

looking back

The 110th Congress: How did we fare?

by Eric Karolak

In the November 2008 election, one-third of the Senate and every Member of the House of Representatives faced re-election. Every two years, this process recreates the Congress. In January 2009, the new 111th Congress will convene in Washington, DC, ready to work with a new President on the challenges facing our country. Now is a good time to look back on the 110th Congress and its record on programs for children, as we prepare to tell our new national leaders what needs to be done.



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.

The 110th Congress began in January 2007 with much fanfare. After 12 years of Republican control, Democrats won majorities in both the House and Senate in the November 2006 elections. However, the Democratic majority was slim, so accomplishing anything would require bi-partisan agreement. And, of course, Congress had multiple, compelling priorities, including military deployments in Iraq and Afghanistan.

National Summit on America's Children

In May 2007, Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA), the first woman Speaker of the House, put children front and center by convening a National Summit on America's Children. The Summit brought together Members of Congress with leaders and experts from across the country, including a provider of early care and education programs,¹ to connect research to policies affecting children and families.

The Summit signaled a new interest in early childhood programs in Congress. What followed, however, was less a comprehensive agenda focused on America's children and more a set of bi-partisan legislative breakthroughs with continued weak funding.

Head Start

The first breakthrough came with the much-awaited reauthorization of Head Start in November 2007. The **Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act** authorized the provisions of the nation's oldest early childhood program with a number of important changes that have implications for the wider early childhood field, particularly regarding teaching qualifications and compensation, the expansion of Early Head Start and the enrollment of infants and toddlers in Head Start programs, and statewide coordination of programs, standards, data, and professional development through advisory councils. For more details on the Head Start act and the other achievements of the 110th Congress, visit www.ececonsortium.org.

All of these provisions, however, would require significant new Head Start appropriations. Like most legislation, one process writes and approves the policy, and another process appropriates the funds for that policy. Here, the 110th Congress and the President let us down.

Higher Education and ECE

Another long-awaited achievement was the passage of the **Higher Education**

Opportunity Act, which the President signed into law in August 2008. For the first time, the nation's higher education law includes provisions for loan forgiveness for early childhood educators and grants to states for ECE professional development. This is a major victory for our field!

While we all know that attaining higher credentials alone is not the solution to the challenges of the workforce, the changes in this legislation should give eligible ECE classroom teachers some much-needed assistance to keep pace with rising expectations. An implementation guide is being developed to clarify who is eligible and how the benefits can be tapped. Stay tuned.

Appropriations

The 110th Congress had to work through two rounds of appropriations, one for Fiscal Year 2008 and one for Fiscal Year 2009. In 2007, as they worked on FY08, the House and Senate made gestures to fund early childhood programs. They both offered \$75 million increases for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), and for Head Start the Senate went as far as to propose a \$200 million increase.

However, the President vetoed the appropriations package in December because the funding levels were not within his parameters — his budget proposal flat-funded CCDBG and Head Start. Unable to override the veto and having to fund the government for the coming year, Congress had to work within the President's constraints, which meant accepting across-the-board cuts that left CCDBG without any increase and actually reduced Head Start funding by \$11 million.

Unfortunately, this was the appropriations package that could have helped

support all of the new Head Start initiatives and strengthen the quality of that program.

This year, similar gestures were made in the FY09 budget process. The House offered \$50 million for CCDBG and more than \$93 million for Head Start. The Senate suggested a \$75 million increase for CCDBG and a \$78 million increase for Head Start.

Faced with another likely veto and knowing elections were just a few months off, Congress opted not to complete its work before the end of the Fiscal Year (September 30, 2008). Instead, it rolled several appropriations bills into a 'Continuing Resolution,' which *continues* federal funding at FY08 levels until March 2009.

The bottom line? Make child care and early learning a national priority

As program providers, you know that year after year your costs increase. So, 'level funding' can really feel like a budget cut. We'll need to join together to send a clear message to the new, 111th Congress and the new President that child care and early learning programs matter.

As child advocates and program providers, we should commend the leadership of those who took a stand for children in the last two years. From the Summit to the House and Senate education committees and the dozens of pieces of good legislation that were proposed but never prioritized, even in these difficult economic times some Members of Congress made a valiant effort.

However, so much more could have been done to serve children and families, and the 111th Congress and the new President will need even more courage and wisdom to make child

care and early learning a national priority. We all know that supporting our troops and stimulating the economy are priorities. We have to help them recognize that supporting young children's learning and development *also* is a national priority.

What do you think the 111th Congress should do in 2009?

The 111th Congress will convene again in January 2009 with new Members, new leadership, and new challenges. And this time, also with a new President. The agenda for child care is comprehensive and robust. Strategies are in place to raise awareness and move things forward for access to high-quality early care and learning programs for children birth through age five and their families.

The Early Care and Education Consortium has added a new interactive tool to its web site, www.ececonsortium.org. There you can choose from several options for Congress to act in 2009 *and* share ideas of your own. We need your insight. You're the experts in child development, in the day-to-day needs of a program and of young children. Help us help you to tell the stories to Congress about what their decisions (or 'indecisions') mean to you.

References

1 Donna Davidson, President and CEO of Easter Seals of North Georgia, which operates child care, Head Start, and publicly-funded prekindergarten programs, testified to the critical role that early intervention plays in the lives of young children with disabilities and their families. Her program is part of the Easter Seals Child Development Network, a member of the Early Care and Education Consortium.