



## Kara Johnson: Winds of change coming for early ed, but is Texas ready?

During the 2008 Presidential campaign, voters heard a good deal of promises, but one that struck a chord with the early education advocates was Barack Obama's promise that federal funding for state-based early education programs would be coming should he be elected.

As we all know, Senator Obama is now President-Elect Obama, and since his victory, new reports from his transition team make the morning news every day. The speed at which his team is moving is unprecedented in presidential political history. However, through the dizzying barrage of reports of new czars, secretaries, and advisors, the Texas Early Childhood Education Coalition (TECEC) has been listening attentively for any indication that the promises made about early education during the campaign just might come to fruition.

Good news, it seems, is now being reported out of the Obama transition team. On Tuesday, the New York Times reported that the Obama office intends to pledge \$10 billion for early care and education programs across the country. According to the story, this would constitute the largest federal investment in early childhood education since the Head Start program began in 1965.

Clearly the voices of advocates, parents, economists, teachers and many more about the importance of early childhood education are gaining attention from President-Elect Obama. But there is one important unanswered question Texas must wrestle with in the face of this incipient opportunity: is our state prepared for this federal infusion of early education funds? That is, are our programs aligned with federal quality guidelines that will allow Texas to reap the potential benefits of a massive early education spending effort?

Of course we cannot predict how the funding will be allocated; however, if we use Obama's "investing wisely" campaign rhetoric as a guide, Texas would be smart to begin to tailor our programs in manner that is more consistent with federal recommendations for quality and effectiveness.

In Texas, we are lagging in some of these quality and effectiveness indicators. For instance, our child care subsidy system lacks proper reimbursement rates paid to providers serving low-income children. Federal recommendations call for these providers to receive a reimbursement rate for their services equal to the 75<sup>th</sup> percentile of the market rate in their region. Nowhere in Texas do we meet that recommendation. In fact, in most areas these providers receive reimbursement rates lower than the 50<sup>th</sup> percentile of market rate, often forcing providers to compromise quality. Also, our child care professionals receive just 8 hours of pre-service training before they begin working with children, while national experts recommend 40 hours.

Our school-based pre-k programs are sometimes lacking, as well. Although many school districts impose quality standards upon themselves, the state of Texas has no class size requirements or staff-to-child ratio requirements for public pre-k classrooms. National recommendations call for a maximum class size of 20 children and a 1 to 10 staff-to-child ratio.

Thankfully, Texas has an amazing opportunity to prepare for the proposed new federal early education funding during the upcoming 81<sup>st</sup> Texas Legislative Session. The first bill filed in the Texas Senate this year was Senate Bill 21, relating to enhanced quality full-day pre-k in Texas. This bill, along with its companion, House Bill 130, would fund full-day pre-k programs while requiring districts participating in the program to impose low class size limits and manageable staff-to-child ratios. These bills represent TECEC's top priority in 2009. Our coalition will also advocate vigorously for increased reimbursement rates, as well as increased pre-service training hours for child care professionals.

Making these quality improvements to our early care and education system will greatly increase our state's chances of securing a decent share of any federal efforts to strengthen early childhood throughout the country. Let's make sure Obama's winds of change don't blow past Texas.

More information on high-quality early care and education is available at [www.tecec.org](http://www.tecec.org).

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