

Fresh Start: What Works in Head Start?

By Douglas J. Besharov

This article originally appeared in The New Republic, June 14, 1993

America's favorite anti-poverty program is Head Start, and no one is a bigger fan than Bill Clinton, who wants to nearly triple its annual financing, from \$2.83 billion in 1993 to \$8.14 billion in 1998. Yet Head Start is in political trouble. Most analysts no longer support its standard claim that "for every dollar we invest today, we'll save three tomorrow." They believe that the gains made by Head Start children disappear--"fade-out"--within two years. The program took a big hit in March, when a report by the Inspector General of the Department of Health and Human Services was leaked. Head Start, it concluded, had fallen drastically short in providing vaccinations, medical tests and health care.

To its credit, the administration--including the president--quickly acknowledged these problems. And it has since made clear that all aspects of the program are open to review. HHS Secretary Donna Shalala told Washington Post editors, "We should not be in the business of just pouring money into the existing program when we know that there are some fundamental problems." Head Start supporters in Congress acknowledge its problems too. As Senator Tom Harkin warned: "I would not want to spend double on the program as it is now."

So, everyone wants to improve Head Start. The question is how. Here are some guidelines:

Insist on better management. Head Start began in the 1960s as a series of grants to local anti-poverty and public agencies. Since then it has grown into a sprawling program with almost 2,000 local agencies, which in turn operate about 36,000 classrooms. Head Start's favored status has shielded it from the need to meet ordinary standards of accountability. Grantees are all but guaranteed annual refinancing. Unlike most other federal programs, they are not required to show results before receiving more money; nor do they compete against other agencies that want to provide the same services.

Moreover, Head Start is operated as if it were still a small project. The program is run by some 200 HHS employees, who are responsible for site visits, performance reviews, rule-making and training. As a result, administrators can provide only the loosest management. Although the data are recorded on refunding applications, there is no list of Head Start sites or their enrollments. And even though a recent evaluation suggests that poor attendance has become a serious problem, there is no process for collecting reliable information on how many children actually attend classes on an average day. At the very least, Head Start needs an administrative reporting system capable of determining how many children come to class and whether they actually receive vaccinations and other medical services.

Fix the program. Don't just make it more expensive. Clinton's promise of billions of additional

dollars let loose a torrent of demands for building renovations, new buses and other "quality improvements." One proposal supported by Shalala is to double the salaries of Head Start workers. But this would cost about \$ 2 billion--without enrolling one additional child. Any cost increase should be judged by whether it makes specific improvements. Is it likely to lessen fade-out? Will it improve medical care?

Give more to Head Start parents, and expect more of them too. As a former National Head Start Association officer put it: "We look back on the poverty of the 1970s as the good old days. Poverty is getting uglier." Today, most Head Start children come from single-parent homes; about 70 percent are on welfare. To give a sense of the problems faced by many Head Start families, consider these statistics collected by a center in Vermont: one-third to two-thirds of its families had substance abuse problems in the home, 40 percent of its mothers had their first child as a teenager and 32 percent of the parents had no high school diploma or ged. How do we respond to these problems? Preschool programs must focus on both the child and the parent.

Although parent involvement has always been an important Head Start goal, few programs were ever given the funds to provide parent-oriented services. Their absence has become more evident as the conditions of poverty have worsened. As one social worker put it, sometimes what a child needs most is "a mother who can cope." Recently, some Head Start programs have stretched their limited funding to provide at least minimal services for parents, including health care and nutrition and literacy classes.

Link Head Start to welfare reform. Clinton has vowed to "end welfare as we know it" by providing "people with the education, training, job placement assistance and child care they need for two years--so that they can break the cycle of dependency. After two years, those who can work will be required to go to work, either in the private sector or in meaningful community-service jobs." The welfare mothers required by Clinton's plan to participate in training or public service jobs will need care for their children. Head Start would be the natural provider, were it not for its limited hours: the average program operates four hours a day, nine months a year. Rather than creating a new child care system, make Head Start full-day, full-year. Expanding Head Start in tandem with welfare reform would be a social welfare "twofer"--more preschool programs for disadvantaged children and expanded job training for their parents.

End Head Start's isolation. When Head Start was established, it was the principal federal child care program for disadvantaged children. Now, however, it is part of a much larger mosaic of preschool services for disadvantaged children--a fact rarely mentioned in the debate about its future. Between 1987 and 1993, annual federal spending on child care rose from \$3.3 billion to about \$6.5 billion. Only \$2.8 billion of this is for Head Start; the remainder is for other child care programs.

Sadly, having many programs doesn't mean there are many options. Inconsistent administrative rules and requirements make the coordination of services time-consuming and problematic. All this is complicated by Head Start's unique status as a federal demonstration program. Grantees receive funds directly from the federal government, unlike most child care and welfare programs, which receive their funds through the states.

The Head Start community has always opposed integration with the larger child care world, in part because of its roots in the civil rights movement, but also because grantees fear losing their independence. In 1974, as governor of Georgia, Jimmy Carter proposed transferring supervision of Head Start to the states; the idea was met with immediate hostility and quickly dropped. But the need for meshing the various child care programs is even greater today. Head Start is no longer a small demonstration program. If financed at the levels the president proposes, it will become more ungainly and out-of-step with local programs. Barring our ability to give Head Start to the states, we at least need a more formal mechanism for local and federal coordination.

Don't rush expansion. Clinton has proposed giving Head Start grantees an additional \$ 16 billion between now and 1998. Unless there is a sound plan for expansion, this money could hurt the program as much as it could help it. Ed Zigler, one of Head Start's founders, cautions, "We started Head Start too quickly. We started it too big, and we have ever since been playing catch up with the quality issue."

The danger is that this will happen again. Head Start is still having trouble absorbing Bush-era increases. According to the Inspector General, during the three 1990-91 increases, which totaled \$425 million, 13 percent of grantees were unable to spend all of their funds: more than half of these had trouble finding and renovating facilities, around 50 percent had difficulty finding qualified staff and more than 25 percent were unable to locate eligible children. As a result, they served 6 percent fewer children than had been financed. During the next wave of Bush increases, which added \$502 million, 25 percent of grantees did not even apply for grants.

The pitfalls of overly rapid expansion were made clear this year. Clinton's proposal in his now-extinct stimulus bill to spend \$500 million for new summer programs sent Head Start offices into a planning frenzy. Even before the bill failed in the Senate, it became apparent that many grantees would have difficulty switching to a year-round schedule. Some did not have the use of their classrooms over the summer and were having trouble finding alternate facilities. The bigger problem, however, was in getting workers and children to participate, as many already had summer plans.

One senator's office received a call from a Head Start staffer who reported that, in a misguided attempt to carry out the summer program, her center issued the following statement: 1) Staff unwilling to work through the mid-July end date will be immediately terminated. 2) Unemployment benefits for those who quit in response to this threat will be contested. 3) Four-year-olds who do not enroll in the summer session will not receive a certificate of completion. 4) Three-year-olds who do not enroll for the summer session will automatically be put on the bottom of the waiting list for the next year. 5) Children with plans to spend the summer outside the center's area (for example, by visiting with the other parent, a grandparent or other relatives) must delay the visit until after the summer session.

Old hands like Zigler foresaw stories like these showing up in newspapers across the country. The director of a large, inner-city program summed up these fears when he said that the summer money "could kill Head Start. In the time we have, there is no way we can spend that money to create a viable summer program."

Preschool programs, no matter how well-run, can do only so much to combat poor prenatal care, inadequate nutrition, lack of suitable role models and dangerous neighborhoods. Making the grandiose claim that Head Start can cure poverty sets it up for an inevitable fall. Properly redesigned and administered, though, it could form the base for a more comprehensive effort to help underprivileged children. Given the oversimplification that permeates public debate over the program, it won't be easy for elected politicians to adopt a critical--but supportive--approach. But if they don't, it's hard to see how Head Start will ever live up to the high hopes of the American people for an anti-poverty program that actually works.