

Keep Head Start Funding Federal to Local

Issue Background

For several years, the Bush administration has proposed turning the Head Start program over to the states. No data exists to counter the assumption that the administration's proposal will directly jeopardize the current level of critical early childhood services provided to more than one million at-risk children in America. Given the extraordinarily high level of testing, evaluation, and reform required over the last four decades of Head Start, it would be a radical departure for Congress and a waste of taxpayer dollars simply to throw caution to the wind and hope for the best in terms of what the states might come up with to replace Head Start.

Consider the following facts:

Very few state governments have the funds to invest in high quality pre-k education. Far from having the ability to turn their attention to new responsibilities, most state governments are facing hard choices in funded programs, some of which have already reduced their commitment to pre-k. While most states are not experiencing the same fiscal stress of the last three years, they operate on a balanced budget requirement and continue to face dramatic budget decisions in key services during the coming months.¹

States will be forced to reduce the overall number of Head Start children served or the scope of services provided – even if they get control of federal Head Start funds. Call it the “opt in/drop out” effect: With state tax dollars in short supply and the sudden emergence of federal monies for the creation of state-level Head Start-like programs, financially-strapped states will take the new federal funds and then cut back on their own financial commitment to support Early Head Start slots and supplemental programs designed to allow more low-income families to qualify for Head Start. The paradoxical result: Fewer children would get Head Start-like help, even if the federal part of the “pie” has to serve the same number of children it currently does.

Head Start children will be at the end of the line for state help. A study by the U.S. General Accounting Office (GAO), renamed the Government Accountability Office in 2004, found that federal funds are eight times more likely than state funds to target the poorest children.² In many states, there has been no clear sign of a political will to provide comprehensive early childhood development services to the poorest of our children.

The historical record shows that shifting the administration of a federal program to the states means reduced funding and oversight. In a comprehensive study, the Urban Institute found that the real value of federal block grants to states gradually declines over time.³ Substantiating this find-

ing, the GAO reported that federal spending for various federal programs decreased by 12 percent when these programs were no longer categorical programs and became block grant programs.⁴ Furthermore, the GAO discovered that federal oversight of Medicaid home and community-based waivers has become lax as states have administered these Medicaid services. As a remedy, the GAO called upon federal lawmakers to strengthen federal oversight over these Medicaid services.⁵

Most states do not have the necessary “infrastructure” or oversight to replace Head Start. The 50 states vary considerably in the services they provide in their early childhood programs. In one study, researchers examined over 30 state pre-school programs, and found many had “few or even no program guidelines, instead leaving it up to local providers to decide what if any types of services and curricula to offer.”⁶ Only about 20 percent of the states required providers to meet their state’s rules for obtaining a license to run a child-care program, “a standard aimed more at preventing unsafe or negligent care than at facilitating child development and school readiness.” Finally, about 30 percent of the states “applied state elementary school guidelines to preschool services, without attention to developmentally appropriate practices for these youngest of students.”⁷ Unlike Head Start, which maintains the highest quality through national performance standards and a rigorous monitoring system, most states do not employ even basic oversight of their early childhood development programs.⁸

Head Start programs generally provide more comprehensive and higher quality services than state-funded pre-k programs.⁹ These services are needed to get at-risk children ready to learn. While Head Start provides children with strong reading skills, it also provides important comprehensive services, including medical care and hot meals. Head Start programs are much more likely to offer parent involvement services than state-funded pre-kindergarten services are.¹⁰ Head Start children are more likely to receive full-day services than children in state-funded pre-kindergarten programs are.¹¹ Only three states — Delaware, Oregon and Washington — provide the same set of eight comprehensive services required of Head Start programs, primarily because they adopted a variation of the Program Performance Standards.

States will be able to lower the standards of teachers and educational outcomes. It was a results-oriented Congress that put into place a federal requirement that at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree. In addition, Head Start programs are required

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to assess children three times a year in order to strengthen classroom teaching and evaluate children's progress. All Head Start programs undergo a thorough, week-long performance monitoring conducted by outside, independent evaluators every three years.

States will not be directed to involve Head Start's 911,627 parent volunteers. Head Start always has known that a parent is a child's best educator. That is why federal performance standards require Head Start to involve parents in the classroom and in the administration of the program itself. During the 2006-2007 program year, the Head Start Bureau reported that more than 911,627 former or current Head Start or Early Head Start parents volunteered in Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms across the country, while many others were actively involved in the program through policy councils.

The bureaucratic overhead and costs of administering the program will rise dramatically under state control. The GAO has estimated that the overhead costs associated with states administering programs funded with federal dollars to be approximately six percent of the total budget.¹² The resulting loss of \$411 million in fiscal year 2006 is the equivalent of 58,423 Head Start student slots. In one clear sign of the sizeable and onerous costs associated with the extra bureaucracy required under the administration's plan, the portion of Head Start's budget that normally would be set aside to improve quality, instead, would be used by states to draft their plans to administer Head Start. Here, we are able to see how the program would work in stark terms: Substitute new bureaucracies and related costs for the existing emphasis on Head Start quality.

References

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- ¹¹ Ibid., p. 483.
- ¹² United States General Accounting Office (October 1994). *Education Finance: Extent of Federal Funding in State Education Agencies*. (GAO/HEHS-95-3). Washington, D.C., p. 12.



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