

March 28, 1990

THE HAWKINS/DOWNEY CHILD CARE BILL: IN RAISING CHILDREN, WASHINGTON KNOWS BEST

INTRODUCTION

This week Congress votes on legislation that will shape how the next generation of America's children are raised. On the table in the House of Representatives is a bill formally called the Early Childhood Education and Development Act of 1990 (H.R. 3), cosponsored by Democrats Augustus Hawkins of California and Thomas Downey of New York.

This Hawkins/Downey bill will create a bloated nationwide bureaucracy; will limit parental choice of child care programs, restricting assistance to most parents whose children are cared for by relatives, neighbors, the private sector, or religious day care; and will give the public schools an unprecedented role in caring for very young children.

This new role for public schools is one of the bill's most disturbing elements. Title II of H.R. 3 creates a federal program to fund care and development programs for three- and four-year-old children in the public schools. By so doing, Hawkins and Downey are asking the federal government to take a position on one of history's and life's most complex and contentious matters: how best and when to educate very young children. Under the Hawkins/Downey bill, the federal government will assert that children benefit from being exposed to formal schooling at ages three and four. Those who, in effect, agree with this federal fiat are rewarded with taxpayer-funded programs. Those who disagree are denied federal funding.

Expert's Warning. It is dangerous enough for Washington to meddle in how children are raised. It is even more dangerous when it does so in haste and ignores the complexity of the issue. To Hawkins and Downey the matter may be simple. To most child development experts it is not. Cautions Tufts University Professor of Child Study David Elkind, past president of the Na-

tional Association for the Education of Young Children and the author of *The Hurried Child*:

There is really no evidence that early formal instruction has any lasting or permanent benefits for children. By contrast, the risks to the child's motivation, intellectual growth, and self esteem could well do serious damage to the child's emerging personality.¹

There is a strong possibility, therefore, that the Hawkins/Downey bill could harm a young child's development emotionally and intellectually.

Unnecessary Program. Title II of the Hawkins/Downey bill also is suspect because it funds child care programs in the public schools for school-age children who are unsupervised before and after school — so-called “latch-key” children. This program is unnecessary; Census Bureau data clearly show that the number of latch-key children is quite small and most latch-key children are from relatively affluent families. To the extent there is a latch-key problem, it can be dealt with using limited resources at the local level and does not require a vast new federal program.

Contrasting sharply with the Hawkins/Downey bill is the bipartisan Stenholm/Shaw bill (H.R. 4294), introduced by Texas Democrat Charles Stenholm and Florida Republican Clay Shaw. It guarantees that parents will be able to choose what kind of child care arrangement they prefer. By guaranteeing parental choice, it preserves the present diversity among child care providers, insuring equal treatment of grandparent care, religious care, and private sector providers. Nearly all child development experts agree that preserving this diversity, rather than using tax funds to move child care toward a public school monopoly, is in the best interests of American children. As important, the Stenholm/Shaw bill does not create a separate program for child care in the public schools.

HAWKINS/DOWNEY: PUBLIC SCHOOL CHILD CARE

Title II of the Hawkins/Downey bill will create a new federal program to provide child care in the public schools. Title II authorizes \$2.7 billion over five years; the funds may be used for: 1) education in the public schools for three- and four-year-old children, or 2) before- and after-school care in the public schools for school age “latch-key” children. Children from families with incomes up to \$33,300 per year would be eligible for assistance under both the pre-school and latch-key programs. This Hawkins/Downey Title II will prohibit parental choice, denying assistance to parents who prefer other types of care or child development programs other than those in the public

1 David Elkind, “Formal Education and Early Childhood Education: An Essential Difference.” *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1986, p. 636.

REEXAMINING THE "LATCH-KEY CRISIS"

In recent years, cries of alarm have been sounded about the increasing numbers of "latch-key" children: young school age children who are left alone without parental supervision for extended periods before and after school. The Washington-based Children's Defense Fund has claimed that there are at least 7 million latch-key children under age thirteen in the U.S. Perhaps in response to this purported crisis, Title II of the Hawkins/Downey bill authorizes an unspecified share of \$2.3 billion over five years for services for latch-key children. The trouble is that there seems no basis for the Children's Defense Fund's statistical assertions. A Census Bureau survey of child care arrangements finds that both the extent and the character of the latch-key phenomenon have been misrepresented enormously.⁸ The Census Bureau counts approximately 2.1 million latch-key children between the ages of five and thirteen who are left without adult supervision for at least brief periods before and after school. Most of these children are over age ten. Only 2 percent of school-age children under age ten care for themselves either before or after school. Among children aged five to seven, the figure is even smaller: less than one percent are in self-care before or after school. Another 2 percent in this age group are cared for by another child under age fourteen, generally an older brother or sister.

Census data also indicate that latch-key children remain without adult supervision for only short periods. Among children under age ten who care for themselves or are cared for by a sibling under age fourteen, a third are alone for less than one hour each day; 89 percent are alone for less than two hours.

Refuting Misconceptions. Latch-key children are not even concentrated in low-income families or in families headed by single working mothers who, the argument has gone, are forced by economic necessity to leave their children unattended. To the contrary. Latch-key children are found disproportionately in intact two-parent families and in families with higher incomes. Latch-key children also disproportionately tend to be white, to live in the suburbs, and to have better educated parents.

In a 1987 in-depth study of latch-key children, Virginia Cain and Sandra Hofferth of the National Institutes of Health find that parents are selective in determining whether or not to have a child care for himself or herself⁹. The maturity of the child and the relative security of the neighborhood, rather than economic necessity, appear to be the prime factors in the decision.

8 Bureau of the Census, U.S. Department of Commerce, *Current Population Reports*, Series P-23, No. 149, "After School Care of School Age Children" (1987), reviewing 1984 Census data. See also, Virginia S. Cain and Sandra L. Hofferth, "Parental Choice of Self-Care for School Age Children," paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Population Association of America, Chicago, Illinois, May 1987.

9 *Ibid.*

Local Solutions. This does not mean that there is not a latch-key children problem. The 307,000 children under age ten who care for themselves either before or after school are a cause for some concern. But the scope of the problem is clearly limited and can be dealt with at the local level. On average, for example, there are only four latch-key children for each elementary school nationwide. There is no nationwide "crisis" requiring establishment of a new federal program, with new federal monies. The appropriate response by local governments would be modest programs providing before- and after-school supervision inside the elementary school. Such programs should be funded by user fees paid by the relatively small number of parents who would benefit from the service; exceptions to the user fee principle could be made for very low income families.

CONCLUSION

Hawkins and Downey claim that Title II of their bill will benefit small children. Perhaps they are right. So far, however, they have produced no evidence or data to support their point. The great body of evidence that does exist refutes them convincingly. Experts insist that early childhood education as it would be practiced in public schools is potentially harmful.

Need for Thorough Debate. The field of child development is characterized by widely divergent views on how best to raise young children. Reasonable people can disagree on the various theories. Congress, therefore, should not mandate one monolithic approach that might not suit millions of American youngsters. Rather, there should be a thorough debate on the points raised by opinions of those experts whose research finds that programs like those in the Hawkins/Downey Title II can harm young children. The Stenholm/Shaw bill avoids this danger – and controversy – by leaving decisions about how to care for and educate young children in the hands of their parents.

Robert Rector
Policy Analyst

All Heritage Foundation papers are now available electronically to subscribers of the "NEXIS" on-line data retrieval service. The Heritage Foundation's Reports (HFRPTS) can be found in the OMNI, CURRNT, NWLTRS, and GOVT group files of the NEXIS library and in the GOVT and OMNI group files of the GOVNWS library.

schools. Hawkins/Downey also bar will all religious activities under the program.

By contrast, the Stenholm/Shaw bill guarantees parental choice. States are free to use additional funds provided through Title XX of the Social Security Act to offer services with a variety of providers, including the public schools, if they wish. But ultimately parents would decide who cares for their children; any parent receiving assistance under H.R. 4294 who does not want his or her child raised in the public schools has the option of receiving a certificate from the government that can be used to pay for child care in whatever setting the parent selects.

WILL CHILD CARE IN THE PUBLIC SCHOOLS HARM CHILDREN?

The pre-school program under the current Hawkins/Downey Title II has a dual purpose. First, it is intended to provide daycare for employed parents, since services are provided ten hours a day, throughout the year, and are restricted to single, employed parents or to two-parent families when both parents are employed. Second, Title II also seeks to promote "early childhood education" to children cared for under the program.

To the extent that Title II funds daycare, it should not grant public schools a monopoly. To the extent that Title II seeks to deliver a specific educational program through the public schools to three- and four-year-olds, evidence that the program could be harmful to young children must be considered by Congress before it acts on the bill.

In advocating formal education for three- and four-year-olds in the public schools, Hawkins and Downey ignore the advice of numerous child development experts. Tufts University's Elkind draws the line here. He is dismayed at the current enthusiasm for schooling of very young children and accuses its proponents of "...blatantly ignoring the facts, and the consensus of experts about how young children learn and how best to teach them."²

"Fundamental Error." Other prominent child development experts agree that formal schooling can be harmful to young children. Edward Zigler, Director of the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University and the architect in the 1960s of Head Start, criticizes universal preschool education as a "misguided enterprise" that does not improve the quality of education.³ Although a proponent of compensatory education with comprehensive health and family services for poor youngsters, Zigler warns that it is a "fundamental error" to advocate the educational component for all students.

² *Ibid.* p. 632

³ Edward Zigler, as quoted in: "A Few Words of Caution on Schooling the Very Young," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1985.

Ignoring Evidence. Most experts agree that the early education of very young children must be undertaken cautiously and in programs well-adapted to the developmental needs of the children served.⁴ Title II of the Hawkins/Downey bill presumes that all young children will benefit from early exposure to its public school program. Yet some experts claim that the schools are poorly suited to meet the unique needs of preschoolers.

Says Zigler: "Those who argue in favor of universal preschool education ignore evidence that indicates early schooling is inappropriate for many four-year olds and that it may even be harmful to their development."⁵

Adds Connie Hayden, Director of the National Center for Montessori Education, a nationwide network of Montessori teaching institutions:

The bureaucratic structure of the public schools is unlikely to design programs that would be beneficial to younger children. Applying to younger children the conventional structured teaching methods developed for older children will, far from boosting the young child's development, damage the child's enthusiasm for learning in later life and limit the child's overall intellectual development. The child will be burnt out before he is even ready to start learning.⁶

Lobbying's Fruit. The role envisioned for public schools under Title II is unprecedented. Public schools currently provide less than 2 percent of the care for children under age five in the United States. The remaining 98 percent of the nation's children are cared for by parents, grandparents, neighbors, churches, and private sector daycare centers. Yet under Hawkins/Downey the public schools are guaranteed 37 percent of child care funds and are eligible to receive an additional 46 percent of funds provided under Title XX (Social Service Block Grants).⁷ This disproportionate funding is a result of the lobbying strength of the National Education Association teachers lobby, not the preferences of parents. Only one parent in twenty would prefer to have a child raised in the type of secular child care program which would be subsidized under Title II.

4 Elkind, *op. cit.*, p. 632

5 Zigler, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

6 Interview with Connie Hayden by Robert Rector, March 24, 1990.

7 This calculation includes the direct child care services provided by Title I, Title II, and Title III of H.R. 3.