

Strong Start for America's Children Act

By Teri Talan

You may have heard this week that Senator Tom Harkin (D-IA), Representative George Miller (D-CA), and Representative Richard Hanna (R-NY) introduced the Strong Start for America's Children Act. This bill is a bipartisan response to the President's Preschool for All proposal introduced during his State of the Union address. It is an important step forward in ensuring access to high-quality early learning programs for low- and moderate-income children. This Act is about equity and quality. It will provide federal funding for pre-K programs, delivered in schools and centers, meeting high-quality benchmarks: teachers with BA degrees in early childhood earning salaries comparable to K-12 teachers; developmentally appropriate curricula and learning environments; comprehensive services for children; and ongoing program monitoring to ensure continuous quality improvement.

While each of these benchmarks is critical to ensuring that children are ready to succeed in school so is well-qualified program leadership. Unfortunately, requiring leaders to have a BA degree and competency in both early childhood education and program administration is a missing quality benchmark in this proposed legislation.

We know that the scope of responsibilities for center directors and school principals is quite similar. Both administrators oversee curriculum and child assessment, supervision and evaluation of teachers, human resource allocation, family engagement, community outreach, and fiscal matters relating to their programs. Yet director qualifications contrast sharply with the qualifications for principals.

- While state requirements for principals vary, all states require certification and teaching experience, a master's degree in leadership, and ongoing professional development.
- Only four states (DE, IN, NJ, PA) require a director to have a degree at any level.
- Only five states (CA, CO, FL, NH, TX) require even one college course related to administration before assuming the position of director of a licensed child care center.

While the Strong Start for America's Children Act is silent on the need for knowledgeable, skilled, BA-level leaders, it is important to sustain momentum for federal investments in quality early learning. The proposed Act may not be perfect but it is a huge step in the right direction. My colleagues at the McCormick Center and I urge you to contact your representatives in Congress and ask them to support the Strong Start for America's Children Act. Rest assured, the McCormick Center will continue to advocate for well-qualified program leaders with the knowledge and skills to support teaching staff to deliver instructional excellence.

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