

The RETURN of Child Care

by Eric Karolak

For a third year in a row, President Barack Obama featured early care and education in his State of the Union address. But this year was a little different. The President mentioned “child care” eight times in its own right. “It’s not a nice-to-have,” he said. “It’s a must-have.” And it’s a “national economic priority” that is critical to securing the middle class. Well, you know that. But when was the last time a leader so prominently called out child care? Not ‘early learning’ or ‘preschool’ — both of which you’re familiar with in your program, but which in the public discourse mean something, well, besides ‘child care’? Exactly. It’s been a while since child care has been front and center.



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Education Consortium, a public policy alliance of thousands of early learning centers that together enrolled nearly 1 million children in all 50 states. From 2001 to 2006, he led the National Child Care Information Center, the largest Federal clearinghouse focused on child care and early education. 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 both houses of the U.S. Congress.

Front and Center

In fact, in the Executive Budget presented to Congress after the speech, the President proposed guaranteeing access to this ‘must-have.’ The President’s budget would add \$82 billion over 10 years to guarantee access to high-quality child care for every child under age 4 from families earning up to 200% of the Federal Poverty Guidelines. It also called for extending the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit (CDCTC) for families with children under age five, tripling the maximum credit available to \$3,000 per child and allowing families with incomes of up to \$120,000 to access the full CDCTC.¹

Even for President Obama this was different. In earlier addresses, he’s stressed the importance of investing in young children, in quality preschool and early learning, and his budget proposals have focused more on expanding publicly-funded preschool — like the preschool development grants that were awarded to 18 states at the White House Summit on Early Learning last December.

Where Did Child Care Go?

It’s not that child care hasn’t been important — millions of families rely on

it every day. But as a public policy issue, child care has not compelled the attention of decision makers at the federal level or in most states. Why is that? A lot of factors have contributed; here are a few on my mind at the moment.

To begin with, national attention has turned away from welfare reform and toward school reform since about 2000. Although child care is the original two-generation program, helping parents earn and children learn, it’s too often been identified more with the former than the latter. That’s understandable since child care is more of a funding stream, a benefit a parent qualifies for, than a program like Head Start or public prekindergarten, whose quality standards a provider must meet. Even with the newly revised Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) law, there are few programmatic requirements for participating providers. As a result, there’s great variety in program components and in quality from one child care setting to the next.

Another related factor is that child care remains a market-based activity and one where the constructive role of government is harder to define or defend. Regulate health and safety in child care? Sure. Most would agree, just like many

other private businesses are regulated; however, it's a harder sell when it comes to requiring a child care business to meet specific educational quality standards, or to guaranteeing universal access, or to supporting training and professional development.

A third factor is that child care is still too often seen as a family's personal responsibility rather than the social responsibility of city, state, or nation. Child care programs typically serve families with children from birth, and care in those early years is seen by many as surrogate parenting. By the time a child is three or four years old, it becomes easier to see her as a pupil, a child who should be afforded the educational opportunity that is preschool. Just as K-12 schooling is widely accepted as an appropriate activity for government, it's easier to see preschool as an appropriate area for the government. In fact, the Education Commission of the States reports that for the 2014-2015 fiscal year, state funding for pre-K increased 12 percent over 2013-2014 to a total of \$6.3 billion. Although funding levels fell in five states, 10 states increased spending on pre-K by 20 percent or more. "Only six states," ECS notes, "provided no state funding for pre-K: Idaho, Montana, New Hampshire, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming."ⁱⁱ

Staying the Course

Of course, child care has never been 'gone,' and so to say it is returning is itself misleading. All across the country, child care programs like yours — many of them also receiving state prekindergarten funding or participating in Head Start grants — have been meeting parents where they are. These programs fuel the economy now, both directly and by enabling parents to go to work, and in a prospective sense by contributing to the development of the workforce of the future. And advocates have never stopped pursuing improvements for

families relying on child care. Often, our advocacy efforts for child care overlapped with those for pre-K and Head Start because in our field we know that the needs of children and families are great, that there is no 'silver bullet' solution or program, and that championing early learning benefits all those whose work is developing the young child. The recognition in the Executive Budget is an indication that our efforts have not gone unnoticed.

But the place of child care in the national dialogue has diminished, and with it government supports. According to the Center for Law and Social Policy, participation in CCDBG "has fallen for the third consecutive year to a 15-year low. Fewer children were served in 2013 than in 1998." CLASP also reports that state and federal spending on child care hit a 10-year low.ⁱⁱⁱ

Child Care *IS* Early Learning

"Hear #childcare — think #earlylearning. It's a better depiction of what we do!" CKeller16 recently tweeted this along with a photo of a teacher demonstrating with a bumblebee model to a half dozen engaged preschoolers in a Minnesota classroom. CKeller16 is Cisa Keller who manages advocacy and government relations for New Horizons Academy, a top-notch multi-site provider. She knows that in high-quality child care programs all over the country young children are learning every day.

Too often, though, child care programs don't live up to the potential. In a marketplace marked by ease of entry, with too few clear indicators for even the savvy consumer to distinguish between programs, and with significant price points, it's easier than it should be to survive while offering less than high-quality early childhood education.

Keeping child care front and center will mean that we have to push for a strong

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quality agenda, too. Most states — 38 at last count — have turned to quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS) to help create a continuous quality improvement pathway for programs in a Wild West marketplace. Some states are beginning to extend QRIS to all parts of our sector, including public schools and Head Start programs receiving state funding.^{iv}

It's the Economy, Silly!

The economic importance of child care — full-day, full-year programming — is well documented and may be returning anew to our advocacy conversations. Indeed, helping parents find and keep jobs is a key priority and to some degree a unique characteristic of child care. You might want to ask, has your state updated its economic impact study? Maybe it's time to do so. In Georgia, the state just commissioned a study of the impact of the child care industry,

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which was estimated to create over \$4.1 billion in revenues annually while creating over 61,000 jobs, the last time the state studied the matter was in 2007.^v

A number of states are beginning to look again at access and affordability questions. In Ohio, Governor John Kasich's budget proposal addresses 'the cliff effect' in child care. Kasich, a Republican who is often considered a potential 2016 presidential aspirant and a leading advocate for a balanced federal budget, called for \$118 million in new early learning investments in his budget proposal.

With concerns about the economy lingering and anxiety about the middle class mounting, child care — a family's 'must have' — may be returning to the public policy stage at just the right moment for broad support.

Endnotes

- i. The Budget Proposal also included a \$1.1 billion increase in Head Start, including an additional \$150 million for Early Head Start — Child Care Partnership grants, and \$75 billion to support the Preschool for All initiative. Preschool for All is funded with an increased tobacco tax and would provide all four-year-olds from low-income families with access to high-quality preschool, and make available \$15 billion over 10 years for evidence-based home visiting. In FY 2016, the budget also proposes a \$500 million increase for Preschool Development Grants, expanding them to over 40 states.
- ii. Bruce Atchison and Emily Workman, "State Pre-K Funding: 2014-15 Fiscal Year" (Education Commission of the States, January 2015), viewed online: www.ecs.org/clearinghouse/01/16/97/11697.pdf. State-funding for pre-K increased by nearly 7 percent nationwide in the prior year.
- iii. Hannah Matthews, "Child Care and Development Block Grant Participation at a 15-Year Low" viewed online: www.clasp.org/issues/child-care-and-early-education/in-focus/child-care-and-development-block-grant-participation-at-a-15-year-low#sthash.gKV5sWDB.dpuf
- iv. See how your state compares by visiting the online QRIS Compendium at <http://qriscompendium.org/>, which includes state profiles and other resources collected by the BUILD Initiative and a number of partners.
- v. "State Commissions Child Care Economic Impact Study," *Valdosta Daily Times*, November 10, 2014.