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Early Education Policy Update

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The following memo provides a summary of recent developments in public policy issues of interest to Early Childhood Advocates.

This Week in Washington

Tuesday marked the third week of the Congressional lame duck session and it has been far from lame. Yesterday, the White House and Senate Republicans struck a tax deal that showed signs of an Administration humbled by the outcome of mid-term elections and a willingness to show voters they will play nice. This deal extends Bush-era tax cuts for two years and also temporarily gives Republicans their preferred estate tax rate. In exchange, the Democrats received a 13-month extension of unemployment benefits and the creation of a temporary tax holiday. This deal costs \$60 billion dollars over two years which has fueled punditry all over the country. The *New York Times* actually did an analysis: “What Does \$60 Billion Buy?” Among the national policy proposals that made this list was universal preschool which would cost an estimated \$46 billion to \$56 billion a year but of course author David Leonhardt wrote this in jest. The Democrats, however, are not jesting about this negotiation and consequently many are pushing back against their President. Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid (D-NV) seems optimistic, however, that with further discussions an official compromise can be reached.

The Congress also continues its efforts to complete work on the FY 2011. The House expects to debate and vote on a year-long Continuing Resolution (CR) tonight. The bill caps FY2011 discretionary spending at the \$1.089 trillion FY2010 level, which is \$45.9 billion less than the President requested for the year. Congress does, however, have the ability to adjust allocations for particular programs in order to respond to changes in the law, meet enrollment needs or address urgent funding needs. Of course, any adjustment may result in cuts to particular programs in order to fund others but cuts are not being made to education programs or services that affect children. In fact, the Women, Infants and Children program and the Child Nutrition Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Programs were adjusted in order to meet the demands in 2011. Additionally, Head Start would receive an increase of \$314 million providing a total of \$7.548 billion. The CR, however, is *not* popular with the education community as level funding and the elimination of “earmark” programs such as Reading Is Fundamental, Reach Out and Read, Teach For America and the National Writing Project is viewed as a detrimental loss. Instead advocates around the country are pushing the Senate to pass an Omnibus spending bill instead so programs could receive some increases above FY2010 levels.

Senator Dan Inouye (D-HI), Chairman of the Senate Appropriations Committee continues to push his Senate colleagues to vote for a negotiated Omnibus bill so that the Legislative Branch can retain the “power of the purse.” Senate Republicans, however, have voiced their preference for a short-term CR kicking the can down the road once again with a continuing resolution that would expire sometime in the next congressional session. Education advocates will be working hard over the next 10 days to convince legislators that an Omnibus bill is the best way to support critical domestic programs.

Congress Clears the School Nutrition Bill for the White House

On Thursday, December 2, the House of Representatives passed S. 3307, the Healthy, Hunger-Free Kids Act by a vote of 264-157. This bill would provide \$4.5 billion to increase eligibility for school lunches, provide schools with six additional cents for each free lunch and allow the U.S. Department of Agriculture to develop new nutrition standards for school-provided meals. Furthermore, this bill could limit the type of junk food offered in vending machines and the number of bake sales or other modes of fundraising at schools that sell unhealthy foods. While the Senate passed this bill unanimously in August, it was not as easily passed in the House. Democrats are concerned with the offsets that pay for part of the bill. These offsets include cuts to the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program, the food stamp program. Republicans are concerned with the role the federal government plays in this bill and the “unsustainable level of government spending,” according to Representative John Kline (R-MN) who is the ranking member on the House Education and Labor Committee. The White House, however, is ecstatic over the passage of this bill, specifically the First Lady, given that it aligns with the Let’s Move initiative to tackle childhood obesity. For more information, visit:

http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_bills&docid=f:s3307enr.txt.pdf.

Senators Dodd and Casey Introduce Bill Creating a National Council to Assess the Well-Being of Children

The Children’s Act of 2010 was introduced by Senators Chris Dodd (D-CT) and Bob Casey (D-PA) on November 18. This bill would create a national council to assess the degree to which the well-being of children is being met across the country and, based upon these findings, make recommendations on how to improve conditions. This annual assessment would be used as a tool to “focus the attention of federal policy makers and national news media on children’s issues, generate new ideas for policy reforms, and create momentum for once-in-a-generation change.” The proposed council would 1) conduct a comprehensive study to examine and assess the health, safety, and learning needs of children; 2) examine systems for children's programs and assess ways to increase spending in preventive services for children and youth in order to improve outcomes; 3) build upon the evaluations of other entities and avoid unnecessary duplication, by reviewing the findings, conclusions, and recommendations of previous commissions, the Federal Government, State and local governments, and nongovernmental entities, relating to the health, safety, and learning needs of children; 4) submit a report to the President and Congress on specific findings, conclusions, and recommendations to address the health, safety, and learning needs of children and make specific recommendations on how to improve children's well-being. The council would be composed of 24 members who have substantial knowledge in the relevant areas. This bill has been introduced in the Senate and referred to the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions. For more information, visit:

http://frwebgate.access.gpo.gov/cgi-bin/getdoc.cgi?dbname=111_cong_bills&docid=f:s3968is.txt.pdf.

NAEYC Launches Web Page for Resources on Early Childhood Data Systems

The National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) launched a web page to provide information on early childhood data systems and the federal initiatives that help states develop these systems. To view this website, visit: www.naeyc.org/policy/statetrends/data.