quality and persistent fragmentation [of existing programs] result in a confusing array of services for families, marked inefficiencies in the use of public and private resources, a difficult environment for assuring accountability and assessing impacts, and significant inequalities in access to programs that are most effective.”⁴³ Program fragmentation, in sum, contributed to an inefficient use of societal resources and an uneven playing field for young children. The issue elicited sufficient concern that a House subcommittee held a hearing in April 2005 on “improvement through integration.” Witnesses from Georgia, Oklahoma, New Jersey, North Carolina, and elsewhere talked about collaborative efforts in their respective states, focusing primarily on the relationship between Head Start and other programs.

Program coordination was thought to be particularly problematic in the context of Head Start. When it was created in 1965, Head Start represented the only opportunity for many disadvantaged children and families to receive developmental services. By the turn of the twenty-first century, however, several national and state programs were pursuing similar goals. The programs evolved along separate tracks, with only “minimal formal coordination of efforts across child care, early intervention of services of children with disabilities, and preschool programs with Head Start.”⁴⁴ Many observers, worried that the proliferation of early childhood programs was leading to inefficiencies, argued that coordinating or possibly integrating these programs was desirable. Such integration was difficult to achieve, because the programs operated by different, sometimes incompatible, rules. For example, the eligibility cutoff for Head Start was lower than that of every federal and state-funded child care program and many state prekindergarten programs. This variation made it “challenging to bring together children in the same classroom.”⁴⁵

In many states, Head Start and public prekindergarten programs had different governance structures. In Georgia, Head Start was “governed by a local entity, policy councils, and board of directors whereby parents take

a very active role in the governance of the program. [The] Georgia Pre-K Program is governed on the state level, through contractual agreements with [its] providers.”⁴⁶ Governance structures affected jurisdiction over programs, implicitly invoking the prime sponsorship debate that remained controversial. Local Head Start leaders were wary of ceding to state governments the authority they had traditionally exercised. One practitioner explained, “One of the strengths of Head Start . . . is its local autonomy, and in some instances that very strength becomes an impediment to collaboration and coordination, because local programs do not have to do that if they choose not to.”⁴⁷ Many Head Start supporters viewed collaboration as undesirable.

In addition, Head Start and other early childhood programs sometimes viewed one another as competitors for scarce resources and staff. In the early 2000s, there was a concerted effort to increase the number of college graduates in Head Start classrooms. Supporters of more-stringent degree and certification requirements, including the Children’s Defense Fund, the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and the National Institute for Early Education Research,⁴⁸ said that such requirements would “dramatically improve cognitive development, language, prereading, and premathematical skills in our young children as well as their social skills and emotional well-being.”⁴⁹ Skeptics worried that individuals with bachelor’s degrees and specialized training in early childhood would move to public school kindergartens where they could earn approximately twice as much⁵⁰ and receive benefits that private Head Start providers typically could not afford.⁵¹ One member of Congress asked, “How is Head Start going to compete? . . . As you get to those economically competitive requirements, it is going to be more difficult for Head Start groups who are running the programs.”⁵² Without more-effective coordination, additional funding for Head Start, or another solution, critics worried that raising the educational credentials of Head Start staffers would have negative consequences.

The debate over program integration came to a head with the introduction of the School Readiness Act of 2003, which would have reauthorized Head Start for five years. Bill supporters argued that the legislation built on the “astounding success” of the program,⁵³ but Head Start supporters were troubled by its attempt at program integration. The main target of their ire was Title II, which allowed states “that have exhibited a substantial dedication to early childhood education and care” to participate in a statewide demonstration program.⁵⁴ Advocates of this provision claimed that it would better integrate preschool programs with Head Start

and address the problematic patchwork nature of early childhood policy. Representative Michael Castle (R-DE), chair of the House Subcommittee on Education Reform, noted, “By coordinating efforts to recruit children, developing state guidelines for care, aligning school readiness standards with K–12 goals, and other activities, a state can leverage resources to spend funding more efficiently and also serve additional children better.”⁵⁵ Similarly, the deputy executive director of the Council of Chief State School Officers wrote that a unified statewide effort would assure “greater consistency among programs and the cost benefit of a statewide system.”⁵⁶ In sum, supporters claimed that the statewide demonstration project would increase the coherence of the existing system and improve program quality.

The Head Start community and its congressional allies, in contrast, viewed Title II as a block grant proposal that would water down or possibly dismantle Head Start. Representative Lynn Woolsey (D-CA) argued that the standards for state participation in the demonstration program were too weak, characterizing Title II as “one huge super waiver of current Head Start law that will weaken and eventually . . . kill Head Start.”⁵⁷ Critics worried that the legislative language did too little to guarantee that participating states would preserve the quality standards and comprehensive services that made Head Start successful. One witness explained, “There are no guarantees, no requirements for performance standards, no enforcement mechanisms, and no specific minimum standards about classroom size, teacher-student ratio or teacher education.”⁵⁸ Critics found the absence of such language very troubling.

One potential solution was to require that states meet existing performance requirements in order to receive block grant money. Critics responded that such a requirement would render Title II unnecessary. If the goal of the measure was to build on the successes of Head Start, they argued, why include the block grant proposal? Opponents of the School Readiness Act also worried about how states would use their newfound authority. Their primary concern was financial. Sending unrestricted block grants to the states during an economic crisis made it possible that cash-strapped states would use the funds to address their broader fiscal problems. Critics feared that the quality and comprehensive services of Head Start would be diluted simply because the states could not afford to maintain them.

Supporters of the School Readiness Act denied that it would weaken Head Start. Castle explained, “[T]his should not be taken as a threat or . . . as something which is going to be necessarily detrimental to Head Start. It

is an effort to improve Head Start, and I would hope we would all look at it from that point of view.”⁵⁹ The accusation that the bill would lead to the dismantling of Head Start, defenders claimed, was not consistent with its substance or congressional intent. They pointed out that many states administered early learning standards exceeding those of Head Start, suggesting that Title II “would entrust states to raise the bar for early childhood programs and develop cohesive, rational systems serving their youngest learners.”⁶⁰ Supporters and opponents of the School Readiness Act viewed it through divergent lenses, and the measure became embroiled in partisan politics. The House eventually passed the bill by a 217–216 vote. All 203 Democrats voted against it and were joined by twelve Republicans and one Independent. The proposal died in the Senate, which took no action on it.

The debate over Title II illustrates the difficulty of reforming the fragmented and decentralized system of early childhood policy. Most observers agreed that better coordination among existing programs was desirable, yet the defenders of individual programs were suspicious of change and jealously guarded their prerogatives. Proponents of the School Readiness Act recognized the need to engage Congress, the executive branch, the states, and “the many other stakeholders in the Head Start program.”⁶¹ Their effort to do so was unsuccessful.

In fact, the dispute over the bill generated a minicontroversy about the political activities of the National Head Start Association (NHSA), which opposed Title II. On May 8, 2003, the associate commissioner of the Head Start Bureau sent a letter to all Head Start programs warning them that their “political activities are governed and, in many ways, restricted or limited by Federal law.” The letter claimed that an advocacy group, presumably the NHSA, was encouraging programs “to use Head Start program funds and/or staff in a manner that is in direct violation of the laws that govern your political activities.”⁶² The executive director of the NHSA responded that the letter’s legal references and “vague accusation of impropriety have had the effect of chilling the exercise of free speech expression by Head Start programs and their representatives.”⁶³ This heated exchange suggests that both sides recognized the political significance of policy feedback. The mobilization of Head Start supporters like the NHSA represented a hurdle to policy change and helped preserve the status quo.

After the demise of the School Readiness Act, Congress worked on the reauthorization of Head Start for another four years. Program coordination and the removal of barriers to such coordination remained a central issue. In 2005, Castle said, “Head Start should be working toward integrat-

ing services with other school readiness programs and not competing against them.”⁶⁴ His revised proposal, which would have given the states more authority over Head Start, did not gain enactment.⁶⁵ President Bush finally signed a Head Start reauthorization measure into law on December 12, 2007. It increased spending for Head Start, expanded eligibility for enrollment, eliminated the controversial standardized test that had been given twice a year to all four- and five-year-old enrollees, and set more-stringent educational credential requirements for Head Start teachers.⁶⁶ These changes, while important, left the basic structure of Head Start intact. They did not fundamentally alter the relationship between the program and other early childhood initiatives.

The Obama Administration and Early Childhood Programs

In 2007, Representative Mazie Hirono (D-HI) introduced the Providing Resources Early for Kids (PRE-K) Act. She called it a “federal/state partnership to provide better preschool opportunities for our country’s children.”⁶⁷ Such language would have been unthinkable in the early 1970s, when members of the early childhood policy community wanted to bypass the states completely and often succeeded in doing so. The PRE-K Act directed the secretary of education to award matching grants to states to enhance state-funded preschool programs. The grants would be awarded through a competitive process and could be used to increase the qualifications of and benefits provided to program staff, decrease class sizes and improve teacher-student ratios, provide comprehensive services, and extend program hours per day and weeks per year.

On June 25, 2008, the House Committee on Education and Labor approved the PRE-K Act by a resounding 31–11 margin. Like so many other congressional initiatives, however, it did not become law. Even though 120 members of the House had signed on as cosponsors, the committee vote proved to be the final action taken by that chamber on the proposal.⁶⁸ Supporters of a more expansive role for the national government in early childhood policy were unable, once again, to achieve their primary objective.

The presidential election of 2008, however, led many advocates to believe they were on the verge of a major policy breakthrough. After Barack Obama’s victory, they were “atremble with anticipation over [his] espousal of early childhood education.”⁶⁹ The new president had campaigned on a comprehensive platform for early childhood. During the campaign, he

pledged to establish a Presidential Early Learning Council to coordinate federal, state, and local policies; to quadruple financing for Early Head Start; to provide challenge grants for states to use for early childhood programs; and to expand home visiting programs for low-income mothers. These initiatives remained a high priority for the administration despite the recession, and opposition to them seemed to be less intense than it had been in the past.⁷⁰ Three years later, however, some advocates expressed disappointment. Acknowledging that the Obama administration had launched several relevant initiatives, they wanted it to make early childhood an even higher priority.⁷¹

The American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA), popularly known as the “stimulus,” included several provisions with implications for early childhood programs. It provided a total of \$13 billion in supplemental funding for Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Both Congress, in its conference report on the legislation, and the Obama administration, in departmental guidance issued after its passage, encouraged local education agencies to consider using these funds for early childhood programs.⁷² The ARRA also included \$39.5 billion in state fiscal stabilization funds to support educational programs. The funds supported early childhood, elementary, secondary, and postsecondary education, with the goals of providing fiscal relief and boosting student performance. Departmental guidance mentioned the expansion of early childhood programs and the modernization of early childhood facilities as potential uses for these funds.⁷³ Head Start and Early Head Start received an additional \$1 billion and \$1.1 billion respectively for program expansion or enhancement, and the ARRA also included preschool-related supplemental funding to the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

These provisions of the ARRA did not launch any groundbreaking initiatives. They simply worked through state governments and local education agencies to provide a boost for existing early childhood programs. Some observers nevertheless viewed this infusion of funds as an opportunity to promote program coordination. A report by the National Conference of State Legislatures explained that the legislation enabled states “to work with additional providers and explore new partnerships to expand services, support providers in meeting Early Head Start standards, or improve quality.”⁷⁴ It encouraged state officials to leverage ARRA funds to build partnerships with school districts and other service providers. This recommendation implicitly acknowledged the diverse array of stakeholders in early childhood policy and suggested that program coordination remained a central concern.

As part of the ARRA, the Obama administration also launched a competitive grant program entitled Race to the Top. The program featured two grant phases that awarded a total of \$4.35 billion in education funding to “reward states that are creating conditions for education innovation and reform; achieving significant improvement in student outcomes, . . . ; and implementing ambitious plans in four core education reform areas.”⁷⁵ The core reform areas included standards and assessments, data systems, great teachers and leaders, and turning around the lowest performing schools. Race to the Top drew a great deal of interest from state officials. Forty states and the District of Columbia submitted applications for the first phase of the program, and Delaware and Tennessee were each awarded a grant. In August 2010, an additional ten winners were announced in the second phase of the program.

One section of the Race to the Top application was entitled “Innovations for Improving Early Learning Outcomes.” States were encouraged to include practices, strategies, or programs that would promote school readiness among at-risk children by improving the quality of their early childhood experiences. This section was an invitational priority, meaning states were encouraged to complete it, but it had no effect on how the applications were scored. Even though it was not a part of the grading structure, most state applications incorporated early childhood education policies and practices.⁷⁶ The applications included initiatives to develop early learning standards, align the standards with those for the later grades, and incorporate early education information into longitudinal data systems. Many states mentioned increasing enrollment in or funding for early childhood programs as a way to improve their education systems.⁷⁷ Some states also included plans to strengthen professional development.

Program coordination was not a common topic. The District of Columbia proposed “blending Head Start funds and local resources to provide comprehensive programming for all children and their families [as part of an effort to] build a more seamless early childhood program.”⁷⁸ Although few applications included that sort of structural reform, advocates recognized that several constituencies would be affected by the changes the states proposed. One report urged early childhood advocates to consider how their initiatives would affect the prerogatives of existing stakeholders. It noted that a memorandum of understanding in California provided that prekindergarten quality and expansion efforts would be an allowable district-level expense if the state won a grant award. Other advocates should follow that example, it concluded, and “consider meeting with local education leaders including teachers unions and school district

superintendents to solicit their buy-in.”⁷⁹ The fragmented terrain of early childhood policy made such calculations a practical necessity.

The peripheral role of early childhood education in the Race to the Top program troubled some advocates. In 2011, it was granted a central place in a \$500 million round of the contest entitled the Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC). The goal of RTT-ELC, which was described as “the administration’s signature early learning reform initiative”⁸⁰ and a “historical opportunity to support early learning,”⁸¹ was to support quality enhancements for programs serving high-need children. The competition focused on “improving development standards and assessment, program standards, tiered rating and improvement systems, and early childhood educators.”⁸² Reprising earlier debates about the role of cognitive development in early childhood programs, critics noted that the initiative did not say “anything about giving children time to creatively explore and learn through play.”⁸³ RTT-ELC nonetheless generated a great deal of interest, as thirty-seven states and territories submitted proposals.

State leaders reacted favorably to the administration’s early learning initiative. They believed that it represented an opportunity to build on many of the initiatives profiled in chapter 8 of this book. A letter from several leaders of the National Conference of State Legislatures asked the administration to “use federal funding to expand and supplement existing programs” and to “leave eligibility decisions regarding who is served in early education programs to the states.”⁸⁴ Increased funding and autonomy are common themes when state officials lobby the national government, yet the letter’s tone and content illustrates an important long-term shift in the politics of early childhood policy. Significant state-level activity is a defining feature of the contemporary debate, whereas the states were less powerful stakeholders in the late 1960s and early 1970s.

In December 2011, the White House announced that nine states would receive awards through the grant competition. The RTT-ELC provided financial support for state efforts to “increase access to high-quality programs for children from low-income families, providing more children from birth to age five with a strong foundation they need for success in school and beyond.”⁸⁵ The grants were important to state officials grappling with a challenging fiscal environment. Like the other early childhood initiatives adopted during the first three years of the Obama administration, however, they left the basic structure of early childhood policy intact. Advocates welcomed increased funding for early childhood initiatives but continued to lament a lack of coordination among existing programs.

Conclusion: The Limited Impact of Increased Congressional Activity

Over the past two decades, members of Congress have held hearings on school readiness, public-private partnerships, program quality and effectiveness, preschool access, and cognitive development. In short, there has been no shortage of congressional activity. This assortment of hearings, however, has produced minimal policy change. Most congressional initiatives have failed to gain enactment, and new programs like Early Head Start essentially built on what already existed. More-innovative programmatic shifts have been stymied repeatedly. The initiatives of the Obama administration made more money available for early childhood programs but did not alter the fragmentation and coordination issues that many observers view as the main weakness of the status quo.

The political terrain on which these recent congressional battles have been fought, however, differs from that of the late 1960s and early 1970s. Earlier generations of reformers operated on something approaching a *tabula rasa*. When they debated the appropriate role of the national government in early childhood policy, there were few entrenched programs and constituencies whose concerns needed to be addressed. By the 1990s, several constituencies viewed themselves as having a stake in this policy arena and jurisdictional turf to defend. Major policy change required the accommodation of state and local officials, Head Start supporters, and various educational associations who viewed new programs as threats to their authority and their budgets. Nixon's veto and the venue shopping and other reactions it spurred had created a dense thicket of interests and actors through which any reform proposal would have to pass. Even when there was broad agreement about the desirability of change, this fragmentation limited reformers' political prospects. The administrative and political hurdles to major policy shifts were simply too great.