

STATEMENT BY

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Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I appreciate the opportunity to testify before you today on the President's plan to strengthen Head Start and work to ensure that every child has the opportunity to enter school ready to learn. I want to take advantage of this opportunity to discuss the President's Head Start reauthorization proposal, focusing attention on the provision allowing interested states to coordinate preschool programs—including Head Start—to better meet the needs of children and their families.

The Head Start Program

Let me begin by saying a few words about the Head Start program and its impact on early care and education throughout the country.

As you know, Head Start was launched in 1965 as an eight-week summer program for low-income children. Its purpose was to prepare these children for success in school and life, through participation in a comprehensive program that included education, health, nutrition, social services, and parent involvement. With strong bipartisan support, Head Start has expanded over the past four decades and now serves over 900,000 children and families each year.

In addition to increasing the number of children served, the Head Start program itself has evolved over time to better meet the changing needs of children and families. To give you just a few examples: Head Start began as a center-based program, where children came to the center for services. We now offer home-based and mixed program options as well. Head Start began as a half-day program. Today, more than 230,000 children receive full-day services to help meet many families' need for full-time care. And Head Start has been expanded to include services to pregnant women, infants, and toddlers through the Early Head Start program

In addition to its own evolution, the Head Start program has triggered changes in early care and education across the country. More than 40 states and the District of Columbia now have early childhood programs of their own—many modeled on Head Start. Numerous states are revising their standards for child care and preschool programs. And as research has demonstrated the importance of providing comprehensive services, states now are involved in trying to integrate a multitude of other programs aimed at young children and their families—from Temporary Assistance to Needy Families, to the Children’s Health Insurance Program and Medicaid, to special education, disabilities screening, and assessments—and the list goes on.

Federal and state governments currently spend some \$23 billion each year for child care and preschool education—and much, much more than that when you consider the other health, nutrition, and welfare-related programs that serve these same children and families. Never has there been such a clear commitment on the part of federal and state governments to enhance the well-being of children and families. Never have we known so much about what children need for healthy growth and development. Never have so many programs been focused on meeting these needs of our most vulnerable citizens.

And, as you might expect, there is good news and not-so-good news in all of this.

The good news is that there are more resources currently available for low-income children and families than at any other time in our nation’s history. We also have a wealth of research about a child’s development and what type of activities enhance that development.

The not-so-good news is that Head Start does an okay job, but it does not do a terrific job. Children in Head Start enter school further ahead than other economically disadvantaged children. But unfortunately – even after 30 years – Head Start children do not enter school at the same level as more economically advantaged children. This Administration does not support a status quo that is not helping America's most vulnerable children.

Additionally, we are seeing an alarming lack of coordination among many of the programs and services designed to meet the needs of this population. This has resulted in large gaps and patchy areas in our safety net, to the detriment of young children and their families.

In some places, state pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs are located in the same community and one or both programs are under-enrolled and are competing for the same children and families. Meanwhile, there are other communities where large numbers of children remain unserved by either state pre-kindergarten or Head Start. To further complicate this issue, when services in the early childhood years are not fully coordinated, children can end up in three different settings within a single day: early childhood special education services, Head Start, and child care.

The President's Proposal

To strengthen the Head Start program, improve services to low-income children, and promote the coordination and integration of comprehensive early care and education services, President Bush is asking Congress to include in the reauthorization of the Head Start Act a provision that will allow interested states to include Head Start in their preschool plans.

Under the President's proposal, states are offered the opportunity to coordinate preschool programs with Head Start programs in exchange for meeting certain accountability requirements. States wishing to participate must submit a state plan for approval to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education that addresses several fundamental issues concerning preschool education. The state plan must address how it will work with the public school system to develop goals for all preschool programs in the state; identify guidelines that preschool programs can use to achieve these goals; devise an accountability system to determine whether children are achieving the goals; provide professional development for preschool teachers and administrators; and, help parents provide support for children to succeed in kindergarten. In addition, states must describe how they will maintain the comprehensive range of child development services for children in Head Start, including the provision of social, parental, and health services.

The President's proposal has several key characteristics that are frequently misunderstood, misinterpreted, or overlooked altogether. I imagine, Mr. Chairman, that you and your colleagues have received numerous phone calls and letters around some of these issues. I would like to set the record straight.

First, the President is not proposing to block-grant Head Start funding to the states. In fact, Head Start will continue to be managed as a federal-to-local program, except in those instances where states choose to develop plans for comprehensive and integrated preschool services that are approved by the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education. To be clear on this point, states are not required to take advantage of this opportunity nor are we proposing that the Head Start program be turned over to states with no strings attached.

Second, any state that takes advantage of this option will be expected to make a commitment to maintain the integrity of the comprehensive nature of Head Start services. At the same time, states must also improve and prioritize the educational components of Head Start -- improving pre-school education for economically disadvantaged children in the state. Further, states must serve as many Head Start eligible three- and four-year olds as are currently being served through Head Start and they must provide the comprehensive services currently found in Head Start, including social, family, and health services. And plans for ensuring the ongoing professional development of staff and administrators must be in place.

Third, states must maintain their current level of state spending on preschool programs. In other words, states will not be able to cut back on state preschool spending because they now have Head Start dollars.

Finally, states will have to explain how they intend to coordinate the use of funds across all state and federal programs that have the purpose of promoting school readiness, as well as how they intend to administer the program. The President's purpose in making this option available to the states is to coordinate preschool programs to better meet the needs of children. States will receive Head Start dollars only when they have an approved plan in place that supports this goal.

The Bottom Line: School Readiness

The bottom line for the President is school readiness -- improving learning experiences and accountability for outcomes of those experiences. Research tells us a great deal about the skills and knowledge children need to be successful in school. And success in school is a strong

predictor of success in life, as reflected in lower delinquency rates, less teen pregnancy, higher incomes, fewer health issues, less suicide, and so forth.

The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is at the center of our research on the quality and effects of Head Start. Under FACES, child outcomes are measured through direct assessment, observation, and parent and teacher ratings, drawing upon a nationally stratified random sample of 3,200 children. FACES provides, for the first time, national data on Head Start child outcomes, family involvement, key aspects of program quality, and teacher practices.

Findings from FACES research allow us to compare the performance of Head Start children enrolled in 1997-1998 and children served in 2000-2001. Both groups of children entered Head Start with levels of academic skills and knowledge far below national norms. Although both groups demonstrated progress in early literacy and social skills, their overall performance levels when they left Head Start still remained below national norms of school readiness. Therefore, we must do more to ensure that Head Start children enter kindergarten with strong literacy skills.

In responding to the President's *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative, the Head Start Bureau has already undertaken a number of efforts aimed at bolstering the school-readiness of Head Start children. The Strategic Teacher Education Program, known as STEP, launched last summer, was designed to ensure that every Head Start program and every classroom teacher has a fundamental knowledge of early development and literacy, and of state-of-the-art early literacy teaching techniques. More than 3,300 local program teachers and supervisors have received this training and have served as "trainers" to the nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers across the

country. I am pleased to report that these trainers are telling us that the STEP training is making a difference in their classrooms.

Following the summer training sessions, the Head Start Bureau hosted national training conferences on mentor-coaching and social-emotional development. These events expanded the skills of teachers and supervisors in fostering effective classroom practices. A national Web-based resource, called STEP-Net, has been created to help early literacy specialists access resources and tools, and to exchange information and promising practices. And the Head Start Bureau is planning additional efforts to support programs and classroom teachers to foster effective early learning and literacy for Head Start children. For example, the Head Start Bureau will provide training targeted at improving the screening and observation of children.

As you know, the President has made accountability a guiding principle of his Administration. In keeping with that principle, we are working to make sure that we measure the outcomes of our efforts, not merely the processes and procedures that make up each of our programs. In the end, the most important indicator of any program's efficacy is whether it is, in fact, helping those it is intended to help.

Good Start, Grow Smart calls for not only the improvement and strengthening of Head Start through intense, large-scale efforts in the areas of early language and literacy, but also for a method to track the results of this effort. I believe this is necessary even though the Head Start program has been showing benefits for parents and children. We must do a better job of determining how well Head Start children across the country are being prepared for academic success once they enter school. This fall we will begin implementing the Congressionally mandated assessments of the school readiness of all the four-year old children in Head Start.

In developing this outcomes-oriented system, we are working with a technical workgroup that advises and guides our selection, development, and use of reliable and valid measurement tools. We are equally committed to assembling measures that have been thoroughly tested, and where no reliable and valid instruments currently exist, we will enlist the best researchers to develop and refine them before including them in the outcomes-oriented reporting system. Our short-term goal is to include only those assessment tools that are reliable and valid for use with economically disadvantaged four-year-old children with the cultural, socio-economic and linguistic differences of Head Start children.

This assessment system will not duplicate the information or research strategy already underway in the Head Start Impact Study already mandated by Congress. Results from that randomized study will not be available until 2006.

Current Partnerships

I should point out that, despite its federal-to-local program structure, Head Start has always recognized that the states play an important role in the formulation and implementation of policies and initiatives that affect low-income children and their families. Partnerships have always been one of Head Start's highest priorities.

These include partnerships with local school districts -- nearly 450 of which operate Head Start programs -- and local governments -- 150 city and county governments operate Head Start programs .

In 1990, when I was Commissioner of the Administration on Children, Youth and Families, under President Bush, we launched the Head Start-State Collaboration Projects. We now have State Collaboration projects in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. Their purpose is to create significant, statewide partnerships between Head Start and the states in order to meet the increasingly complex challenges of improving services for economically disadvantaged children and their families.

Through these and other efforts at the state and local levels, Head Start has sought to support the development and enhancement of state-level efforts to build early childhood systems through linkages, coordination, and integration of policies and services. We will continue these efforts to forge significant partnerships on behalf of children and families to remove as many obstacles to partnership as possible. This reauthorization of the Head Start Act affords us the opportunity to take a significant step in that direction, by offering states the option to include Head Start in their state preschool plans.

The Time is Right

As I suggested earlier, one of the reasons the Head Start program has remained strong over the course of nearly four decades is that it adapts to accommodate to the changing needs of children and families. Now, more than ever, economically-disadvantaged children and their families need a strong, coordinated system of early care and education.

The time has come to allow states to fully integrate Head Start into their preschool education planning. We can no longer afford to dissipate precious resources through overlapping and ill-coordinated programs. Most importantly, we cannot afford to have children slip through the gaps that such a cobbled up system inevitably creates, particularly when children with the greatest need for support continue to remain below national norms of school readiness.

Children and families deserve the best support that states and local communities can provide. The President asks that you give states the option of integrating Head Start—our nation’s leading program for low-income preschoolers—into their planning for coordinated services.

Other Improvements

Before concluding my statement, I would like to briefly highlight a couple of other aspects of the President’s Head Start reauthorization proposal that will strengthen our ability to ensure program quality and accountability and better support school readiness.

Of particular note, our proposal would change the current set-aside for training and technical assistance to provide the Secretary with greater discretionary authority to allocate these resources each year in a manner that will maximize benefits to children and families. Our proposal would also provide flexibility in targeting funds to quality improvements. Training and technical assistance resources have grown considerably in recent years at a rate well above the growth of Head Start while, at the same time, grantees have had access to quality improvement funds that provide them additional resources for these activities. These changes will allow the Secretary to determine the appropriate level of funds for these activities taking into account all the other needs of the program and the children and families served. For example, in FY 2004, this

increased flexibility will provide for enrollment increases in those areas of the country with the greatest unmet need for Head Start services.

In addition, other changes are included to strengthen the program and address the President's commitment to enhancing school readiness for all children.

Conclusion

In closing, let me reiterate that the President's proposal is to give states an option. Their participation will not be required. This is not a block grant; rather, it is a proposal designed to offer states the flexibility to better serve low-income children and families. Where states decide not to participate, the Administration for Children and Families will continue to provide oversight and guidance to ensure program quality and effectiveness.

It is the Administration's belief, that America's children and families will not have the coordinated network of early care and education services they deserve until states have the option of integrating Head Start into their comprehensive state plans. We ask your support in making this option available to benefit our most vulnerable citizens.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your commitment and dedication to the well-being of our nation's children, and thank you, members of the committee, for your interest in hearing about our proposal to make Head Start stronger, and the lives of children and families better.