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THE "NEW" ABC CHILD CARE BILL: NOW IT SEEKS TO REGULATE GRANDMOTHERS

- (Updating *Executive Memorandum* No. 229, "Two Cheers for Bush's Family Tax Cut," March 22, 1989, and *Issue Bulletin* No. 145, "The 'ABC' Child Care Bill: An Attempt to Bureaucratize Motherhood," October 6, 1988.)

The full Senate is about to consider a revised version of the Act for Better Childcare (S. 5), the measure introduced by Christopher Dodd, the Connecticut Democrat. A similar bill (H.R. 30) has been introduced in the House by Dale Kildee, the Michigan Democrat. Known generally as the "ABC Bill," the legislation would spend nearly \$12 billion over four years to subsidize secular day care centers. Contrary to the claims of its sponsors, this expensive legislation still poorly serves parents with young children; recent changes have not corrected the bill's inherent flaws. In fact, ABC would deny parents choice in child care while taxing poor families to subsidize day care for the rich.

Among its many problems, ABC would provide no help to typical families. Only one pre-school child in ten is cared for in a day care center, while 75 percent of pre-school children are cared for by parents and relatives. And American parents overwhelmingly prefer care by parents, relatives, and neighbors for their children to care in formal institutions. Families that use day care centers, moreover, are far more affluent than those who do not.

No Funds For Families. Critics of the original ABC bill pointed out that it would fund bureaucrats and social service institutions while denying funds to parents. ABC backers responded by claiming that 70 percent of the bill's funding actually would be provided as "direct assistance" to families. This is untrue. In fact, families would receive virtually no ABC funds. Up to 30 percent of ABC funds would pay for administrative and regulatory costs; nearly all of the remaining money would be direct grants to day care centers.

True, ABC contains a provision allowing states to give "childcare certificates" to parents. But experience with the highly flexible Social Service Block Grant day care funds, which can in part be distributed as vouchers, suggests that most states will not offer such certificates. More important, only a tiny fraction of ABC funds would be disbursed to parents in this manner even were a state to introduce a certificate program. These ABC certificates, moreover, would not offer genuine parental choice because, unlike true vouchers, they could not be used with a wide variety of licensed day care providers. To use an ABC certificate, parents would have to enter into a written contract with the state, which would select and approve the child care arrangement. Day care providers also would have to receive specific approval and enter into a written contract with the government for each certificate received. Thus in practice there would be little difference between certificates and direct grants to government-selected centers; bureaucrats and not parents would select the child care.

This certificate provision – which baits with talk of parental choice and then switches with government selection – is characteristic of the entire bill. ABC backers appear hostile toward any type of child care that is not “professional” and bureaucratically controlled. Indeed, Kildee stated that if his mother were to care for his children (her grandchildren) in his own home, he would want her registered and trained by the government.

Daunting Requirements. Because such sentiments against family child care are alien to most Americans, ABC backers have tried to hide the true nature of their bill, claiming that the “new ABC” would allow funds to be used to subsidize care provided by grandmothers. But in order to receive support under ABC, a grandmother caring for her grandchild would face a daunting array of requirements. First, she would have to reside in a state actually distributing child care certificates. Second, she would have to enter into a personal written contract with the government, specifying the conditions under which she would care for her grandchild, and obtain state approval. Third, the parents would have to sign a contract with the state. And fourth, the grandmother would then have to demonstrate that she complied with federal health and safety standards and would be required to fill in daily reports proving that the food she provided to her grandchild met detailed federal nutrition standards. Given these conditions, it is unlikely that any grandparents would receive ABC funds, despite the fact that more pre-school children are cared for by grandparents and aunts than by day care centers.

ABC advocates also have sought to deal with the claim that the original bill excluded church-based day care. Again, they have failed to do so. Church-based day care centers could receive support under the legislation – but only if they banished religion from their program. Any church-based day care center providing religious values to children, through Bible stories, prayers, hymns, or similar activities would be denied funds. Thus religious day care centers either would be forced to purge their programs of religious content or would be forced to operate without subsidies in competition with heavily subsidized secular day care centers. Many of the church day care centers would be driven out of the market. Thus ABC discriminates against parents who wish to have their children raised in a religious environment, and those parents would be taxed to pay for secular day care for other families.

Forcing States to Regulate. The anti-religious impact of ABC would go even further. Many states, especially in the South, exempt religious day care centers from state licensing and regulation. Religious day care is regarded in effect as “Sunday School during the week,” and state legislatures wisely have deemed that government licensing would violate the separation of church and state. The ABC bill, however, stipulates that state governments must impose and enforce all existing state day care regulations “uniformly” on day care providers. ABC thereby deliberately bans states from exempting religious day care centers from the current regulations imposed on secular day care centers. If a state received ABC funds, it thus would be forced to impose state licensing and regulation on all religious day care centers within the state, even if those centers did not receive one cent of federal or state money.

The ABC bill thus is a highly discriminatory and anti-religious measure. In contrast, George Bush’s proposed tax relief for families with young children would not discriminate against those families choosing parents, grandparents, neighbors, or religious centers to care for their children. ABC advocates demand that the government invest in “quality child care,” but the highest quality child care is provided by families themselves. Bush is right to propose that the way to secure America’s future is by investing in families, not in professional day care centers.

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