

Head Start: Ensuring Dollars Benefit the Children.

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Testimony

Mr. Chairman, and Members of the Committee,

Good morning, my name is Yvonne Atkinson Gates, and I am a Clark County Commissioner representing an 8,000 square mile area as large as the State of New Jersey, located in southernmost part of the State of Nevada. Clark County is also the home of the City of Las Vegas, a world renown tourist destination and Nellis Air Force Base, one of the key fighter pilot training facilities for the defenders of the free world.

I wish to thank Senator John Ensign for inviting me and giving me the opportunity of appearing before you today to talk about the importance of the Head Start Program to our community.

Clark County's population is now over 1.5 million and we have 118,782 children under the age of 5 years of age. Unfortunately, 22,468 of that total include children who come from poverty households. As a booming growth community, Las Vegas attracts many immigrants who are interested in developing a better life for their families. Like many cities in the southwest, many of those newcomers are, however, poor and have a language barrier where English is not their native tongue. Presently, our school district has a majority of students from minority backgrounds. As such, it faces the dual challenge of assimilating many of these students into American cultural life while at the same time addressing, for many, their limited English language skills.

"No Child Left Behind" is more than an educational mantra, but rather the larger goal of our society. We believe that the Head Start program with its focus on the youth and their families is a key tool in providing the necessary foundation for their life success. Children coming from these poor families need additional compensatory education. We believe that the sooner we begin this process, the greater likelihood that these children will more quickly assimilate into American society.

Children are every society's greatest resource, as they represent our future and our collective hope for a better world. The promise of the Head Start Program is to erase inequities among our citizens and to give our children, all our children, a level playing field for their future academic success.

In my community, our current Head Start provider is a community action program agency and it has a funded enrollment of 1,723 children, providing Head Start services at

fifteen sites. This Head Start program is a key lifeline for these children as 804 children have no health insurance and 511 children are receiving dental care and 1,532 have received preventative dental care.

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As a County Commissioner, I have worked with my colleagues on the County Commission, the Clark County School District, and the Cities of Las Vegas and Henderson, nonprofit agencies, and the faith based nonprofits to help build state-of-the-art Head Start/Early Childhood Development Centers in our community. I have provided for your review a short package showing several of these centers which were funded by our community partners using federal Community Development Block Grant funds, County and City General Funds, private loans, and land contributions and long term leases. Included in this package are also several personal testimonies about the importance of the Head Start programs to program participants and their families.

With the growth in the federal budget deficit, we must identify new ways to enhance program accountability of our service delivery systems to ensure that our children, and their families, receive top value for the investment of our tax dollars in their pre-development education. Our goal should be to reward and enhance performance toward specified goals, rather than continuance of funding to Head Start providers unable to document their successes.

I wish to commend the United States Government Accountability Office for their recent review of the Head Start Program. Their insights relating to the weaknesses of the federal oversight process can help us together to build a stronger federal and local review system so that this federal program can achieve its promise of preparing our children for their future lives of promise and achievement in what is an ever diverse and competitive world environment.

This GAO study seems to indicate that much of the weakness of this program occurs at the federal level, where inadequate federal monitoring oversight combined with the lack of clear and sufficient sanctions allows the continuation of funding to Head Start providers who continue to come up short. This GAO study provides a unique opportunity for the federal government to get its own house in order. While clear weaknesses have been identified relating to the 1700 Head Start grantees nationwide, this federal report gives us a unique opportunity to step back and develop new systems to measure accountability and to better control the administration of federal funds at both the federal and local levels.

To improve this federal oversight, the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) needs to be given the support and the necessary staff resources to take a more proactive role. Rather than letting program problems continue to fester, ACF needs to engage in

more direct intervention efforts to assist substandard performers achieve the targeted benchmark levels, and in cases of continued lack of performance, to take the hard steps of closing and providing opportunities for others to utilize these funds rather than continue, by inertia, to keep funding the current poor performers.

As part of this reform effort, the federal government may wish to re-think how federal funds should be disbursed to run this important program. As an alternative to the current federal grantor/local nonprofit agency grant recipient relationship, we would propose that this funding relationship be modified whereby State and local governments potentially be selected to serve as local administrators, and that the review and evaluation process be expanded to include more local stakeholders.

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We need to recognize that should a Head Start program be defunded by ACF, that this will create a critical and immediate community challenge as ACF and others will need to seek new providers to continue the operation of these programs so that the children and their families are not negatively impacted by program service interruptions. Recognizing that these provider relationships may have been forged over decades, identifying and selecting new providers will take time and we must acknowledge that “breaking up is hard to do”. To diversify program delivery and to reduce the government tendency to utilize fewer grantees for their own ease in monitoring and program administration, Congress may wish to consider restrictions prohibiting the ACF from allocating all its Head Start funding to a single organization within a single large metropolitan area. Utilizing multiple providers can provide an immediate backup should a current provider no longer be able to effectively deliver the service.

Our goal should be to expand local oversight of the chosen grantees. I know as a County Commissioner that my office frequently has had to field calls from disgruntled parents who think that we can directly resolve their issues with a federal Head Start grantee as they do not recognize that this is a federal/local grant that does not flow through the County

We believe that local government needs to be more actively engaged in the local review and evaluative process for the use of these federal programs. Local government is closer to the people, and we have the opportunity of providing technical and mentoring assistance to our local nonprofit agency partners, and additionally may be able to provide other resources to expand the scope of services for the operations of these programs. As shown by my handout, a number of these new Head Start/Early Childhood Development Centers were the direct result of that local funding commitment to this federal program reflecting our keen awareness of the importance that preschool education can make for our children.

Additionally, the federal government might wish to transfer these Head Start funds to

local governments as a block grant, which would provide for local oversight of these monies. Local governments currently administer a number of block grant programs, and provided that sufficient administrative monies are available to cover staff and monitoring costs, the Head Start program might be transferred to this local level whereby local government, rather than a more distant federal agency, has day to day oversight monitoring responsibilities for the Head Start program, and serves as the immediate contracting grantee for the program.

As the grant managers for other federal funds, state agencies are also uniquely qualified to serve in this facilitator role as they currently supervise the administration of many other federal grants, including those from the Department of Health and Human Services. Secondly, being geographically closer to the grant recipients, they may have increased opportunities to provide critical oversight, technical assistance, and mentoring assistance to enable those nonprofit grant recipients to achieve full compliance with all the applicable federal regulations as the Head Start program is but one of many grants that States make available to these nonprofit grant recipients, for which the States are already responsible.

In assessing this reform initiative as part of the reauthorization of the Head Start program, we must be careful not to overreact to this GAO study and use it as an excuse to terminate or reduce federal funding for this critical human development program because of current weaknesses shared at both the federal and local levels. Our children are too important to this nation's future to be caught up in federal deficit reduction efforts, as fundamentally their future successes are critical to our nation's competitiveness on the world stage.

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Where other countries have discriminated toward others due to gender discrimination, America continues to be a shining light on the hill as all our citizens have an opportunity to succeed based on their abilities and hard work. This is the "meritocracy" envisioned by Thomas Jefferson, where a person's abilities would be the only limit to their ultimate life success, rather than pre-conditions of race, sex, and economic status.

Let us work together to help the Head Start Program achieve its original promise as a compensatory educational program to help our most vulnerable youngest Americans and their families achieve this Jeffersonian "meritocracy".