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A NEW DAY FOR YOUNG CHILDREN?

By Rafael Heller | Sep 27, 2021 | Editor's Note

As I write this column, in late-August, the United States Congress is gearing up for a budget reconciliation process that will (if Nancy Pelosi, Chuck Schumer, and colleagues can manage to keep all House and Senate Democrats on the same page) result in a truly historic federal investment in early care and education. The starting point for negotiations is President Joe Biden's $3.5-trillion spending plan, which includes a proposed $200 billion to support universal public preK programs and another $225 billion to help families pay for childcare, as well as to establish a $15 minimum hourly wage for childcare workers.

By the time this issue of *Kappan* arrives in mailboxes, we should have a better sense of where the budget package is likely to wind up — whether it entails a massive spending increase in services and supports for young children, a massive disappointment for progressive policy advocates, or something in between. But if it were up to the American public, rather than their representatives on Capitol Hill, the outcome wouldn't be in doubt. According to a May 2021 survey commissioned by the Bipartisan Policy Center (Smith & Rosen, 2021), parents with young children overwhelmingly support new federal programs along these lines: "96% of liberals and 88% of conservatives agree working parents deserve access to high-quality child care [and] 95% of liberals and 79% of conservatives agree that expanding government support would be beneficial for parents and children." Likewise, a January 2021 survey by the First Five Years Fund (also a bipartisan organization) found high levels of support among voters in general, not just among parents of young children: "73% of Republican voters and 95% of Democratic voters support making preschool more available by providing it [at no cost] to all three- and four-year-olds whose parents want to send them" (Uhing, 2021).

Until the 2020 election, efforts to support early care and education enjoyed strong bipartisan support among policy makers, too. As Shantel Meek, director of the Children's Equity Project, explains in this issue, we've seen significant increases, over the last 10-15 years, in public funding for childcare and preK programs, not only in deep blue parts of the country (e.g., Vermont and the District of Columbia) but also in red states such as North Dakota, Oklahoma, West Virginia, and Georgia. And Republicans in Congress applauded when the Trump administration approved funding increases for federal childcare subsidies and Head Start in fiscal years 2019 and 2020.

We have been here before, notes Teresa Preston in this month's Look Back column. For example, in a 1994 *Kappan* article, Sharon Kagan praised the "surprising, if not stunning" ambition of the Goals 2000: Educate America Act, which aimed to ensure that "by the year 2000, all children will start school ready to learn." The problem, argued Kagan, is that such reforms never seem to gain traction unless there's a major national crisis to galvanize support. We didn't have one then, but thanks to COVID-19, we certainly do now.

References

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