



## HEAD START: A FORMULA FOR SUCCESS THAT THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION WANTS TO DISMANTLE

*The Bush Administration's 2004 Budget includes an untested, radical proposal to give the states more leeway to shape Head Start programs. Since 1965, Head Start has helped over 20 million children build the confidence and skills they need to succeed in school and to become the leaders, taxpayers, and productive citizens of the future. Head Start is unique in its comprehensive approach to supporting children and families by offering early education, health care, social services, and nutrition services, while emphasizing parent involvement and support and building upon the strengths of local communities. This approach has represented a formula for success for decades. Head Start works.*

- **The Bush proposal is an untested proposal that would replace an already successful program.** While it provides a bare minimum increase for Head Start, the Administration proposes to shift away from Head Start's comprehensive approach. Such changes would gamble the futures of the nearly 1 million children who currently participate in the program. Head Start currently provides federal grants directly to community organizations. The Administration's proposal would make Head Start a state-controlled program and the performance standards that are the core of the program's success would be eliminated. Responsibility for the program would also shift from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to the U.S. Department of Education. Building on its successful record, Head Start should be expanded—not diluted—and fully funded with continued efforts to further strengthen its quality.
- **Head Start is working, so there is no need to drastically alter it.** Head Start has demonstrated its success in preparing children for school and for life. According to a recent study, Head Start narrows the gap between disadvantaged children and their peers in vocabulary and writing skills during the program year. Once in kindergarten, Head Start graduates demonstrate that they are ready to learn, making substantial progress in word knowledge, letter recognition, math skills, and writing skills relative to national averages. Other studies have shown that Head Start children are less likely to be placed in special education or held back a grade. A customer satisfaction survey for federal government programs found that Head Start's rating was the highest out of 29 agencies as well as higher than the private sector's average. This program has been subject to rigorous Congressional scrutiny and academic evaluations throughout its history. There has been no conclusive research that state programs would work any better or even as well as Head Start.
- **States are unprepared to continue Head Start's successful approach. They are grappling with huge budget deficits that are already placing their existing state prekindergarten programs at risk.** States are facing enormous budget deficits, forcing states to make drastic cuts in vital programs. Some states are reducing funding for their prekindergarten programs or replacing state funds with federal dollars, as in Massachusetts and Ohio. New York's governor has just proposed to eliminate the state's Universal Prekindergarten program. In this environment, states will be tempted to use Head Start dollars to fill in gaps in their own programs and spread dollars more thinly.

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- **States' current commitment to early education is relatively limited compared to the federal investment.** While 45 states invest in state prekindergarten, they spend just over \$2 billion compared to the \$6.54 billion spent by the federal government on Head Start. In addition, as of 1998-99, most state prekindergarten spending was concentrated in just 10 states.
- **States are already struggling to confront new responsibilities, such as meeting the requirements of the new federal education reform measure.** Only 12 states are on track to comply with even half of the major federal requirements of the No Child Left Behind Act. As states try to meet the enormous demands of the education reform act without adequate resources, they may be tempted to focus their early education programs on narrow academic measures that do not truly represent what children need in order to enter school ready to learn.
- **Head Start must continue its longstanding commitment to addressing children's full range of developmental needs.** Head Start was founded on the principle that children cannot learn when they are hungry, or sick, or too worried about their home situation to concentrate in school. Therefore, the program emphasizes not only children's cognitive development, but also their social, emotional, and physical development. Research demonstrates that all of these areas of development are intertwined. Abandoning a focus on one endangers children's development in the other areas. Yet, most state prekindergarten initiatives do not provide the comprehensive services that are the hallmark of Head Start. With no new resources and no requirements to focus on children's comprehensive needs, states will likely water down the services currently available to young children in Head Start.
- **States do not have Head Start's extensive experience in promoting parent involvement and offering family support.** Head Start emphasizes parent involvement, recognizing that this is crucial to their children's success in school. Head Start also supports low-income parents as they try to become self-sufficient. In contrast, most state initiatives do not have a strong emphasis on parent involvement. Shifting responsibility for Head Start could change the program in a way that would leave many parents struggling to move from welfare to work without the helping hand they need, and many children would go without their parents' active involvement in their learning.
- **Shifting responsibility would remove essential quality guarantees.** Head Start has extensive quality standards and regular monitoring to ensure these standards are met. As a result, Head Start has maintained a generally high level of quality—a study found that the average quality rating of Head Start programs was higher than that of other early care and education programs. Without federal performance standards, there would be no guarantees that this level of quality would be maintained. States have not demonstrated a commitment to strong standards in their programs for young children. For example, 30 states allow teachers in child care centers to begin working with children without receiving any training in early childhood development. Also, in contrast to Head Start standards that require a comprehensive, on-site monitoring once every three years, 21 states with prekindergarten initiatives either do not require any monitoring or only require written reports without on-site visits.
- **Head Start offers children continuity that many state prekindergarten programs do not.** Head Start serves children ages three and four, as well as a small number of infants and toddlers in Early Head Start. Allowing children to remain in the program for multiple years provides children with stability and enables them to develop close relationships with teachers and peers. Yet, 18 state prekindergarten initiatives limit eligibility to four-year-olds.