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Initiative Focuses on Early Learning Programs

By [SAM DILLON](#)

Tucked away in an \$87 billion higher education bill that passed the House last week was a broad new federal initiative aimed not at benefiting college students, but at raising quality in the early learning and care programs that serve children from birth through age 5.

The initiative, the [Early Learning Challenge Fund](#), would channel \$8 billion over eight years to states with plans to improve standards, training and oversight of programs serving infants, toddlers and preschoolers.

The Senate is expected to pass similar legislation this fall, giving [President Obama](#), who proposed the Challenge Fund during the presidential campaign, a bill to sign in December.

Experts describe the current array of programs serving young children and their families nationwide as a hodgepodge of efforts with little coordination or coherence. Financing comes from a shifting mix of private, local, state and federal money. Programs are run out of storefronts and churches, homes and Head Start centers, public schools and other facilities. Quality is uneven, with some offering stimulating activities, play and instruction but others providing little more than a room and a television.

Oversight varies by state, but most lack any early childhood structure analogous to the state and local boards of education that govern public schools. A result is that poor children, even many who have access to government-financed early care or learning programs, tend to enter [kindergarten](#) less prepared for school than those with wealthier parents.

To qualify for grants, states would have to demonstrate that they have established or improved what the bill calls a “governance structure” for their networks of child care centers and prekindergarten programs.

The structure would include quality standards; a curriculum of sorts, appropriate for young children; a mechanism for reviewing programs and assigning quality ratings; minimum training requirements for providers; a plan for reaching out to parents; and a system for collecting data on children and families. The Departments of Education and Health and Human Services would jointly administer the Challenge Fund.

[Sharon Lynn Kagan](#), a professor at Teachers College who has traced the history of American child care programs back to the early 19th century, wrote a [paper](#) last year advocating federal aid to states in building a more coherent and robust early-childhood infrastructure.

“No one bill can solve everything,” Professor Kagan said, “but this will move us more than any other piece of legislation toward higher quality in early education, not just more spaces for children.”

Since the campaign, Mr. Obama has raised expectations among early learning advocates with his

endorsements of public investments in the careful nurturing of young children, especially the disadvantaged. In the economic stimulus bill, Congress last spring appropriated more than \$4 billion in new financing for child care and education efforts, including [Head Start](#), the federal program that serves about 900,000 preschoolers.

Still, not all early learning advocates are satisfied that the administration is doing all it could to integrate early learning efforts into the nation's broader public education system.

The [Department of Education](#) is already administering a separate \$4.3 billion competition among states to reward and encourage improvements to elementary and secondary schools. In August, scores of early learning groups and advocates wrote letters to the department criticizing proposed rules for that competition, known as Race to the Top, as largely ignoring early childhood education.

"We don't see how our country can race to the top when all kids are not at the same starting line" when they reach kindergarten, said Marcy Young, project director for the [Pre-K Now](#) program at the Pew Center on the States, one group that criticized the rules.

One reason the administration focused on elementary and secondary schools in the Race to the Top competition and early childhood in the Challenge Fund is that the two are at contrasting levels of development, administration officials said, with the public schools needing initiatives to improve teacher effectiveness, for instance, and early childhood needing basic structures of governance.

Sara Mead, a senior research fellow at the [New America Foundation](#), said, "I haven't talked with anybody who isn't excited about the prospects for this Early Learning Challenge Fund."

"But there is disappointment in some parts of the early childhood community that it's not more focused on adding slots," Ms. Mead said.

One reason advocates are especially concerned about slots for children is that after a decade in which states had taken the lead in expanding access nationwide, several with deep budget troubles have recently eliminated or reduced services for tens of thousands of children.

Illinois, for instance, cut the budget for its Pre-K for All program to \$305 million this fiscal year from \$338 million last year, eliminating slots for about 9,500 children, according to statistics provided by Albert Wat, a project manager at Pre-K Now.

In Ohio, lawmakers did away with a program known as the [Early Learning Initiative](#), the budget for which last year was \$125 million, Mr. Wat said. The action eliminated access for 12,000 children, he said.

"In some states, we're seeing a disaster," said Steve Barnett, co-director of the [National Institute for Early Education Research](#) at [Rutgers University](#).

But despite the tightest budgets in decades, nearly 30 states have chosen to protect or increase financing for early learning programs.

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