

PREPARED STATEMENT OF AMY WILKINS

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for inviting me to speak today. I am honored to join today's panel to discuss the reauthorization of Head Start.

My name is Amy Wilkins. I am the Executive Director of the Trust for Early Education (TEE). TEE was established in 2002 to promote high quality, voluntary pre-kindergarten programs for all 3- and 4-year-olds.

While the school readiness problem is most acute for low-income children and children of color, large percentages of middle income and white children are entering school without the skills they need to do their best. In fact, we know that children who recognize their letters before entering kindergarten become stronger readers sooner than children who do not. We also know that about one-quarter of white children and about one-third of middle class children enter kindergarten without knowing their letters. More startling, perhaps, is data published last Fall by the Economic Policy Institute, which indicates that the math and reading skill levels of children from families in the middle socio-economic status (SES) quintile are closer to the skill levels of children in the lowest SES quintile—our very poorest children—than they are to the skill levels of children in the highest SES quintile.

The global economy is demanding ever higher levels of skill and knowledge from all of our citizens. Given this, TEE believes we must quickly and comprehensively address the school readiness issue faced by this nation and that the most effective response to the issue is high quality pre-kindergarten for all.

TEE works at both the State and Federal levels because we believe that it is neither possible nor desirable to build the system that will provide access to high quality pre-kindergarten to all children without strong coordination between Federal and State policies and funding.

In the last 13 months, TEE has distributed over \$3 million in grants to advocates in nine States (Illinois, New York, New Jersey, Massachusetts, Pennsylvania, Arkansas, Wisconsin, North Carolina and Oklahoma) to help them advance the cause of high quality pre-kindergarten at the State level.

Our work at the Federal level has convinced us there is not only the need to coordinate Federal policy with State policy more closely, but also a need to better co-

ordinate policy between Federal programs and agencies. As you work on reauthorizing Head Start, it is critical that you coordinate these efforts with the reauthorization of the Higher Education Act, which will soon come before you.

For more than three decades, Head Start has provided pre-kindergarten for children living in poverty. The program has, without question, achieved a great deal of success. The Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) data from both 1999–98 and 2000–2001 suggest that a year of Head Start boosts children’s knowledge and skills, and narrows the school entry skills gap between them and more affluent children.

Head Start has provided millions of our most vulnerable children a foundation of integrated health, nutrition, academic and family support services. Nonetheless, when Head Start children enter kindergarten, a gap remains.

Our paramount goal for this reauthorization of Head Start should be to improve Head Start in order to narrow the gap even more. As this Committee considers the many issues which will arise during this reauthorization we urge you to evaluate each policy choice with this goal in mind. We ask you to ask yourselves this question: “Is this policy likely to help narrow the school readiness gap?”

The President and many members of this Committee have noted that narrowing the gap will require that Head Start do more to promote strong language and literacy skills in the children it serves. We agree, but this still begs the question how best to do this. TEE believes that the single most important step that this Committee can take in this reauthorization to boost early literacy skills of Head Start children is to ensure that every Head Start classroom is staffed by a lead teacher who has at least a bachelor’s degree and specialized training in early education. In fact, we believe that all the other steps that you may take to narrow the gap and to promote early literacy will amount to little without an increase in the percentage of well-educated Head Start teachers.

As important as it is for Head Start to do more to enhance the intellectual growth of children, it cannot be asked to do so by cutting back on other critical services that have demonstrable, positive impacts on school readiness. The health, nutrition, and family support services that Head Start provides are the foundation of its success and must not be compromised. The truism that children who are hungry or sick cannot learn has and should continue to guide Head Start policy. It is equally true that well-fed, healthy children who are not well taught cannot learn either. We cannot sacrifice one aspect of children’s development to promote another.

#### BETTER QUALIFIED TEACHERS LEAD TO BETTER OUTCOMES FOR STUDENTS

Well-educated teachers improve the quality of pre-kindergarten programs by building strong academic skills in children and promoting positive social and emotional development. Research indicates that literate, engaged, and attentive teachers—teachers with bachelor’s degrees—help children learn and develop the knowledge and skills they need to do well in kindergarten and beyond.

Strong reading skills are the foundation for success in school and in life. Vocabulary is a critical building block for later literacy. Research shows that low-income 3-year-olds have vocabularies that are only about half the size of vocabularies of 3-year-olds living in our most affluent families. As a result, without powerful interventions to help build their vocabularies, low-income children have more difficulty than their more fortunate peers mastering basic reading skills.

Research has established a clear link between the number and complexity of words spoken by adults—including parents and teachers—and the number and complexity of words spoken by children. When children are exposed to larger vocabularies and more complex speech, they respond with greater comprehension and more complex speech themselves (Huttenlocher, Vasilyeva, Cymerman, and Levine, 2002). It would seem then, that in order to boost vocabularies—and thereby lay the foundation for other early reading skills—we must provide Head Start children with highly literate teachers who themselves have rich and robust vocabularies.

An analysis by the Educational Testing Service (ETS) suggests that adults with bachelor’s degrees have higher literacy levels than do adults with less formal education. Working with the data from The National Adult Literacy Survey, ETS finds that adults with only associate’s degrees are twice as likely as those with bachelor’s degrees to have literacy skills below the “competent” level. Therefore, requiring that Head Start teachers have bachelor’s degrees—not just associate’s degrees—will increase the chances that children in the program will experience richer, more complex speech, and be better able to build stronger vocabularies that are positively associated with later reading success.

The logic of this notion is supported by the findings of The National Child Care Staffing Study, which concluded that teachers with more formal education were

more sensitive than teachers with less formal education, and that children with more sensitive teachers received higher language scores than did children in classrooms with less educated teachers (Howes, Phillips & Whitebook 1992; Whitebook et al., 1990).

But well-educated teachers do more than simply build the framework for later literacy. They support strong social and emotional development in the children they teach. Three of the largest and most reliable studies of early education and care—The Cost Quality and Outcomes Study, The Florida Quality Improvement Study, and The National Child Care Staffing Study—each found very strong evidence of the positive impacts that teachers with bachelor's degrees have on overall classroom quality. These studies suggest that teachers with bachelor's degrees are:

- Less harsh, critical and punitive than teachers with less formal education;
- Less detached from their students than teachers without degrees; and
- More engaged with and attentive to their students than teachers with less formal education.

The studies also found that children in classrooms with teachers with bachelor's degrees engaged in more creative peer play than did children in classrooms with teachers with less formal education. Moreover, the studies demonstrated that children in classrooms with teachers with more formal education spent less time in "aimless wondering" than did children in classrooms with teachers with less formal education.

The findings of all of these studies are supported by what we know happens in good pre-kindergarten programs. The most powerful and renowned early childhood education programs for low-income children—the programs we all reference when extolling the benefits of pre-kindergarten for low-income children—such as the Perry Preschool Program, the Chicago Parent Child Parent Centers, and the Abecedarian Preschool Program are staffed by teachers with at least 4-year degrees. Children participating in these programs:

- Enter school better prepared to learn;
- Are less likely to be retained in grade;
- Are less likely to be placed in special education; and
- Are more likely to graduate from high school than their peers who have not had the benefit of such high quality programs.

If we want the same results from Head Start, we must staff Head Start with the same caliber of teachers employed by these exemplary programs.

Given all of the evidence suggesting that positive outcomes for children are strongly linked to the presence of well-educated teachers, it should come as no surprise that many of the most respected research institutions in the field of early childhood education, including: the National Research Council of the National Academy of Sciences, the National Institute for Early Education Research, the Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute and the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University, support the notion of increasing the percentage of teachers with bachelor's degrees in the Head Start program.

Staffing pre-kindergarten programs for low-income children with well-educated teachers is not a revolutionary policy. In fact, many States are ahead of the Federal Government in this area. Half of the States with pre-kindergarten programs already require that all of their teachers have 4-year college degrees. In an area as critical as the qualifications of the program's teaching force, Head Start cannot now lag behind the State programs that were established to emulate it.

#### WE CAN GET THERE

Even with solid research pointing to the need to put a teacher with a bachelor's degree in every Head Start classroom, there are some who say it cannot be done. They insist that asking the program to substantially ratchet up the quality of its teaching force may be desirable, but that it is unrealistic to ask for so great an improvement. TEE believes it can—with will, innovation, coordination and resources—be done. Consider the recent success of New Jersey.

In 1998, the New Jersey State Supreme Court ruled on a school finance equity case known as *Abbott v. Burke*. Part of the Court's decision required the State to establish high quality pre-kindergarten programs in the 30 highest poverty school districts in the State. The court later required that each of these programs be staffed by lead teachers with bachelor's degrees within 4 years. At the time of the court order about 35 percent of teachers in the pre-kindergarten programs in Abbott districts held bachelor's degrees. Today, about 80 percent of the teachers in these programs hold 4-year degrees and State certification. Kindergarten and first-grade teachers in the Abbott districts are already reporting that children are coming into their classrooms better prepared than in the past.

In order to raise teacher qualifications in accordance with the court order, the State created and executed a plan that included:

- Realistic but ambitious timelines;
- A strengthened and improved teacher education infrastructure;
- Scholarships, release time, and substitutes for teachers; and
- Improved teacher compensation and attempts to reach salary parity with kindergarten teachers.

Today, TEE and the Schumann Fund for New Jersey are releasing a paper on what it took for the State of New Jersey to meet the court mandate. The New Jersey experience provides important lessons that I hope this Committee will consider.

Not all of the steps that New Jersey has taken can be addressed through the Head Start bill, but this Committee also has jurisdiction over the approaching reauthorization of the Higher Education Act. By coordinating policy between the two bills and using the resources of Head Start and Titles II, III and IV of the Higher Education Act, the Committee can lay the foundation of a strong system that will make it possible not only for every Head Start classroom to have a lead teacher with a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early education by 2011—but also to improve the qualifications of teachers working in all settings that serve 3- and 4-year-old children.

#### THE TRUST FOR EARLY EDUCATION RECOMMENDATIONS

We strongly urge this Committee to require all Head Start teachers have bachelor's degrees with specialized training in early education within 8 years. The House's action on this issue, while significant and laudable, is limited. If, as a national average, only half of the teachers in Head Start are required to have a bachelor's degree, it is very possible that not a single State represented on this Committee would see any improvement in the number of teachers with bachelor's degrees.

While TEE is pleased that the House Committee has recognized the need to increase the percentage of well-educated teachers in Head Start, we call on the Senate to build on and expand on the work of the Education and Workforce Committee by both increasing the percentage of teachers with bachelor's degrees in Head Start classrooms beyond the level established in the House bill and making the resources available to educate, attract and retain those teachers.

TEE has estimated the cost of providing Head Start teachers with scholarships and other supports needed to earn bachelor's degrees at about \$1 billion. We have estimated the cost of appropriate increases in Head Start teacher salaries at about \$6 billion over 8 years, with about \$3 billion needed by the end of this reauthorization to put the program on a solid path to reach the final goal. Some may balk at these costs; however, we believe that they are an indispensable investment in better school readiness outcomes for Head Start children.

In addition, TEE supports several other changes to the Head Start law to enhance the quality of the teaching force, including:

- Adding a requirement for annual center-by-center public reporting on the educational attainment of all teachers. This will help parents, the public, and Congress better monitor progress toward the important teacher education goal established by this bill.
- Amending the existing sections of the law which outline requirements for Head Start programs' salary scales to require that they relate directly to the level of teachers' formal education. It is entirely reasonable for the Federal Government to demand higher levels of formal education for Head Start teachers. However, as we demand more education from them we must compensate them at higher levels.

If we require that Head Start teachers have bachelor's degrees and specialized training in early education, we will be requiring that they meet essentially the same requirements that most States have established for their kindergarten teachers. As it currently stands, Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees earn only half as much as public school kindergarten teachers. Without improved wages, Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees will not stay in Head Start programs. In New Jersey, which experienced mixed success in raising compensation for degreed teachers, 17 Head Start centers lost 125 certified teachers in 3 years. Such high turnover will not only limit Head Start's ability to improve quality, but high turnover will also be detrimental to children's social and emotional development which depends, at least in part, on their ability to build long term trusting relationships with their teachers. Raising Head Start teacher salaries so that they are commensurate with those of kindergarten teachers with similar credentials will encourage the best teachers to stay in Head Start and will help attract a new, highly educated workforce of potential teachers for Head Start.

The issue here, however, is more than an issue of increased investment; it is also a question of coordinated policy between Federal programs. This Committee will undoubtedly spend a great deal of time discussing how Head Start programs can be coordinated with State pre-kindergarten programs. The Trust for Early Education is eager to participate in these discussions in order to help create a system that is dedicated to providing access to high quality pre-kindergarten to all children. But we would urge you to remember the need for coordination between Federal programs as well. The New Jersey success story is largely a story of coordinated effort. When this Committee takes up the Higher Education Act we recommend that you:

- Expand the use of Title II funds to cover the improvement, expansion and creation of post-secondary education programs for preparation of pre-kindergarten teachers as well as K-12 teachers as the House did in H.R. 2211;
- Expand the provision of Title II which provides loan forgiveness to K-12 teachers working in high-poverty schools to include teachers in Head Start and other pre-kindergarten programs serving low-income children.
- Attend to student aid policy that may make it difficult for Head Start teachers and other working adults to balance the demands of work, family and post-secondary education; and
- Encourage greater cooperation between 2- and 4-year colleges around the transfer of course credits.

#### CONCLUSION

Head Start has been successful for so long because it has evolved and incorporated the best research into its programs and practices. The single best way to continue to improve the quality of Head Start is to ensure that teachers with a bachelor's degree and specialized training in early education lead each and every Head Start classroom. It is time to follow the best models and give Head Start children the best chance for success.

Thank you for allowing me this opportunity to testify.