

challenging states to improve quality: a new federal proposal

by Eric Karolak

You know that 'quality' shouldn't be something extra in your child care program. You strive every day to provide the best possible environment and services to your children and families. As a provider, you know that quality counts, and that quality costs! Some in Washington are beginning to get this, too. The Obama Administration and leaders in Congress have worked together and this summer proposed an all-new effort to help states prioritize investing in the quality of early childhood learning across all program



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

settings and targeted to the most at-risk children.

Early Learning Challenge Fund legislation

In July, U.S. Representative George Miller (D-CA), Chairman of the House Education and Labor Committee, introduced a major higher education initiative: the Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility Act. The bill aims to reform the college student loan system, with part of the anticipated savings paying for a new Early Learning Challenge Fund.

The Challenge Fund proposal makes a significant new investment in early childhood development programs: \$1 billion per year over 8 years. It places a new focus on the development of state early learning systems, and makes a commitment to increasing the number of low-income children in high-quality programs.

Grants to states

The Early Learning Challenge Fund creates a two-part grant program to states to increase the number of low-income children in high-quality early learning settings. State applications for

'Quality Pathways Grants' must show how the state has in place, or will implement, key components of a comprehensive early childhood system that helps disadvantaged children. 'Development Grants' are designed for states not as far along in their efforts to build a comprehensive system.

In an interview for *ECEC Radio*, Ruth Friedman, Senior Education Policy Advisor to the House Education and Labor Committee and a chief architect of the proposal, described the initiative as a challenge to states to develop effective and innovative models for high-quality early learning systems for children from birth to age 5. "It's a systems approach," Friedman explains. "It's really meant to challenge states to develop comprehensive systems of early learning programs serving children zero to five, not focusing on one age group per se more than others, but really having a broad perspective on how we meet the needs of our zero to five population."

- Each type of grant requires that a state match part of the award with state money, and states must use grant funds to add to, rather than replace, their existing state spending.
- States will have to apply, and the grants are competitive (not a formula

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grant that sends some amount of money to every state.)

- It's not known how many states will be selected or how much the individual grant awards will be, but at \$1 billion per year, this is a major new investment in early childhood education.
- The states that are selected will be able to fund a variety of activities with these grants. The Early Care and Education Consortium web site has more details about the uses of funds and other aspects of the proposal. Visit www.ececonsortium.org/federal_ece_legislation.php to learn more.

According to Friedman, "The goal here really is to increase the number of children from low-income families in high-quality programs, to drive standards reform across the states, and ensure more children are entering school ready to learn."

Tune in online to hear the full interview!

ECEC Radio presents this exclusive interview with Ruth Friedman on the Early Learning Challenge Fund and what it means to you.

Visit www.ececonsortium.org.

How will it help my program?

Years of research make it clear that the quality of early care and learning makes a difference for young children in both the short- and long-term. And the components of quality — an intentional curriculum; a qualified, caring, and committed workforce; developmentally appropriate materials; and much more — all cost. States receiving Early Learning Challenge Fund grants can use

those funds for a variety of supports for program quality, including professional development and incentives and rewards for quality rating systems.

And the rating system isn't just for child care: the legislation proposes a comprehensive, cross-sector rating system that includes all early childhood program settings. "The legislation makes clear," Friedman explains, "that states really need to pull all types of providers into the rating system — family child care, center-based, Head Start, and state pre-K. For states that are willing to participate and are willing to raise the bar, we really think it will transform the way things work."

While the Early Learning Challenge Fund won't directly increase the supply of care or open up additional slots in a program, it does give states another way to direct dollars to support children where they are, and to target resources to



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Early Learning System Components

To be competitive, states must have or commit to develop a comprehensive, high-quality early learning system for children birth to age 5 that includes:

- Early learning standards reform
Evidence-based program quality standards
- Enhanced program review and monitoring of program quality
- Comprehensive professional development
- Coordinated system for facilitating screenings for disability, health, and mental health needs
- Improved support to parents
- Process for assessing children's school readiness
- Use data to improve child outcomes

the most disadvantaged. And the legislation permits a state that is making progress in its system building to apply to use some grant funds after the first year to expand access for low-income children to full-day, high-quality programs.

A game changer

According to Friedman, the legislation will be 'game-changing' in a number of ways, and "will transform early learning programs by insisting on real change in state standards and in practices."

- To be competitive, states will have to develop data systems to track the quality level of programs serving children from low-income families, and they will have to set goals (or benchmarks) for increasing the number in high-quality settings.
- "It's also going to be game-changing by challenging states to develop

comprehensive early learning systems that address eight broad areas that we know are important for delivering quality," says Friedman.

- She also points to the opportunity the Challenge Fund offers to leverage state investments in supporting high quality programs. "So instead of looking at early learning as a critical work support — which it is — it's really about challenging states to do a better job of meeting the developmental needs of children birth to five."

Status of the Legislation: What you can do to help!

The House Committee on Education and Labor voted on and passed the higher education legislation that includes the Early Learning Challenge Fund. However, the House of Representatives broke for the August recess before the bill made it to the floor for consideration and vote. The House will need to take up the legislation when they return. And, the Senate needs to introduce the legislation as well. "To enact this legislation and get this passed into law," Friedman emphasized, "we really need to hear from the field. We think there's support for this proposal, but it's really important to raise the volume and let members of Congress know how critical it is to our country's children."

You can help us build momentum for this \$1 billion a year investment in quality! Let your Members of Congress know this is an important step in helping states develop the system of early care and learning programs. With renewed investments in the Child Care and Development Block Grant and Head Start, the Challenge Fund will support high-quality programs in communities across the country.

Visit the ECEC Action Center (http://action.ececonsortium.org/action_center) for an easy way to send a letter to your Member of Congress today!

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