

Head Start: Ensuring Dollars Benefit the Children.

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Witness:

Mayor A.C. Wharton

Memphis, Tennessee

Mayor of Shelby County

Testimony

During my campaign for the office of Mayor of Shelby County, Tennessee, I stressed that my first three priorities would be education, education, and education. By that statement I was attempting to project that a sound education was the bedrock of any progress Shelby County might make. By "education" I include preschool exposures that will ensure all children are ready to learn upon entering kindergarten, and that their families receive the appropriate assistance in developing support tools to help their children thrive.

Based upon that philosophy, upon taking office in September 2002, I first set my intentions to make an inquiry about Shelby County's troubled Head Start operation. News reports often chronicled the difficulties within Shelby County's largest delegate agency, an entity known as Head Start, Inc.

Shelby County Government was and is the official grantee for all Head Start funds. As Mayor of Shelby County, I believed I had full authority over the program, and I knew I had a moral obligation to ensure that it was adequately serving the children and families in my community.

Drawing on my background as a trial lawyer, I poured through, literally, many feet of files, investigative reports, and assessments. Additionally, many concerned citizens beat a path to my door to tell me of the troubles of Head Start. After thoroughly researching the issues and listening to the concerns of citizens, I had a clear vision of the immediate and long-term changes required for us to have a successful, stable and well managed Head Start program in Shelby County.

What I could not anticipate was how the political realities, created largely by the obstructive albeit well-intentioned governance structure for Head Start, would prevent swift and decisive action.

I was elected with 62 percent of the vote, due in large part to the fact that I had bipartisan endorsement. My support base crossed all racial, demographic, and political lines. Given this broad support, I assumed that when I set out to correct what I believed to be obvious deficiencies in this most critical program, I would be able to accomplish the task. Unfortunately, I found that my motivations were questioned and that it was not going to

be the efficient task it should be.

As a defense lawyer, I am well respectful of the due process rights our Constitution accords our citizens. I feel, however, that the hurdles I had to face in ridding Shelby County of an ineffective, and perhaps illegally operated program, went far beyond our founding fathers' notion of due process.

With this in mind, it is my belief that all Head Start grantees, such as Shelby County Government, should upon receipt of their grant or as a condition of receipt of their grant, be allowed to develop a local governance and operations program that determines how best to select delegate agencies and how to terminate those contracts efficiently when needed. Once this due process program is approved, it should rest solely with the grantee to determine when a contract is to be terminated. The role of the federal government should be simply to ensure that the grantee has complied with its due process plan it submitted to HHS and which has been approved by HHS. The best interest of the intended recipients of Head Start programs should be the focus of any due process review.

While I understand and support the provisions of the policies that set forth the parameters for the policy councils' authority, my experience is that the resulting practice serves to delay and overcomplicate the termination process. The broad and expansive role given to the policy committees adds other areas in which delay occurs. Additionally, in the case of Shelby County, a vote of the Shelby County Commission was required. With each member of this body being elected by the public, there obviously is room for much political interference.

It is my opinion that our present Head Start scheme is one in which process has trumped product. Head Start was designed as a compensatory education project for culturally deprived children. The purpose was to ensure that these children receive services and attention that would prepare them to be ready to learn once they enter school.

Because of the complicated procedural regulations, more time is given to "the process" of running the Head Start programs, and all of the attendant politics, than is given to the intended product, namely well cared for, and well taught children, ready to learn when they enter school.

Nothing herein should be construed to mean that governments or any other grantee should be allowed to ride roughshod over the dignity that should be accorded all participants and Head Start programs whether they are grantees, policy councils, policy committees, or certainly children and parents. What I do feel emphatically is that the pendulum has swung too far in an effort to correct the excesses that accompanied the origin of our many War on Poverty programs in which those from the outside came in

and professed to know what was best for the service recipients, giving them no voice, but only imposing on them their designs for a greater society. We need to pull the pendulum back to a middle ground which gives the appropriate respect to the desired end of participant involvement while at the same time not bogging down the programs with procedural hoops that detract from the overall goals of the Head Start program.

Again, I wish to emphasize that in my legal services experience, I worked closely with citizen boards. I have also worked closely with citizen boards in many other civic programs. I emphasize that because I want to make it clear that this is not a call for eliminating policy committees and policy councils. I do feel, however, that the role of the policy councils in such areas as the selection or termination of delegate agencies should be reviewed carefully. As it now stands, regardless of the severity of mismanagement within a delegate agency, the grantee, in this case Shelby County Government, faces unnecessary barriers in bringing about an immediate termination of the delegate agency contract, creating a feeling of hopelessness that ultimately weakens the entire program

In order to understand the seriousness of this dilemma, one must understand the down to earth politics which often accompany Head Start programs. Many of the parents who are on the policy council may feel somehow indebted to those who operate the program. In many instances, their children are attending various Head Start programs, and they have been accorded a level of dignity and respect which they have never received before. The operators of delegate agencies are often politically well fixed because they provide a substantial number of jobs in the community.

What we're faced with is not merely a benign situation in which an errant agency through no bad intent runs afoul of the guidelines. In many instances the wrongdoings and shortfalls are calculated to bring about the political empowerment or financial enrichment of those who profit from the wrongdoing.

The GAO report focuses on financial management. Based upon my personal observations and experience, this report and its recommendations will stand in a vacuum if the governance problems are not also considered. Head Start grantees cannot correct financial mismanagement at the delegate level if they face obstruction by the politics of an unnecessarily complicated governance structure. Without the authority to quickly access records or take appropriate action on personnel issues when mismanagement has been identified, Head Start grantees cannot safeguard the financial security of this country's most effective and proven program to support at risk children and families.

In an article entitled "Life Way After Head Start," the New York Times Magazine chronicled the research findings of the High Scope Perry Preschool – the precursor to Head Start – over the course of more than four decades. Looking at the school participants and non-participants side by side, the results are nothing less than staggering. Considering a variety of factors from social service requirements to wealth creation, the analysis suggests a return on investment of 17:1 for the Perry Preschool. The need to ensure Head Start's success goes beyond a moral obligation and has implications for our

country's future prosperity. We should not allow any policy or practice to stand in the way of ensuring this program's success.