

Illinois Community Action Association 2003 Head Start Reauthorization Issues

Since 1965, Head Start has successfully prepared children living in poverty for school. In fact, the program has been so successful that Head Start parents gave the program the highest score of any government agency in a 1999 American Customer Satisfaction Index survey. Yet despite this and other documented successes, the current administration is intent on making dramatic changes to the Head Start program. These sweeping changes include: Refocusing Head Start on school readiness; Improving teacher training; Mandating a system to assess the success of Head Start programs in preparing children for school; and Giving Governors options to request a Head Start Block Grant in eight states

ICAA agrees that the Head Start can and should be improved, but many of these changes are already taking place. Studies show that Head Start works because it has always embraced progressive changes to help better prepare low-income children for school. For example, a current 36 site data collection pilot project is being conducted to increase the ability to track baseline progress of Head Start children and to standardize data collection for all Head Start programs. This data collection program is scheduled to go nationwide in the fall of 2003.

As a result of these proposed changes, ICAA has taken the following positions on Head Start reauthorization:

1. The Head Start Program should remain a federal child development program administered by the Department of Health and Human Services.

Children born into families living in poverty start life at a marked disadvantage to their peers in middle-income and wealthy families. Many times they do not have the richness of books in the home, proper nutrition, access to a continuum of health services, but they do have a wide array of at-risk factors encountered by low-income families. Head Start addresses these issues by improving the value of the early learning experience. This is done by teaching things beyond the standard curriculum such as how to properly brush your teeth, exhibit table manners, maintain health and dental check-ups, and hygiene information. Head Start's focus on families and fighting poverty in a comprehensive manner has led to the program's success in getting children ready for school, improving their literacy and

numeric skills, and giving their parents the skills needed to become their child's first and best teacher.

The proposed transfer of Head Start to the Department of Education (which has subsequently been dropped from the proposal) holds no guarantee that essential program components such as comprehensive child development services, career development of community residents, extended day services to meet the needs of working parents and the parental involvement component of Head Start will be sustained.

In addition, there is no guarantee that the direct national-to-local flexibility that now exists would be maintained if the block grant option allows responsibility for operation of the program is transferred to states. Currently there is a direct relationship between the federal Department of Health and Human Services and local Head Start programs. Offering states block grants to coordinate preschool programs with Head Start will only build in an additional layer of unnecessary bureaucracy. This new bureaucracy could potentially lessen local involvement and control of Head Start programs. Currently local involvement includes connecting parents with educational and job training programs, screening children for disease and involving parents in hiring and policy making decisions. This type of local involvement has been a cornerstone of Head Start's success. This flexibility must continue in Head Start Reauthorization.

It is also very important to consider the budget pressures if states were to request and receive Head Start resources as a block grant. This would divert resources from serving children to creating an additional level of state government bureaucracy. When introduced, this diversion of resources could have happened in all 50 states, but was reduced to an eight state demonstration in the U. S. House. In addition, this block grant provision would begin a process of folding Head Start into the existing public school system that could lead to the end of Head Start. This would be especially problematic at this time when Illinois (as well as most other states) is trying to close a \$5 billion budget deficit.

2. Head Start funding should be increased in order to improve the service quality and to expand the program so that all eligible children are given the opportunity to participate.

According to the HHS - Head Start Bureau, only 40 percent of the children eligible for the Head Start program are able to participate due to a lack of funding. Without adequate resources, Head Start will not be able to expand its services nor improve the quality of the program. Considering the documented effectiveness of Head Start, there is justifiable reason to increase funding to ensure that additional poor children can receive these services.

Reauthorization should also consider a more adaptable method for using the federal poverty line in determining Head Start eligibility. While other means-tested federal

programs allow families with incomes up to 185 percent of the poverty line to qualify for services, the Head Start program continues to operate at 100 percent of the poverty line in determining income eligibility. Illinois Head Start programs are increasingly identifying families who meet all the program's at-risk criteria for enrollment except for being slightly above the income guideline. This trend can be attributed to the welfare reform efforts requiring more stringent work requirements. In cases where Head Start programs have the capacity to increase enrollment, there should be consideration for increasing the income eligibility to 125 percent of poverty.

3. Allow all complying Head Start programs to serve children from birth through age 5 when community assessment demonstrates need.

New and existing early brain research points to the absolute necessity of providing children at the youngest possible age with the cognitive and social stimuli necessary to ensure optimum development. The Head Start program was one of the first national programs to formalize and assess a comprehensive program with performance standards for infants and toddlers. That program is known as Early Head Start (EHS). Many Head Start programs have applied for and been approved as EHS grantees. However, there is still an increasing need for services to infants and toddlers, and the law limits funding for EHS. If all Head Start programs showing the need and ability to serve children birth to compulsory school age were able to do so through regular grant funding, expansion funding, and by other non-federal monies, not only would programs better demonstrate a comprehensive approach to community needs, there would be no administrative overlap in funding cycles, oversight, and on-site reviews.

4. Reduce the 20 percent match and/or establishing an automatic hardship waiver.

Illinois Head Start programs are concerned as to the viability of the 20 percent local matching requirement. The Secretary, under authority of law, has the discretion in particular situations to reduce the required match on an annual basis. Community and in-kind services (such as volunteer services from parents) that have helped to make up the match in the past have significantly decreased due to welfare reform's increased work mandates. For these reasons, Congress should consider eliminating or at least reducing the 20 percent match during reauthorization.

One option that would be helpful in this regard is that the 20 percent rule should only apply to base funding. It should not be applied to any additional contributions that are received throughout the program year. In its current form, this rule makes program planning and fundraising unnecessarily burdensome for the program's operations at the local level.