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Reauthorizing Head Start: The Future Federal Role in Preschool Programs for the Poor

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Overview — *This paper describes the implications of President Bush's proposal to devolve authority for running the Head Start program to the states and to alter the organization and funding of all government early childhood programs—with the goal of improving the school readiness skills of low-income children. The administration plan to allow states to mix Head Start funds with state-funded preschool money and, if desired, child care monies to create a more uniform early childhood care system with an educational focus raises numerous questions. This paper addresses questions raised by this plan, including the potential quality of these new systems, the extent to which the programs will offer health and family support services (as Head Start now does), the capacity of states to administer large-scale preschool systems, and the prospects for adequate funding of new systems, given state budget deficits and demands for providing more child care for low-income working parents.*

Reauthorizing Head Start: The Future Federal Role in Preschool Programs for the Poor

When it comes to making sure that students achieve in school, the U.S. education system faces a daunting task. Nearly half of children entering kindergarten today are at risk for academic failure. Children who are low-income, have single parents, have parents who dropped out of high school, or are non-English-speaking most often start school with sub-standard learning skills and continue on that trajectory.

Now, more than ever, states need their low-achieving students to do better. President Bush's 2001 education reform law holds schools accountable for children to meet certain standards in math and reading by grade three. Quality preschool programs have been found to boost the academic performance of low-income children. In the fall of 2003, Head Start, the federal government's program offering education, health, food, and family services to poor three- to five-year-olds, is up for reauthorization. Bush has proposed a controversial and, by some estimates, radical plan to alter Head Start and the organization and funding of all government child care and preschool programs, with the stated intent of helping states meet higher achievement goals.

The administration's plan aims to address two problems with one solution. The first problem is that Head Start is not doing a stellar job of delivering to public schools children who are ready to learn. The program has been criticized for focusing too heavily on children's social and emotional development at the expense of math and literacy training.

The second problem is that, in the pursuit of two very different policy goals, federal and state dollars have subsidized a two-tiered system of care for low-income young children. To promote school achievement, there is the federal Head Start program, the gold standard preschool model, and a growing system of state-funded preschool programs designed largely after Head Start. To keep parents working and off of welfare, there is custodial child care; these programs spend considerably less per child and follow state rules that aim to keep children safe, not developmentally stimulated. All of these programs serve roughly the same population of low-income children whose academic performance is now the subject of growing concern.

One solution being proposed by the administration is to give states the option to integrate all government child care and preschool funds, including Head Start, to create a system with more uniform standards

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and a singular goal—school achievement. The logic is that since states are now responsible for student test scores beginning with grade three, they should be able to control Head Start funds to see if they can beat the federal track record in preparing the program's children for school. In exchange for funding flexibility, states would have to apply to all programs they are integrating standards for meeting school achievement goals and for providing some level of health, nutrition, and social services.

The proposal represents a radical departure in the way policymakers—especially Republicans—have viewed welfare-related child care for the past two decades. Years ago, Congress decided it would place no quality standards on such care to keep costs down to be able to help more low-income women leave and stay off of welfare.¹

The plan also could place the Head Start program and concept at considerable risk. The Bush proposal would allow states to use Head Start money without adhering to Head Start's classroom standards or health and family service requirements. Serving the number of children currently in government-subsidized care at Head Start's per-child expenditure would cost billions; the Bush proposal offers a \$148 million spending increase.

Head Start advocates are convinced that states would have little option but to create systems with classroom standards lower than Head Start's and few, if any, social services. States are facing severe budget deficits, and a number are cutting their preschool and child care budgets. At the same time, states are serving only a minority of families eligible for work-related child care. The administration has proposed no cost increases for custodial child care and would like to raise the work requirements in the current welfare law, a move that would further increase demand for child care. Should the proposal pass, advocates predict one of two scenarios: Head Start, in some states, would be stripped of its comprehensive nature and become exclusively a vehicle for raising test scores. Or, even worse in their view, some states would use Head Start money to fund a system of even lower-cost custodial child care.

Clearly, the proposal raises serious questions about the future of Head Start, as well as the direction of education and social services policies for poor children. For instance,

- Using Head Start money, can states develop preschool programs that better prepare children for kindergarten? Can they create these programs for an amount equal to or lower than the Head Start per-child expenditure?
- Is the level of Head Start's health, nutrition, and family services worth maintaining? Can the states achieve the kind of academic results they want with less expensive programs that offer fewer or no such services? Are health and social services offered through preschool programs worth the government investment, even if they do not lead to academic improvements?

The Bush proposal represents a radical departure in the way policymakers have viewed welfare-related child care.

- Should academic achievement be the chief measure of preschool programs' success, or should other factors, such as being well-adjusted, be considered?
- What role should the federal government have, if any, in an integrated system that offers early childhood programs to all low-income children or to preschool-aged children of all incomes?
- To what extent are states prepared to administer early childhood education systems that promote school readiness?

EARLY CHILDHOOD FUNDING

Today, 62 percent of children under age five receive care on a regular basis from people other than their parents. In 2001, combined private and government spending on child care arrangements was estimated at \$55 billion; families paid about 55 percent, 30 percent was subsidized by the federal government, and the remaining 15 percent came from state and local governments.²

States and the federal government spent an estimated \$25 billion on care for children under age five in 2001, with the federal government contributing about \$16 billion. Most of this state and federal money goes toward low-income children.³ All told, government spending is about evenly split between child care and more educationally oriented preschool programs, although more children are served by the less-expensive child care programs. It should be noted that, even with \$25 billion in funding, these various programs fall far short of serving all eligible children.

The major sources of government funding streams that pay for care for low-income children under age five (Table 1) are as follows:

Federal Support

Head Start — Head Start is the largest source of federal funds for early childhood programs for children under age five. In fiscal year (FY) 2001, when the program served about 905,000 children, federal funding for Head Start stood at \$6.2 billion. About \$558 million of the federal funds were spent on Early Head Start, serving 55,000 children under age three.⁴ Head Start is estimated to serve about 40 percent of all eligible children.⁵ (At least 90 percent of the children participating in a Head Start program must come from families with incomes at or below the poverty level—\$15,260 for a family of three in 2003).

Title I Preschool Services — Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act passed in 1965, Title I provides funds for school-based preschool and child care programs in schools in high-poverty areas. Estimates of Title I spending on preschoolers for FY 2001 range from \$200 million to over \$700 million.⁶

Today, 62 percent of children under age five receive care on a regular basis from people other than their parents.

TABLE 1
Federal Expenditures on Early Childhood Care and Education
for Children Less than Five Years of Age
(selected programs and years; shown in millions of 2002 dollars)

PROGRAM	1973	1977	1988	1992	1995	1999	2001
Head Start	1,409	1,277	1,584	2,702	3,973	4,992	6,224
Child Care and Development Fund				1,196	1,632	2,357	3,056
Social Services Block Grant	933	1,536	643	550	317	204	178
Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit	611	926	3,331	2,186	2,120	1,753	1,579
Child and Adult Care Food Program		229	570	973	1,187	1,127	1,140
Even Start				86	116	148	251
Dependent Care Assistance Plan					511	286	335
Title I	133	—	—	658	678	713	704
Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) of 1990 and Amendments of 1997-Part B				216	224	220	229
IDEA-Part C				214	358	396	427
Temporary Assistance for Needy Families						1,380	2,153
TOTAL	3,086	3,968	6,128	8,781	11,116	1,3576	1,6276

Source: W. S. Barnett and L. N. Masse, "Funding Issues for Early Childhood Care and Education Programs," in *Early Childhood Education and Care in the USA*, ed. D. Cryer (Baltimore: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., in press).

Even Start — A federal literacy program serving children ages birth to seven and their parents, Even Start provides early childhood education, parenting skills, and literacy training to families in low-income areas. In FY 2001, Even Start was funded at \$250 million, and served about 27,000 children under age five.⁷

CCDF, TANF, and SSBG — The Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF), authorized by the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996, spent \$3 billion in FY 2001 on child care for low-income children under age five (CCDF provided another \$1.6 billion for child care for older children).⁸ It provides vouchers to families or directly to child care providers to pay for family day care, center-based care, or care in a relative's home. To be eligible, children must be

in families whose incomes do not exceed 85 percent of the state's median income, in 2000 roughly \$38,000 for a family of four.⁹ However, states give priority to families just coming off of welfare. In FY 2001, another \$2.2 billion in federal welfare funds (from Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, or TANF) was spent on the same type of child care arrangements for roughly this same population of preschoolers. That year, states also spent an additional \$1.7 billion to supplement CCDF and TANF-funded care for children under age five and \$267 million, or 15 percent, of the federal Social Services Block Grant (SSBG) on child care for low-income children.¹⁰ In FY 2002 state and federal CCDF, TANF, and SSBG funds provided care for about 2.25 million low-income children—most of them under age five.¹¹

State Support

In 2000, 41 states and the District of Columbia spent a combined \$1.9 billion to fund educationally oriented preschool programs for predominantly disadvantaged children. Many of these programs are built on the Head Start model. Together they are serving about 725,000 children (Table 2).¹²

VARYING STANDARDS AND QUALITY

Head Start

Born out of the War on Poverty nearly 40 years ago, Head Start is the federal government's premier comprehensive child development program. It is designed to reduce poverty by boosting the academic and social potential of disadvantaged three- to five-year-olds. Along with educational instruction, the program delivers health and dental care, immunizations, and meals to its preschoolers while connecting children's families with social services. Special services are available for disabled enrollees, who comprise 12 percent of Head Start's population. The program is run according to federal standards and monitored by federal regional offices. Money flows directly from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to local grantees. State governments, so far, have had no part in running Head Start.

Head Start requires credentialed staff, uses enrichment curricula, and follows rules for small class size and low student-to-teacher ratios. About 25 percent of programs operate on a full-day, year-round schedule that accommodates parents with full-time jobs. The rest are on either half-day or a school-day schedule and operate eight to nine months a year. Head Start is reported to meet the needs of 42 percent of its families who require full-day, full-year care.¹³ In FY 2002, the program spent \$6,711 per child for three- to five-year-olds, a figure that blends the costs of half- and full-day programs, as well as eight-month and year-round programs.¹⁴

Head Start is the federal government's premier comprehensive child development program.

TABLE 2
State Funding Levels: State-Financed Pre-K Programs

STATE	Total State Funds Devoted to Pre-K Program	Fiscal Year	Per-Child Expenditure of State Funds on Pre-K	STATE	Total State Funds Devoted to Pre-K Program	Fiscal Year	Per-Child Expenditure of State Funds on Pre-K
Alabama	\$3,225,000	FY 02	\$4,167	Montana ^a			
Alaska ^a				Nebraska	\$1,500,000	FY 02	\$3,000
Arizona	\$10,364,000	FY 00	\$2,879	Nevada	\$3,500,000	FY 02	\$1,750
Arkansas	\$9,900,000	FY 01	\$986	New Hampshire ^a			
California	\$294,920,000	FY 02	\$2,577	New Jersey		b	b
Colorado	\$22,951,000	FY 01	\$2,536	New Mexico	\$1,800,000	FY 01	\$1,125
Connecticut	\$37,276,000	FY 02	\$5,882	New York	\$275,200,000	FY 02	\$3,796
Delaware	\$4,281,000	FY 02	\$5,078	North Carolina	\$6,450,000	FY 02 ^c	\$4,300
District of Columbia		b	b	North Dakota ^a			
Florida	\$62,001,000	FY 01	\$3,163	Ohio	\$19,506,000	FY 00	\$2,436
Georgia	\$238,000,000	FY 02	\$3,748	Oklahoma	\$56,650,000	FY 02	\$2,448
Hawaii ^a				Oregon	\$29,009,000	FY 02	\$7,845
Idaho ^a				Pennsylvania		b	b
Illinois	\$164,000,000	FY 02	\$2,982	Rhode Island		b, c	b
Indiana ^a				South Carolina	\$23,800,000	FY 01 ^c	\$1,488
Iowa	\$8,383,000	FY 01 ^c	\$2,320	South Dakota ^a			
Kansas	\$8,500,000	FY 02	\$2,263	Tennessee	\$6,000,000	FY 02	\$1,995
Kentucky	\$47,100,000	FY 02	\$2,964	Texas	\$267,000,000	FY 00	\$1,793
Louisiana	\$7,987,000	FY 01	\$2,776	Utah ^a			
Maine	\$2,209,000	FY 01	\$2,617	Vermont	\$1,386,000	FY 01	\$1,282
Maryland	\$19,000,000	FY 01	\$1,730	Virginia	\$23,500,000	FY 02	\$3,888
Massachusetts	\$104,000,000	FY 02	\$4,775	Washington	\$30,082,000	FY 02	\$4,848
Michigan	\$85,500,000	FY 02	\$3,378	West Virginia	\$17,037,000	FY 02 ^c	\$3,256
Minnesota	\$10,400,000	FY 02	\$242	Wisconsin	\$31,606,000	FY 01	\$2,506
Mississippi ^a				Wyoming ^a			
Missouri	\$14,519,000	FY 02	\$2,337	U.S.	\$1,948,542,000		\$2,547

Source: "Quality Counts 2002: Building Blocks for Success, State Efforts in Early Childhood Education," Education Week, January 2002; accessed April 8, 2003, at <http://www.edweek.org/sreports/qc02/>.

^a No state-financed pre-K program.

^b Unable to calculate because pre-K spending cannot be separated from block grant or K-12 state funding. In the case of Rhode Island, the state had a line item for \$6.2 million in FY 2001 for the Early Childhood Investment Fund. However, because of local discretion in spending, the state is unable to determine pre-K spending.

^c Iowa also spent \$15 million on Community Empowerment in FY 2002. North Carolina also spent about \$8 million of its \$210 million Smart Start FY 2001 expenditure on pre-K. South Carolina spent \$39 million on First Steps in FY 2001. Rhode Island spent \$67 million on Starting Right in FY 2001. West Virginia spent \$1 million on Educare in FY 2001.

One of the unique components of Head Start is its attention to children's families, both in the form of requirements for parental involvement and provision of family services. From the beginning, Head Start has been a two-generational program, grounded in the belief that parent involvement in a child's education is crucial and that children fare better when their parents have fewer problems and good parenting skills.

The Head Start model seeks to engender an excitement for learning and an understanding of child development in parents by encouraging them to volunteer in the classroom, attend parent workshops, and meet with Head Start staff, both at the center and during home visits. Consistent with the community action movement of the 1960s, Head Start also empowers its families by handing them local control of the programs. Program rules require that parents sit on Head Start policy councils and have a say in how programs are run. In terms of family services, Head Start employs more than 20,000 caseworkers who make home visits and help families obtain health insurance; counseling and literacy training, if needed; and other supportive services.¹⁵

Finally, Head Start has been a major training and employment program for parents. Working often as cooks, janitors, or paraprofessional aides, parents of current or former Head Start children today comprise 29 percent of the program's paid employees (66,000 in 1999).¹⁶ Most programs also offer training to parent volunteers in the health, nutrition, and early education fields, allowing them to move into paid positions.

Work-Related Child Care

CCDF and TANF child care funds allow parents to purchase care provided by relatives in their homes, by family day care providers, or by child care centers. The programs leave regulations to the states, which vary widely in their child care licensing standards. For instance, 20 states do not regulate group size for providers serving children ages four and under. In more than half the states, child care providers are not required to have training in any early childhood topics, most states do not require child care teachers to have four-year degrees, and no state requires child care providers to operate from a curriculum.¹⁷ It is difficult to estimate average per-child costs in these programs, since they serve children of varying ages and operate under different regulatory schemes. These costs are, however, considerably lower than Head Start's.

Research has found that the quality of child care for families of all incomes is mediocre (measuring factors such as caregiver behavior, group size, and staff training), with some studies finding up to one-third of child care settings to be of poor quality.¹⁸ Findings from the 1995 national Cost, Quality, and Outcomes Study of child care found that 11 percent of sites surveyed offered care that did not meet even minimum levels of quality.¹⁹

Head Start employs more than 20,000 caseworkers.

State-Funded Preschool

On the whole, states are relative newcomers to running preschool programs. Fueled by education reform goals and promising long-term results from model preschool programs for poor children, state investment in preschool has grown tenfold over the past decade. More than half (58 percent) of these programs are half-day and target children at risk of educational failure. About two-thirds of the programs use income as the main criterion, with thresholds typically set at 185 percent of poverty (about \$28,000 for a family of three)—more generous than Head Start.²⁰

Many experts predict that states will continue to expand these programs, serving more low-income four-year-olds and, eventually, preschoolers of all incomes. The need for all students to perform well, along with more practical concerns about the child care needs of working parents, has made the concept of universal preschool appealing. Now the Bush administration is counting on states' experience in this arena to run Head Start.

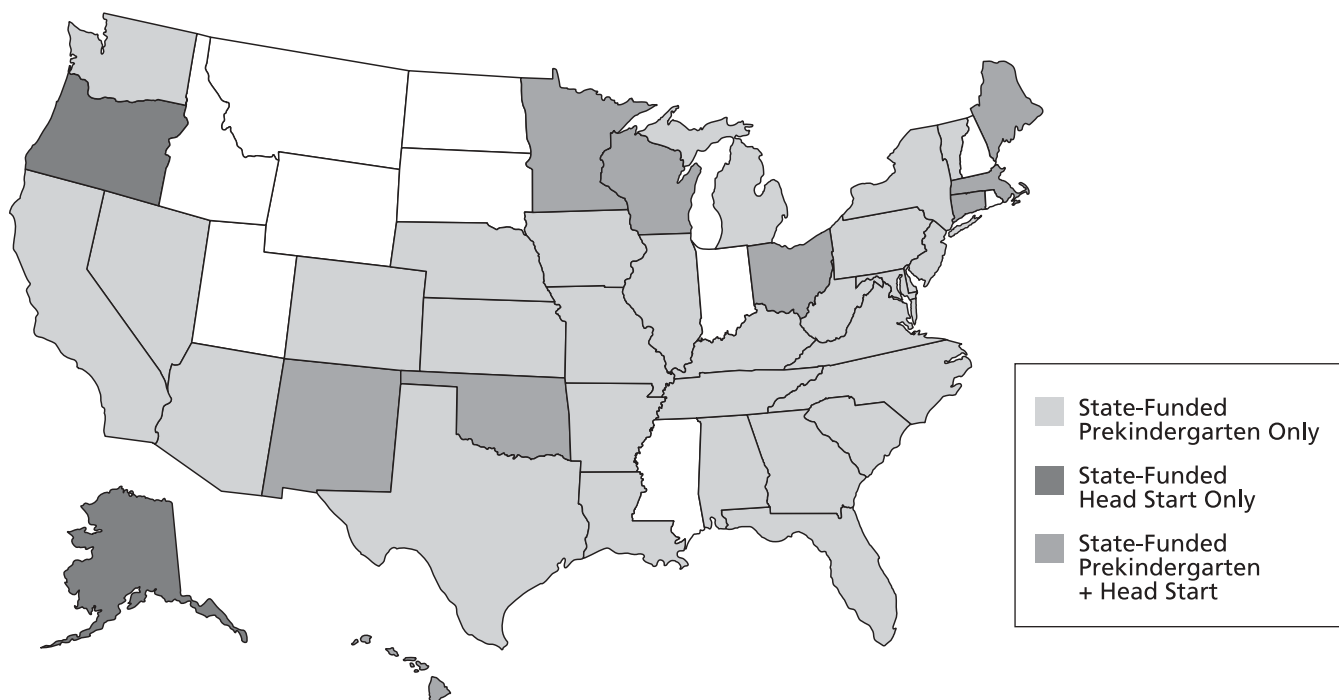
States' experience in operating preschool programs, however, varies widely. While more than 40 states offer some type of prekindergarten program, many of these programs are quite small. Eleven states (Connecticut, California, Georgia, Illinois, Massachusetts, New Jersey, New York, North Carolina, Oklahoma, Ohio, and Texas) account for more than 75 percent of all funds spent. These states provide a level of per-child funding more than four times greater than that of the ten lowest-spending states.²¹ Georgia, New York, and Oklahoma have passed legislation to serve all four-year-olds. Georgia is farthest along in implementation, serving about 70 percent of all eligible children.²²

It is commonly thought that states are running preschool systems alongside the federal Head Start program, both targeting roughly the same population. The picture is not that simple; a considerable amount of integration between the two is already occurring. For instance, two state programs invest their money only in expanding Head Start. Another eight states invest in both state-funded preschool programs and Head Start (Figure 1). And, in the 30 states that allow a range of child care providers to run their preschool programs, Head Start is the most common contractor. In addition, a number of state systems either encourage or require their programs to follow Head Start program standards.²³

Overall, however, when compared with Head Start, state-funded preschool programs in most cases approximate and, in some cases, exceed the standards that Head Start sets for classroom quality but fall short in providing health, nutrition, and family services. For instance, according to a study by Yale University researchers of 31 state programs running in 2000, most states met Head Start's standards for class size of 20 or fewer children, three states did better, and three states had no size limit. When looking at teacher-child ratios, most states met or bettered Head Start's standard of 1 to 10 for four-year-olds and 1 to 8.5 for three-year-olds; six states had no staff ratio standards.²⁴

State investment in preschool has grown tenfold over the past decade.

FIGURE 1
Distribution of State-Funded Prekindergarten and Head Start Programs, 2003



Source: Walter Gilliam, Ph.D., Yale University Child Study Center

On teacher qualifications, all state preschool programs had requirements that met or surpassed those of Head Start. Head Start requires all lead teachers to have a degree in early childhood education or, at a minimum, a two-year child development associate credential. More than half (55 percent) of state programs required their teachers to have a bachelor's degree.

In contrast, state preschool programs provide a much thinner array of health, nutrition, and family support services. The same Yale study found that less than 20 percent of state programs mandated the use of family case workers, and less than half mandated home visits. In terms of health services, physical health referrals were mandated by about 75 percent of state programs. Less than 60 percent of programs required mental health referrals, dental referrals, or the provision of nutritious meals.

Requirements for parent involvement in state programs are also lower than in Head Start. About 35 percent of states reported requiring local preschool programs to involve parents in governing or operating the

program; an additional 26 percent reported having ways to encourage parent involvement.²⁵

GREAT EXPECTATIONS

The Bush administration's early childhood proposal aims to correct a disturbing but understandable reality. Education experts estimate that disadvantaged children enter kindergarten between one and two years behind their middle-class peers in reading and math skills.²⁶ These children continue to lag behind in public school.

The administration's No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, a sweeping reform of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, requires states to develop standards for what each child should know in reading and math in grades three to eight and to begin testing them annually by the 2005–2006 school year. The law also requires that schools publicize student performance and provides options for parents to remove their children from low-performing schools.²⁷

Ensuring math and reading proficiency will be a challenge; today about 46 percent of all children entering kindergarten are either low-income, have single parents, have parents who dropped out of high school, or are non-English-speaking. Children with at least one of these risk factors are twice as likely to score in the lowest quarter of their kindergarten class in terms of literacy skills. Those with two or more of these factors are about three times as likely to score in the bottom quarter.²⁸

"What you tend to get is a railroad-tracks effect," says Nicholas Zill, vice president of Westat, a research firm that has evaluated the impacts of Head Start. "Poor kids make gains in most of the elementary schools that they go to. The gains are parallel to those of more advantaged kids, but the gap still remains. To me that suggests that, if you could further boost low-income children's literacy skills by kindergarten, you wouldn't see as much of that gap."²⁹

Long-term studies of low-income children who attended model pre-school programs show that participants can make significant gains.³⁰ To set reasonable expectations for the success of state programs, it may be valuable to examine how much of the school readiness gap these expensive, optimally designed model programs were able to close. Evidence finds that the best programs, using highly trained staff, small class sizes, low student-teacher ratios, and comprehensive social services have been able, at about twice the per-child costs of Head Start, to close about half the learning gap between poor and middle-class preschool children entering kindergarten, according to Zill.

Findings from the recent Head Start FACES (Family and Child Experiences Survey) study show that Head Start can close about a quarter of that gap in some skill areas, such as vocabulary knowledge. Results from

Disadvantaged children enter kindergarten between one and two years behind their middle-class peers in reading and math skills.

ten state preschool programs with reliable evaluations reveal school readiness results similar to that of Head Start.³¹

HEAD START PERFORMANCE

"Despite high per pupil costs, Head Start does not adequately prepare children for school in key areas of cognitive development that have been shown to be critical for later school success," according to a recent U.S. Department of Education fact sheet. Criticism of Head Start's ability to raise academic performance is not new. Since 1998, Congress has directed the program to do better.

Head Start reauthorizing language in 1998 added performance standards requiring that every child leaving the program be able to recognize a word as a unit of print, identify at least ten letters of the alphabet, and associate sounds with written words.³² In addition, starting in September 2003, DHHS has required all Head Start programs to test children at the beginning and end of the school year to measure the program's impact.

"I don't think anyone would be in favor of Head Start becoming a program that just 'teaches to the test,'" says Zill. "But when you look at where Head Start has been in the last few years, they've been bending over backwards to avoid literacy skills. The Piagetian slant has been very strong. The ironic thing is that most Head Start parents want their kids to learn those skills. It doesn't hurt to correct for some of that."³³

Head Start supporters say that the program should, and is, doing more to promote preliteracy skills. Yet, pointing to the Bush administration's intense interest in math and reading scores and the proposal to let states use Head Start money without having to provide the same level of health and support services, advocates believe the pendulum would swing too far in the other direction. And they point to a body of evidence that indicates that an overly academic emphasis would actually harm children's ability to learn.

"The early emergence of intelligence, emotional well-being, social competence, morality and literacy skills are highly inter-related and the development of mastery in each is closely intertwined with the others, particularly as they affect young children's readiness to meet the challenges of school," Jack Shonkoff, M.D., said at a conference sponsored by the National Head Start Association in January 2003. Shonkoff, dean of Brandeis University's Heller School for Social Policy and Management, was summarizing the findings of a report he co-edited, *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*.³⁴

Particularly for children who are facing economic and social stress, said Shonkoff,

any preschool curriculum that is intended to foster literacy must invest comparably in the promotion of emotional health and social development. This means that the task of teaching letter recognition must be

"Head Start does not adequately prepare children for school in key areas of cognitive development that have been shown to be critical for later school success."

embedded in a learning environment that promotes curiosity and self-direction, [and] cooperative play with other children...each of which could be undermined by excessively formalized, didactic instruction for preschoolers who are not yet developmentally ready to read.

THE PRESIDENT'S PROPOSAL

The administration's Head Start proposal is explicit in its intent:

The single most important goal of the Head Start reauthorization should be to improve Head Start and other preschool programs to ensure children are prepared to succeed in school....the President proposes to allow interested states to integrate state and federal preschool programs including Head Start into a cohesive system in exchange for meeting certain accountability requirements.³⁵

Participating states would be required to integrate state prekindergarten and Head Start monies and would have the option to blend in funding from a number of other programs, including Early Head Start, Title I preschool, the special education preschool program, and CCDF (which already includes TANF money).

States that chose to commingle funds would have to do the following: agree on a set of cognitive and behavioral skills that children should possess by kindergarten entry, create guidelines for all programs to use so that children have these skills, create a system for making all programs accountable for meeting the standards, and publicize program performance. In addition, states would be required to show that they are serving at least the same number of Head Start children as before and are not reducing the state share of funding for all integrated programs. Program standards would have to be set, but standards for classroom quality, as well as the intensity of health, nutrition, and family support services, would not have to meet the level currently required by Head Start.

Ron Haskins, White House welfare policy advisor involved in crafting the proposal, has described the premise of the plan:

The administration was trying to walk a middle path between making it attractive for states to integrate all of their preschool and child care money and making sure poor kids are prepared for school....You can't say to the states, 'spend another \$5 billion and have \$7,000 to \$8,000 per child costs for every [low-income child] in your state.' Wouldn't it be much better to give states flexibility to cover more kids with a package that's not as rich? The logic of that was very strong.³⁶

The president's early childhood proposal extends downward the main tenets of his education reform law—performance standards and public accountability. Under the plan, the expectation that disadvantaged children could read and do math proficiently by grade three would not rest wholly on the performance of preschools. Public schools, which have been accused of ill-preparing low-income students to succeed, would have to do their share. "Schools have to improve too. It has to happen

The expectation that disadvantaged children could read and do math proficiently by grade three would not rest wholly on the performance of preschools.

all the way along the continuum. The theory is that our educational systems are ineffective, especially with kids from poor families. Goals are not clear enough, measurement is not clear enough, and the public understanding of school performance is not clear enough," says Haskins.³⁷

Cost Assumptions

Critics of Head Start believe states should be given the opportunity to see if they can run programs that can deliver better academic gains for the same, or less, per-child spending than Head Start. Accordingly, the proposal was developed with two cost assumptions. First, administration officials discussed the possibility that, in a new integrated system, states could pay teachers less than Head Start's current salary rate. Provider wages account for the largest category of spending in any early childhood program. The average Head Start teacher's salary is about \$21,000 annually, compared to about \$17,000 for child care teachers.³⁸

Second, states would make some arrangements for social services, but not at the level of Head Start. Head Start spends about 20 percent of its budget on health, nutrition, and social services (health, 4.4 percent; nutrition, 4.1 percent; family support and parent involvement, 11.8 percent). Most of this money goes to support family case workers and program health and nutrition managers.³⁹ Head Start critics cite the lack of evidence linking these services to school readiness or later achievement and believe that, given the availability of Medicaid, food stamps, and WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Program for Women, Infants, and Children), these Head Start program components are duplicative. At least 90 percent of Head Start children are Medicaid-eligible and also meet the income criteria for WIC and food stamps.⁴⁰

THE ASSUMPTIONS EXAMINED

Teacher Salaries

Will lower spending on teacher salaries affect program quality? Opinion and research on this issue are divided. On the one hand, the option to pay teachers below Head Start wages seems to run counter to the recommendations of the early childhood research community. Studies have revealed that caregiver quality—whether in a center, a classroom, or a family day care home—is the most important determinant of quality in an early childhood program. Evidence supports a domino theory of correlation: higher teacher pay correlates with better provider education, which in turn relates to higher program quality, which is associated with higher student achievement in elementary school.⁴¹ The National Research Council has recommended that all early childhood teachers have a bachelor's degree in early childhood education.

During the Head Start reauthorization debates in 1998, in demanding better program performance to boost enrollees' math and literacy skills,

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Congress mandated a better-educated teacher workforce. In 1997, 34 percent of teachers had a two-year degree or better. Congress required that by September 2003 half of Head Start teachers have at least a two-year degree. The Head Start Bureau recently announced it had achieved that goal.⁴²

On the other hand, not all agree with the National Research Council recommendation. Head Start leaders believe they can deliver quality programs without bachelor's requirements. In fact, the Head Start FACES study found no difference in classroom quality between teachers with two-year degrees and those with four-year degrees.⁴³ At the same time, many experts say that Head Start has failed to produce the academic results of model programs because their teachers are not as well educated. It is unknown whether states could maintain the cognitive gains achieved by even Head Start in a system that offered lowered wages.

Health, Nutrition, and Family Services

While research suggests that addressing the health and family needs of low-income children will make them better learners, no direct connection has been established. So far, studies of model preschool programs, as well as Head Start, have not been designed to isolate the effects of the non-educational support services on school readiness or on later life success. Nor have they shed any light on the question of what level of service intensity makes a difference.

"We can't answer those questions definitively from the data we have, but that doesn't mean that we can't draw reasonable inferences from the extensive body of knowledge that we do have about child development," says Shonkoff. He comments that public policy is influenced by three types of information—established knowledge [conclusive studies], reasonable hypotheses based on established knowledge, and irresponsible assertions. "If we counted on established knowledge alone, we wouldn't have enough information to make most policy decisions. Thus, reasonable hypotheses grounded in science provide guidance when all of the answers are not yet in." The belief that comprehensive services help many disadvantaged children to do better in school "is a reasonable conclusion based on the knowledge we have."⁴⁴

Apart from school achievement, studies show that family support, nutrition, and particularly health benefits delivered through Head Start convey other benefits. With regard to family support and parent involvement, several studies have found that communities that house Head Start programs have greater parent involvement in the local schools and infusion of money into the local economy, particularly through jobs that Head Start provides.⁴⁵

With respect to Head Start's nutrition component, studies have found that Head Start meals provide up to 50 percent of nutrients recommended

Head Start leaders believe they can deliver quality programs without bachelor's requirements.

for preschool children and that Head Start children take in higher amounts of protein, calories, and other essential nutrients than children with similar backgrounds who do not attend Head Start.⁴⁶ The extent to which Head Start's nutritional component overlaps with WIC and food stamps is unknown, but data suggest that not all the food needs of low-income children are being met through WIC and food stamps. In a 2001 Department of Agriculture study of the food needs of families below 185 percent of poverty (WIC income criteria), over one-third reported that their children lacked sufficient food at some point during the previous year without being hungry; 1.5 percent reported their children were hungry.⁴⁷

With regard to health services, studies show that Head Start children are more likely to receive physical and dental check-ups and receive follow-up care than other low-income children. Head Start performance standards require that all enrolled children receive physical, dental, and mental health screenings and that any problems identified during a check-up are treated. The programs hire health coordinators—oftentimes nurses—to meet these goals. Within the first three months of the school year these coordinators must find out whether each child has a usual source of care and is current with periodical health screenings. If there is no usual source of care, staff work with families to find one, to enroll children in a public health insurance program, to help arrange appointments, and to take them to the doctor, if need be.

Each child is also checked for any developmental problems. Within 45 days of the school year health staff are required to screen children for any vision, hearing, behavior, language, social, cognitive and emotional problems.⁴⁸

Indeed, because most Head Start children (84 percent) have some form of health insurance coverage, most of Head Start's health dollar goes to staff salaries to coordinate care, not to provide it. Head Start is the payer of last resort for children with no coverage. In 2001, 67 percent of program children were enrolled in either Medicaid or the State Child Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), 16 percent were privately insured, and another 16 percent were uninsured.⁴⁹

Yet, more than 30 national studies included in Head Start's 1985 meta-analysis of research showed that Head Start children received more health and dental screens than their non-Head Start peers. While at least some of these differences could be because non-Head Start children lacked insurance (Medicaid eligibility in 1985 was more restrictive and did not include all Head Start-eligibles), more recent government findings suggest that being eligible or enrolled in Medicaid does not guarantee access to care.⁵⁰

In 2001, 87 percent of Head Start children received health screens. One-fourth of children screened needed treatment, and 88 percent of those children received it. By comparison—although Medicaid's Early and Periodic Screening, Detection and Treatment (EPSDT) program requires

Head Start children are more likely to receive physical and dental check-ups and receive follow-up care than other low-income children.

that all enrolled children receive comprehensive health check-ups and treatment for any detected ailments—a 1997 study of the DHHS inspector general found that 60 percent of children in Medicaid managed care received no EPSDT screens.⁵¹ In addition, the General Accounting Office (GAO) reports that, according to the National Health Law Program, at least 28 states have been sued since 1995 for failing to provide required access to EPSDT services.⁵²

Another DHHS study found that in 1996, 31 percent of two-year-olds enrolled in fee-for-service Medicaid since birth had no well-child visit. Another 35 percent had only one or two visits. Only 1 percent of children had at least nine well-child exams, the number of screenings the American Academy of Pediatrics recommends by age two.⁵³

Comparisons of dental screening rates are also striking. For instance, in 2001, 81 percent of Head Start children had a dental exam. Nearly 30 percent of children screened needed care, and 77 percent of them received it. Meanwhile, a 2000 GAO report found that about 21 percent of two- to five-year olds below the poverty line received a dental screening.⁵⁴ Other research has found that Head Start children were more likely than middle-income preschoolers to see a dentist.⁵⁵ Dental caries is the single largest health problem among children: it is five times more prevalent than asthma, according to the Children's Dental Health Project.⁵⁶

(As a cautionary note, data collected by the Head Start Bureau does not lend itself to perfect comparisons of health care utilization rates among low-income children in general. The populations studied are not identical. Also, researchers note, Head Start health care rates may be higher due to selection bias, that is, Head Start parents may be more motivated than other low-income parents to get their children health care, since they were motivated enough to enroll their children in Head Start.)

FISCAL REALITIES

As described above, a number of states are committed to the Head Start model, either through funding Head Start with state money or imposing Head Start-like standards on state programs. But funding a new early childhood system at the per-child spending level of Head Start will likely pose a challenge for states interested in doing so. Given the estimated costs, the fiscal woes of states, and the pressure to provide child care for more low-income children, advocates fear that any integrated system would be funded at quality levels closer to that of custodial care than of Head Start.

The Bush administration's proposal would offer \$148 million more in Head Start funding. It would also allow states to access an already existing \$165 million in Head Start technical assistance funds to reconstruct their systems.

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Meanwhile, states are in a poor position, at least in the short term, to spend more per child on early childhood programs. In FY 2003, states have to close \$50 billion in budget deficits.⁵⁷ In 2002, to help meet these shortfalls, 13 states cut child care spending, according to a report released in March by the Children's Defense Fund.⁵⁸ Even before the mounting deficits, states were having problems meeting the demand for child care. In 2000, CCDF and TANF were estimated to serve only one in seven eligible children; that year 17 states had waiting lists for child care for low-income children. In addition, for FY 2003, the administration has proposed expanding work requirements for welfare recipients, a move the Congressional Budget Office estimates would generate at least \$8 billion in child care costs over five years. The president's welfare proposal offers no increases in child care funding.⁵⁹

STATE ADMINISTRATION

Bush's proposal would give states responsibility for running an integrated early childhood system that combined federal and state funds. This would entail setting program standards and overseeing quality. While 42 states now have some experience in this arena, some are concerned that only a handful of states are equal to the task. "Probably not many people in the federal government have a sense of states' infrastructure [for early childhood administration]," says Anne Mitchell, a researcher who studies state prekindergarten systems.

Programs in most states are not state-wide, and their size varies widely. In 1999, the seven states with the largest programs were serving between 5 percent and 40 percent of all preschool-aged children.⁶⁰ In addition, many states have few or no program guidelines, allowing local providers to decide what services and curricula to provide. About half of states require or request programs to meet acknowledged standards for high quality (either Head Start performance standards or guidelines put out by the National Association for the Education of Young Children). About 20 percent of states allowed their preschool programs to follow their state's child care licensing standards, most of which aim for child safety, not development. In addition, 28 percent of states had no in-service training requirements for teachers, and 16 percent offered no technical assistance to local programs.⁶¹

A LOOK AHEAD

In the interest of school readiness, state investment in preschool programs for low-income children is mounting, and many predict that states, over time, will assume the federal government's historic role of supporting the educational needs of low-income children. What also appears to be developing is a growing state interest in providing preschool experiences for all children, regardless of income. Georgia now subsidizes a voluntary preschool system for all four-year olds; New

State investment in preschool programs for low-income children is mounting.

York and Oklahoma have passed similar legislation. Other states, including California, are giving universal prekindergarten serious thought, and some national foundations have invested in promoting the concept. The question is, what is the role of Head Start or, more generally, of the federal government in a system in which states offer preschool programs to all low-income children or to children of all incomes? The range of views is wide.

Good Start, Grow Smart, the Bush administration's early childhood proposal, suggests that, when it comes to low-income preschoolers, the federal government should help states, at least in the short term, with financing (in the form of Head Start dollars) but allow them to set standards for and administer the programs, as they do with kindergarten through twelfth-grade education. The federal government could also take the lead in funding research on what constitutes effective early childhood education and providing that information to the public.

Early childhood experts have described variations on the theme of a stronger federal role. "If states reached a point where they were going to serve all three- and four-year olds, theoretically, Head Start could be a program that provides comprehensive services for the lowest-income children. But we're nowhere near a discussion like that," says Helen Blank, head of the Children's Defense Fund child care division.⁶²

Others believe that Head Start should continue to provide comprehensive services for low-income children, as well as move to serve younger children. "I think the future of Head Start is in serving children under [age] three," says Joan Lombardi, head of child care during the Clinton administration. Lombardi notes that children entering Head Start are already behind their more advantaged peers, and interventions to boost the functioning of infants and toddlers have proved effective.⁶³ The Early Head Start program, begun by Head Start in 1994, is such an effort. Recent evaluations of this program found that it led to improved parent-child interactions, reduced family stress, and higher infant and toddler developmental achievement.⁶⁴

Amy Wilkins, director of the Trust for Early Education, a Washington-based information and advocacy group, says that Head Start could be one of a number of programs serving low-income children in a universal preschool system that fell under a uniform set of standards for classroom quality and offered parents a choice of programs. In such a system, the most disadvantaged children would get intensive health, nutrition, and family support services, funded by some level of government. Services would be less intensive as family income rises. "In a system like that, Head Start could be a stand-alone [program], but it doesn't have to be."⁶⁵

CONCLUSION

The debate over government early childhood policy begins with evidence that no one refutes: quality preschool programs can raise the math

and literacy skills of poor children by the time they enter kindergarten. The consensus over where to go from there deteriorates. Policymakers differ over the goals of early childhood programs (school readiness versus overall child development). Those who want an emphasis on school readiness question whether the intensity of social support services that Head Start provides is needed to achieve their goal, or whether these services produce any other meaningful benefits. Children's advocates resent the litmus test, saying it is fundamentally logical to assume that providing health care, nutrition, and family support will help children learn better. Moreover, they hold, even if these services produce no academic benefits, their other impacts make them worth the investment.

Then there is the future of Head Start. Advocates acknowledge the deficits in Head Start children's school readiness. But, they say, the program—through congressional and administrative requirements for higher teacher qualifications, more teacher training, and new academic performance standards—is addressing these problems and does not need to be run by the states without any protections for program standards. A number of recent newspaper articles and editorials indicate that many in the public agree.

More generally, the extent of federal involvement in standard setting, oversight, and funding is also up for debate. Proponents of the administration plan want to hand the responsibility of running preschool programs for low-income children, including Head Start, to the states. States, they say, would have an easier time coordinating funding and program goals and would have the chance to make Head Start more cost-effective. And states appear to be moving in the direction of developing preschool systems anyway. However, while some children's advocates believe that states will eventually assume responsibility for serving four-year-olds, most believe that states are not yet sophisticated enough to handle the assignment.

Finally, the question of funding looms large. Given the administration's modest plans for funding Head Start and child care and pressures for states to expand child care funding for the working poor, at what level of quality and comprehensiveness can the state systems be expected to operate?

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