

House passes child care bill^[1]

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EXCERPTS:

The House passed a bill to overhaul child care for low-income families Monday, and it will likely become law before the end of the year.

Lobbyists and advocates say they didn't expect the House and Senate, which passed its version of the bill earlier this year, to successfully broker the child care deal during this Congress. But with legislators on both sides of the aisle eager to score points during an election and high-profile education lawmakers retiring at the end of this Congress, legislators managed to strike a deal they announced Friday.

The House quickly took the bill up under suspension of the rules "because we recognize the importance of getting this done this year" and because there's a "growing national consensus" around early education, House Education and the Workforce Committee ranking member George Miller said on the House floor Monday.

Under the bill, called the Child Care and Development Block Grant Act, low-income families receive assistance from the program mostly in the form of the vouchers, which they can use at a child care facility of their choice, including religious institutions.

The early childhood world has changed in big ways since the child care law was last reauthorized in 1996: State-funded pre-K programs for low-income families have risen to popularity, and a new body of research suggests that early education - including child care - is crucial to brain development.

The bill focuses on common sense updates, not ambitious early-education investments that have been floated by Democrats. It would make modest-but-overdue changes: Adding mandatory background checks for child care center staff, better health and safety requirements and more information for parents about their child care options, for example.

The bill will be among the final achievements in Congress for Senate HELP Committee Chairman Tom Harkin and Miller, both of whom will retire at the end of this year.

Republicans and Democrats in both chambers have thrown their support behind the reauthorization, which they describe as a hearty bipartisan compromise.

The two parties view the child care program and its benefits differently. Republicans are attracted to its emphasis on school choice and its roots in welfare reform: Congress last passed the child care law to make it easier for low-income mothers to work.

"Women now make up nearly half of our workforce," House Republican Conference Chairwoman Cathy McMorris Rodgers said. "Yet so many of our workplace laws and labor laws were written at a different time."

Democrats, many of whom have become strong advocates for early education in recent years, see the program more as a part of early-education policy that could help stimulate brain development and help boost kindergarten readiness. Many Democrats would have liked a much bigger emphasis on education in the bill.

Advocates say it will be crucial to secure more money for the program. They expect it to be an uphill climb.

"That's the long-term agenda," said Hannah Matthews, director for child care and early education at the Center for Law and Social Policy. Still, the bill "is a tremendous step forward," Matthews said.

The bill also could help shield House Republicans from election-year attacks on child welfare and education issues.

At a recent House subcommittee hearing on government oversight, education committee Democrats barraged witnesses with questions on child sexual abuse and mistreatment of young people with disabilities in the school system, issues that Democratic aides said Republicans are hesitant to give time to on the committee. On Monday, House Democrats unrolled their version of an education appropriations bill, which focuses on boosting funding for Head Start and the National Institutes of Health.

Comedian Bill Maher has taken up the cause: Last Friday he announced that House Education and the Workforce Committee Chairman John Kline would be the target of his campaign to "Flip a District" - in which Maher will focus on trying to unseat one congressman, Kline, from office this fall. Kline is expected to win his race against Minnesota lawyer Mike Obermueller - but that hasn't stopped Maher, who

singled Kline out for his support of for-profit colleges.

"As the powerful chairman of the House Education and the Workforce Committee, Kline has done more to keep 20-somethings in their parents' basements than anyone else alive," Maher said.

This isn't the first education bill Congress has passed this year: This summer Congress passed a rewrite of the Workforce Investment Act, the nation's flagship bill for job training, and this past spring the House overwhelmingly passed a bill to update charter schools law. And the Senate education committee this week will mark up a small House-passed bill that would reauthorize federal education research. That bill is considered to have good odds of being signed into law.

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