

# U.S. Senate set to vote on Child-Care Bill aimed at bolstering program quality <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

The U.S. Senate is set to consider a bill that would update the Child Care and Development Block Grant program, which hasn't gotten a makeover since 1996. The measure is one of just a handful of bipartisan education bills that have come out of either chamber since the Obama administration took office.

So what exactly is the Child Care and Development Block Grant program? The \$5.2 billion CCDBG program was initially designed as a way to help parents cover the cost of child care and after-school programs while working or going to school, generally through vouchers. States get to set a lot of the rules for the program, including deciding how much of their own money parents must kick in to access the grants.

What would this bill do? In the nearly two decades since CCDBG was last renewed there's been an increasing emphasis on ensuring that child-care programs are high quality. The bill would ask states to be more deliberate about program improvement, and to kick in a higher percentage of their own money to bolstering programs, from 4 percent now to 10 percent by 2018. That would essentially put current practice into law-many states already spend 10 percent or more of their money on program improvement.

The measure also would require states to take some quality assurance steps that may seem like no-brainers to some, such as requiring child-care providers in the program to undergo comprehensive background checks. (That's something that only about a dozen states call for right now.) It also calls for states to conduct at least one annual visit to licensed CCDBG providers, as well as to visit centers before granting them licenses. And the measure would smooth the way for parents to hang on to their child-care vouchers despite fluctuations in income.

"We've learned so much more about children's needs" since the 1990s, said the bill's co-author, Sen. Barbara Mikulski, D-Md., at a press conference Tuesday on the measure. Lawmakers wanted to craft a bill that would beef up program quality while not piling on so many federal mandates that small child-care providers could no longer participate, she said. "We were able to come up with how we could work with our states to provide local flexibility with certain minimal national standards."

So what are the bill's chances in the House? Rep. John Kline, R-Minn., the chairman of the House education committee, has said the Senate bill is a good starting point for discussions in his chamber. And politically, the bill seems like a winner-it's bipartisan and it's on an issue (early education) that's been getting a lot of attention lately, thanks in part to the administration's push to entice states to expand their prekindergarten offerings.

But there's one big hurdle and it's all congressional inside baseball. The Senate legislation doesn't call for any new funding (to the chagrin of advocates). Instead, it essentially says that Congress can allocate as much money for the program as lawmakers think is appropriate.

The problem? House leaders don't like that kind of language. They want lawmakers to specify how much money a program should get, and they typically want to hold spending down to current levels. This is the issue that stopped the reauthorization of the Education Sciences Reform Act dead in its tracks late last year. A bipartisan, Senate-approved CCDBG bill would provide an important test for this rule.

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