

Is Head Start finished?

Proposed reforms may sound good, but do they have children at heart?

By Margot Horwitz

Why tamper with a program that's been a success for more than 35 years?

Educators, child advocates and parents all over the country are asking that question, and looking to President Bush for answers. In the guise of "making it better," the President is pushing a House bill that would let the states take over Head Start and combine it with existing preschool programs. A pilot program would work with eight states — at least that's the way it would begin.

Head Start centers have many concerns about the possibility of states taking over. This is not a good time for state governments. In the House bill, some states can apply to combine their existing preschool programs with their federal Head Start money if their program's standards are similar to federal standards, and if they agree to maintain state spending on preschool. But that's not necessarily Head Start, is it? As state budgets grow leaner, won't the temptation increase to use Head Start block-grant money for other programs?

The House bill calls for a greater focus on reading and math. Would this emphasis take away from Head Start's vital medical and dental health and nutrition components?

President Bush calls for decentralization of Head Start, turning it over to individual states. Would that create unequal programs, with a diminishing of Head Start's quality?

President Bush seems determined to push the program's 1 million 3- and 4-year-olds toward greater academic effort, and he is setting ambitious goals. He forgets that these youngsters are the nation's poorest, in need of more than scholastic pressure. The program now looks at the whole child, providing the nurturing that all children, especially disadvantaged kids, desperately need. The fear is that this will be greatly undercut by the new emphasis on book learning.

The bill is also pushing for Head Start teachers to have four-year college degrees within the next five years. Sounds good — except that it's bound to undermine one of Head Start's great strengths: the use of parents



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often in their own children's centers. Over the years, these parents have continued to work in the program, keeping community ties strong.

Head Start has been a proven success both in educational achievement and in creating the social competence children need at home, at school and in their communities. This was the goal when Lady Bird Johnson created the program in 1965, at the urging of President Johnson, a former teacher, who had just begun to fight the War on Poverty.

New start for Head Start?

'Even though most children in Head Start make some educational progress, most of them still leave the program with skills and knowledge levels that are far below what we expect. ... [Head Start efforts are] working OK, [but] we want them to work better than OK. ...

Every Head Start center must prepare children to succeed by teaching the basics of learning and literacy. ... We're not going to just spend money and hope something positive happens. We're going to spend money and see results. ... We want Head Start to set higher standards for the million children it serves. No one wants Head Start to change; we just want additional focus. ... In my line of work, you see a problem, you address it.'

President George W. Bush
remarks at a Landover, Md.,
Head Start Center, July 8

Working with the Office of Economic Opportunity, the program reached out to children so disadvantaged that the only animal they could recognize was the rat — not animals in the zoo.

Mrs. Johnson traveled the country, visiting schools and day-care centers to oversee the program's growth. She found that the narrow worlds of the urban and rural poor children expanded quickly. For child after child, the program made a difference from the day it began.

Today, Head Start's success goes beyond children's needs by also working with their families. The program offers career training and employment, creating new jobs in thousands of communities. It also plays a major role in providing and coordinating local social and health services for disadvantaged families.

The President's zeal to shift authority away from Washington may seem to offer gains in flexibility and accountability — but it is misplaced in terms of child development. Long before George W. Bush was emoting about leaving no child behind, Lady Bird Johnson was actively working to move children beyond their underprivileged background toward better lives — and she succeeded.

The needs are even greater now, and Head Start is more important than ever. It should be left alone, a federal program of which we can all be justly proud.

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