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House Committee on Government Reform and Oversight

Subcommittee on Human Resources

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Testimony of Edward Zigler, Yale University

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for giving me the opportunity to speak before this committee on the goals and challenges of Early Head Start. I am Sterling Professor of Psychology at Yale University and director of the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy. I have studied the growth and development of children for over 40 years. I was a member of the planning committees for both the Head Start and Early Head Start programs. In the 1970's, I was named the first director of what is now the Administration for Children, Youth and Families and, in that capacity, I was the federal official responsible for administering Head Start nationwide.

Today I have been asked to comment on Early Head Start from the scientific point of view. The wisdom of extending Head Start's philosophy and services to infants, toddlers and their parents is well grounded in empirical research. Recent advances in brain research have provided dramatic evidence that an infant's brain grows rapidly in the first years of life -- more rapidly than previously suspected -- and that the early sensory experiences of the growing child play a determining role in the basic "wiring" of the brain for life. At stake are the child's capacity to develop complex language skills, motor and visual coordination, and positive rather than negative emotional patterns. By the time the

regular Head Start program begins at age 3 or 4, many unused neural pathways have already been pruned away; priceless opportunities to stimulate development have been lost forever. Home visits, parent education, health services and quality early child care experiences – the essential ingredients of Early Head Start – are most urgently needed in the critical first years.

Long before magnetic resonance imaging of the brain was even possible, we knew that Head Start alone was not enough to overcome the ill effects of poverty. It is very difficult to change the growth trajectory of a child living in poverty. But a principle has emerged from decades of research: the benefits of a program are directly related to its quality and its intensity. For maximum impact, a program such as Head Start should be both high in quality and long in duration. This is the thinking behind Early Head Start and the Head Start Transition Project, which follows Head Start graduates into the first few years of elementary school with the same attention to health, nutrition, parent involvement, and other needs of the family. The concept of linking different programs for children as they grow is consistent with what is called the "developmental model." As children pass through different stages of development, they need different environmental nutrients. Just as good parents recognize the changing needs of their children and respond with the appropriate kinds of experiences and supports, interventions for poor children should do the same.

A study of resilience in economically disadvantaged urban youth in Chicago, published last month in the American Journal of Orthopsychiatry, confirms the correctness of the developmental model. The author found that children who had participated in a comprehensive preschool program that continued on through the second

or third grade were far more likely to exhibit competence in academics and social adjustment than were children who had received only a preschool program or only an elementary school program. Other studies have found these same effects.

In the early years of Head Start, however, the program was threatened by the discovery of a "fade-out" effect: initial dramatic gains in IQ scores immediately after children completed a year or two of Head Start were found, 3 or 4 years later, to be diminished and, after that, vanished completely. I have two comments to make on fade out. First, IQ was the wrong thing to be measuring. From the beginning, Head Start was designed to help poor children develop the social competence necessary to make a positive adjustment to school. Head Start takes a holistic approach to children and school readiness, which includes health, nutrition and the child's need for parental encouragement. A more accurate assessment of Head Start's success in achieving its goals is gained by measuring long-term indicators of social competence, such as placement in regular classrooms rather than special education and reduced incidence of delinquent behavior in adolescence. On these measures, the Cornell Consortium data, especially the High Scope findings, indicate that preschool intervention has considerable long-term effects. Secondly, the "fade out" effect for I.Q. is not at all surprising. The very idea that one or even two years of special intervention in a child's life could ward off the ongoing, devastating effects of poverty is Pollyanna thinking, sometimes known as the "inoculation model," or a one-time vaccination against poverty. Instead, to maximize the intellectual and social gains of Head Start and to prevent fade out in either domain, I would recommend a series of linked, developmentally appropriate interventions

beginning with Early Head Start, followed by Head Start, which in turn is followed by a high-quality program in the early grades of school.

For someone who has studied children for 40 years, it is gratifying to see that policy makers are using our scientific knowledge base to establish effective programs and policies for children and families. Olivia Golden and Helen Taylor should be commended for taking the road map laid out by the bipartisan Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion, and working very hard to improve Head Start's quality. Due to their efforts, new performance standards for Head Start now cover services for infants and toddlers. Early Head Start is a prime example of the new conventional wisdom that the best programs for children involve both the parents and their children. We might ask why it has taken 33 years since the launching of Head Start to mount a sizeable high-quality program for disadvantaged infants and toddlers. But at long last we have a program for very young children that insists on quality and is well-grounded in our knowledge of human development.