

Notes from WSA Conference Call 8/19/08

Guest Speakers:

Helen Blank is currently the Director of Leadership and Public Policy at the **National Women's Law Center**. Helen has been working on early childhood issues for many years and is revered in Washington DC for her knowledge and skill on our issues. She spent many years at the Children's Defense Fund.

Funding

There's not going to be an appropriations bill this year, they will probably do a continuing resolution at this year's funding levels. There was some discussion of including increased funding for certain programs like Head Start, but that's uncertain. When the new president comes in he'll be faced right away with working on this year's appropriations bills. There are some who think the president can add a lot more money, like happened a few years ago, but that's going to be hard. The new president won't use all his capital for something hanging over, when it's not clear where the money will come from.

Joel heard from one aide that they might take the lowest number from the President, house and Senate for the CR. Helen says that doesn't always work. Things look pretty bleak at this point, and the chance of getting an increase for either Head Start or child care is very small.

Helen says she got a question about how much it would matter if programs got an increase in October instead of February. For example, some programs may be able to avoid discontinuing transportation services. Sandy Junker agrees with this – with fuel prices this is a major problem for her program. They've cut back on transportation – they only transport about a third of families now. If she got money in October, she could add transportation.

Pre-K bills

Nothing is going to happen on this this year. The Hirono bill was marked up, but will not go to the floor.

The Hirono bill is in some respects a more modest pre-k bill. It's supposed to go to states to improve the quality of their pre-k programs, and not until it reaches a certain funding threshold will the money go to slots. This is in contrast to the Clinton or Casey bills, which are mostly targeted towards expanding pre-k slots.

The real issue is whether the NCLB reauthorization will have a new pre-k initiative, and how big it is. There are logical arguments about why the feds shouldn't get into pre-k (they already have Head Start), and they would be superseding the state efforts. That said, there is a lot of interest in pre-k by members, and it's likely to come up during No Child Left Behind. The question is how do you maintain enthusiasm for HS, Child Care, etc while the interest is about new programs.

Obama has talked about quadrupling funding for EHS, but hasn't talked specifically about Head Start.

People have focused on Hirono, but the real action may be in No Child Left Behind in the Senate. It will create more competition with Head Start funding. So far there hasn't been a lot of discussion. It's one of Hillary's big issue, but not much public conversation because NCLB hasn't marked up the bill.

There's no need to do much this minute. Keep talking to Sen. Murray about what good Head Start and EHS do, what's been happening because the programs have been starved, and that it's important to grow the program.

All the pre-k money goes to the states. If Head Start goes to the states, we probably wouldn't have these Pre-K bills. Governors are doing their own pre-k programs, and aren't particularly attached to Head Start. They want federal funding for pre-k.

The Hirono bill's goal is to support higher-quality pre-k programs. It's a fairly modest effort. In the senate, the Casey and Clinton bill (500 million and 50 billion) are much larger. Hirono requires that programs meet certain standards. There's a 10% set-aside for infants, and slots kick in at 250 million, at which point states can use it to fund low-income programs.

The Democratic platform has a pre-school bill included. Obama also says he would support a new state early learning initiative. Sounds like universal preschool. Platforms don't necessarily mean much in the end.

McCain has no info about pre-k. No sense at all of what he might be thinking.

Some Congressional leadership are interested in pre-k, some in 0-5. The challenge is that there's not a lot of enthusiasm about Head Start. Over all, Head Start doesn't generate the kind of deep support that it did 10 years ago. There was a long, contentious reauthorization process, a lot of focus on bad problem, etc, and pre-k is the fresh new penny.

What do we do? Get lawmakers into your best programs, and talk about what HS is doing for children and families. It would be good if you could get others in the community to talk about Head Start.

Uby – should we make up a booklet of facts and stories to give to the people who can make a difference. Also commercials, web, newspapers, etc.

Joel – great idea. We've also been working on a child outcomes project, which will help us highlight the work of our program and the data we have.

Helen – you need to make members of Congress understand the good stories about your program.

Joan – I'm getting the feeling that Head Start and the state programs are in conflict instead of working together.

Helen – a new program does create some competition, and there is limited money. We shouldn't argue against federal pre-k, but should talk about how valuable Head Start is. Head Start could deliver this pre-k, but people see it as separate from this new pre-k.

Joan - It's important to me as an ECEAP person that the flexibility of ECEAP remain. Can Head Start be redesigned to provide more flexibility? I see ECEAP as becoming more popular because it can better adjust to the community needs.

Helen – I don't think that will happen, since people aren't going to want to open up Head Start again. Head Start is one of the few programs with standards, and nobody wants to open it up right after 5 years of painful reauthorization has just been completed.

Joel – in some states, like Washington and Oregon, there's more receptivity to flexibility, and things like Washington Head Start will hopefully incorporate that flexibility. In other states, like SC or Texas where there are very conservative governors, it may not happen.

Joan – there are some Head Start standards (like policy council) that are very difficult to comply with for rural programs.

Other issues – Early ECEAP, Basic Ed definition

Helen – it would be great to move forward with early ECEAP. There's growing recognition that those early years are very important, Obama is very interested, and much of the expansion has been into EHS. In Washington State, Gates is looking more broadly than just pre-k.

In 7 states, pre-k are included in the basic ed formula, but none have 0-3.

Buffet foundation is funding 0-5 programs, and Pew as well.