Alternative Visions for Financing Child Care

Introduction

The preceding articles in this journal issue have detailed the history and current status of public funding for child care in the United States. They have outlined the range of programs that exist to provide out-of-home care for young children, the quality of those programs, and the relationship between cost, quality, and the developmental outcomes of children served by those programs. Together, these articles make the point that the child care system is really no system at all, but rather thousands of different programs, administered by many different federal, state, and local agencies. These programs are supported through dozens of funding streams and are subject to diverse program requirements. The result, as summarized by the authors of the previous articles, has been child care of uneven and largely mediocre quality; spot scarcities of care, especially for infants; long waiting lists of low-income families seeking child care subsidies; abrupt changes in eligibility for child care after parents move from welfare to work; and a child care work force paid wages so low that staff turnover averages 40% annually.

As Stoney and Greenberg suggest in their article, some have endorsed the notion that block granting funds for early childhood programs would reduce fragmentation in the child care system. This would enable each state to impose uniform eligibility requirements and quality standards, and use funds in a way that best meets the needs of the families in that state. But, as Stoney and Greenberg point out, that sort of approach will not address all the problems in the child care system. To do that, they contend, and we agree, will require additional resources.

The following articles offer alternative visions for addressing the larger questions concerning additional resources: How many more resources are needed? How should those new dollars be raised? How should they be distributed? What services should be delivered? In other words, these articles are designed to move beyond the descriptive to the visionary.

The first two articles, by Edward Zigler and Matia Finn-Stevenson and by James Walker, propose several new ways to finance child care. Zigler and Finn-Stevenson outline a system in which child care for three- and four-year-olds would be financed through the public K-12 education system. Walker proposes two strategies: One would address the child care needs of low-income families through a child allowance, and the other would enable parents to meet the child care needs of infants by implementing a parental leave system, financed by individual contributions into parental leave accounts.

Following the proposals are commentaries by Lenny Goldberg, a tax reform advocate; Thomas Schultz, a national expert who advises education leaders on early childhood programs; and Michele Piel, who administers public child care funds for low-income families in the state of Illinois. These commentaries are, in turn, followed by brief responses from the authors of the proposals.

The proposals, commentaries, and responses demonstrate the complexity of the child care field, illustrate some of the competing forces that must be considered in developing strategies to finance child care services, and address the appropriate role of government in helping families care for their children.