

The Shifting Politics of Early Childhood Education

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Early Start



Preschool Politics in the United States

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“One of the great pieces of unfinished business is high-quality child care; I wonder why we just can’t do it.”

Former House Speaker Nancy Pelosi (D-CA)

November 2011

A “Watershed” Moment: 1971

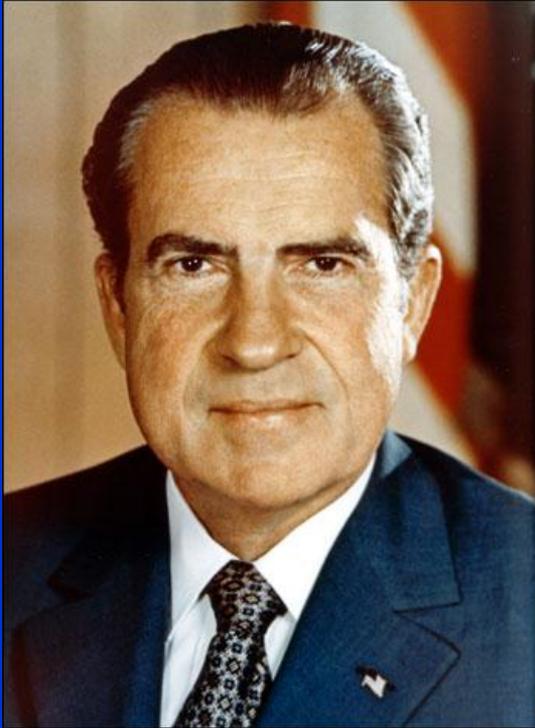
- Congress passes the Comprehensive Child Development Act
- Laid the foundation for a universal program
 - Services “should be available as a matter of right to all children regardless of economic, social, and family background”

Key Issues

- Eligibility
 - At what income level should it be set?

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 - At what income level should it be set?
- “Prime sponsorship”
 - State governments or localities?



“[The bill] would commit the vast moral authority of the national government to the side of communal approaches to child rearing over against the family-centered approach.”

President Richard M. Nixon
Veto Message, December 1971

Nursery School Enrollment, 1964-2010



Political Implications

- Building a coalition becomes more challenging
 - Those with a stake in the status quo will defend it, even if they support the expansion of preschool in principle
- Three constituencies
 - “Private” providers
 - Head Start community
 - State governments

“Private” Providers

- Rising enrollments in non-public programs
- Facilitated by tax code changes that occurred with little fanfare in omnibus revenue bills
- Affects the mobilization of two groups
 - Service providers
 - Satisfied middle-class parents

Head Start Community

- Political status of Head Start was tenuous in 1971, but solidified by the end of the decade
- Impact
 - Formation of National Head Start Association
 - Mobilization of Head Start parents



“We are concerned about the possible establishment of two federal funding streams... [The] solution of taking money from Head Start and giving it to Smart Start is exactly what we fear.”

Congressional testimony on Smart Start, 1988

Head Start and State Programs

- States where the Head Start community is stronger are...
 - More likely not to fund preschool education
 - Less likely to fund a “freestanding” preschool program

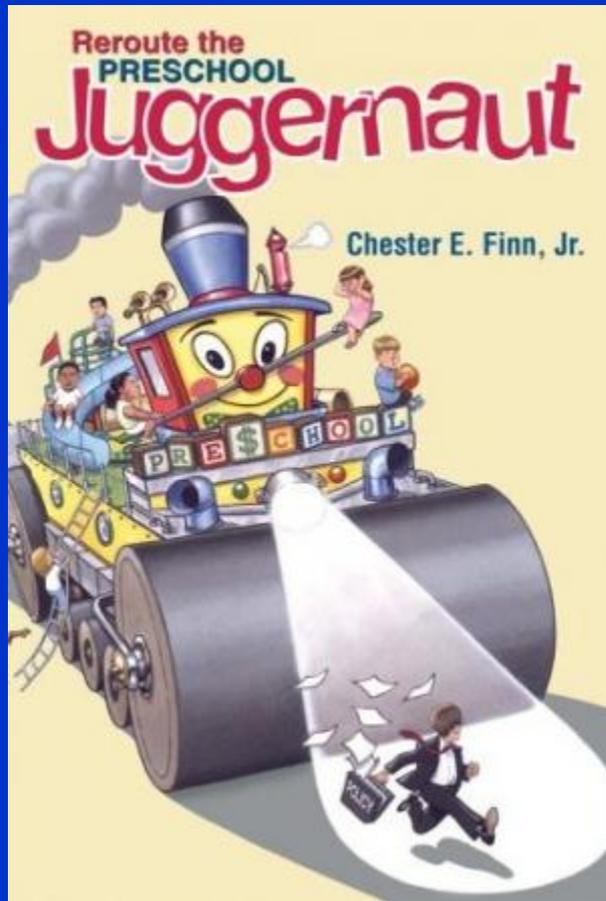
State Governments

- The 1971 bill effectively bypassed the states
- Increased state-level momentum by the end of the decade due to...
 - Frustration of state officials
 - Tactical decision by preschool advocates





- “Signature early learning reform initiative” of the Obama Administration
- State governments play a central role



- States have taken the most ambitious actions
 - Some unlikely successes
- Accommodating existing stakeholders is a logistical and political necessity

“Change is popular in the abstract,
controversial when it hits home...
We saw change quickly become
controversial when reform requires
adults with a stake in the failed
status quo to do things differently.”

Duane Benson, Minnesota Early Learning Foundation

December 2011

