

CARES: Strengthened or Shredded?

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The endangered CARES program, which has helped many thousands of California early care and education teachers increase their education, looks like it could be coming back stronger. But only if California First 5 commissioners approve the staff's proposal for a "Teacher Signature Program" at their April 21 meeting. That approval is not certain, although advocates are cautiously optimistic.

Educators who have watched students grow and flourish with CARES support would be very pleased with the First 5 staff proposal. It calls for a continuation of the core program – stipends, advisement, and other supports for teachers continuing their education – as well as some important additional investments in the professional development infrastructure.

Proposal on hold

At their January meeting, California First 5 commissioners tabled the proposal, apparently because of their concern about the financial future of First 5. In the legislature, Senator Cox was busy promoting another one of his bills to raid First 5 funds to help fill the state budget hole. In addition, some commissioners wanted to make sure First 5 would have the money to bail out the Healthy Families program again, since the budget deficit continually threatens its support.

Now, however, the Cox bill that was pending in January has been defeated; Cox has introduced another version, but its passage seems unlikely. Meanwhile, the new federal health care reform law improves the prospects for children's health care funding. And Commissioner Molly Munger argued at the January meeting that First 5 has enough money to fund the Teacher Signature program *and* bail out Healthy Families again if that's needed.

Continuing CARES

The staff's Teacher Signature Program proposal was part of California First 5's effort to focus its resources on five "Signature Programs" based on lessons First 5 has learned. The proposal includes

- **the basic CARES program**, including stipends, advisement, other supports – and a requirement for county matching funds.
- **a statewide professional development registry** including information on participants' education, employment, and certification. This would be used as a planning and accountability tool to track professional development and identify needs.
- **a new certification/career ladder** (replacing/ updating the Permit Matrix) based on the Early Educator Competencies document that the CDE will

soon release. CARES participants would focus their education on moving up this career ladder.

- **a new Higher Education Quality Pathway Partnership program**, which would support the formation of regional collaboratives; bringing together CARES programs, colleges, community-based organizations, and local education agencies. The collaboratives would work to strengthen, systematize, and coordinate the development of higher education programs for early educators, including articulation of college requirements, development of new courses based on the Early Educator Competencies, and integration of knowledge about cultural and linguistic diversity.

Piece of the puzzle

This professional development system would fit in with other state efforts. It could become the staff development component of the Early Learning Quality Improvement System (ELQIS) currently being planned. It would also support the development of quality programs in Power of Preschool, the “Child Signature Program,” which the First 5 Commission did adopt at its January meeting.

The proposed professional development system would also position California to qualify for federal funds by fulfilling part of the mandate of the new California State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care.

Yet another statewide ECE meta-structure? Yes, the federal government requires states to have this one if they want to receive Head Start funds from the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act (ARRA). The council’s purpose will be to plan a statewide early education system that coordinates Head Start and other early childhood programs. The governor gets to appoint the members, which he doesn’t seem to have done yet, but it will include the whole ELQIS Advisory Committee plus a state director of Head Start Collaboration, along with representatives from higher education, the board of education, the health or mental health agency, and the Head Start agencies.

More money maybe

Some of the other parts of the proposed Teacher Signature Program would help California qualify for a grant from the federal Early Learning Challenge Fund. The catch is that the fund doesn’t exist yet. The Early Learning Challenge Fund -- \$1 billion a year in competitive grants for states to create quality early learning systems -- was included in Student Aid and Fiscal Responsibility bill. That is until recently.

Remember that flurry of confusing Congressional activity around the federal health care reform law? Somewhere in there, the student aid bill got folded into the health care bill. The good news is that it passed. The bad news is that the Early Learning Challenge Fund was stripped out of the bill in the

process. So at the moment it's not in any bill. But it's still part of President Obama's program, and advocates are continuing to push for it.

(By the way, the student aid bill will provide other benefits for early childhood development students, by increasing the Pell Grant program and eliminating the "middle-bank" from the student loan program. By providing student loans directly, the federal government will save a lot of money that banks had been raking off the student loan program, so more students will be able to get aid.)

Here's where you come in

Input from the field could be important in influencing the California First 5 Commission's decision on the proposed Teacher Signature program. Commissioners need to hear from early childhood educators who can describe in very concrete ways why the professional development program is so important. Maybe you and/or your students, staff, or mentees could get up to Sacramento for the April 21 commission meeting. Maybe your faculty group or AEYC chapter could write a letter to the commissioners. What's at stake is the continuation and further development of the professional education culture that CARES has created within the early childhood workforce. Can you imagine how important that will be in the lives of California's young children?

The California First 5 Commission will meet April 21, 10 am to 4 pm, Holiday Inn Capitol Plaza, 300 J St., Sacramento.

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