

Executive Summary

Research tells us a great deal about the skills and knowledge children need to be successful in school. Among preschoolers, vocabulary, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness, in addition to social and emotional factors, have a significant impact on later success in school. For example, reading scores in the 10th grade can be predicted with surprising accuracy based on a child's knowledge of the alphabet in kindergarten. We must ensure that children are equipped with the basic skills necessary so that they begin school ready to learn.

More than 40 states have initiatives aimed at helping preschool children prepare for kindergarten, because they know that children from poor families enter school behind children from more privileged families in academic skills. Schools often have difficulty as they compensate for this difference. At a time when only 38 percent of children from birth through age five receive care solely from their parents, and the remaining 62 percent of these children receive care through a variety of arrangements, it is important that these settings provide high-quality care to ensure that children begin school ready to learn. States were recently given an additional reason for developing high quality preschool programs with the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which holds states accountable for ensuring that all children are proficient in reading and math. Given what we know about the positive effects of high quality preschool programs in conjunction with states being held accountable for student performance, states should have a more prominent role in the delivery of Head Start programs to provide a high quality preschool experience before children enter kindergarten.

The major federal program aimed at preparing children for school is Head Start, which Congress is scheduled to consider for reauthorization this year. Since 1965, Head Start has provided a comprehensive program, including activities that aim to promote social, emotional, and cognitive development, as well as health services, for children in poverty. In light of what we know about the preschool years, the President believes Head Start must provide more emphasis on early learning and promote the best methods for preparing children for success in school by making early education a top priority. Research shows that acquiring specific pre-reading, language, and social skills strongly predict future success in school. Head Start sites that have implemented carefully designed programs that focus on school readiness have shown significant gains for children.

Head Start is one of many federal and state programs that together provide approximately \$23 billion in funding for child care and preschool education. In programs other than Head Start, states have the responsibility and the authority through planning, training, and the regulatory process to have a substantial impact on the type and quality of services provided, and are held accountable for the delivery of high quality programs. However, Head Start funding goes directly from the federal level to local organizations, and thus states do not have the authority to integrate or align Head Start programs with other early childhood programs provided by the states.

To address these issues, the President proposes to allow interested states to integrate state and federal preschool programs including Head Start into a cohesive system in exchange for meeting certain accountability requirements. Participating states will design a plan outlining

how they will: work with the public school system to develop goals for all preschool programs in the state; identify guidelines that preschool programs can use to achieve these goals; devise an accountability system to determine whether children are achieving the goals; provide professional development for preschool teachers and administrators; and help parents provide support for children to succeed in kindergarten. In addition, states must describe how they will maintain the range of child development goals of Head Start, including the provision of social, parental, and health services in their Head Start programs. In exchange for meeting these requirements, states will have the authority to create a unified system of preschool education to meet the needs of children from low-income families in their individual states.

Improving and prioritizing the educational components of Head Start, while allowing states to enhance coordination of all preschool programs, will go a long way toward meeting the President's goal of better preparing children to succeed in school. Some advantages include:

- Enhanced school readiness among children leading to improved performance in school.
- Increased ability for states to help working parents enroll their children in programs that better meet the children's and families' needs.
- Better clarity of school preparation goals and improved guidelines for early education programs.
- Greater coordination between the elementary schools and both early education and child care programs at the federal and state level that focuses on skills needed to prepare children for school.
- More and better public information for parents to determine the particular early education programs that best prepare their children for school.

President Bush's Plan to Prepare All Children for Kindergarten

Head Start: Where Are We Now?

Early childhood, which is the period in a child's life from birth through age 5, is a critical time for children to develop the physical, emotional, social, and cognitive skills they will need to be successful in school and the rest of their lives. What children learn before coming to school is vital to their success.

The federal government awards grants to local public and private agencies to implement Head Start programs that provide comprehensive child development services to children and families. Intended primarily for preschoolers from low-income families, Head Start's mission is to promote school readiness to enable each child to develop to his or her fullest potential. Children in Head Start also receive comprehensive health services, including immunizations, physical and dental exams and treatment, and nutritional services. Head Start now serves more than 900,000 children each year, yet only 20% of these children are enrolled in programs that provide full-day, full-year services for working families. President Bush has requested \$6.8 billion in Head Start funding in his Fiscal Year 2004 budget request, an increase of \$148 million over the previous year.

In the 1998 Reauthorization of Head Start, Congress emphasized promoting school readiness. This was based, in part, on recent research showing that improving the educational components of preschool programs is the best predictor of children's future success in school. Congress set specific educational goals, including a requirement that at least fifty percent of Head Start teachers have an Associate degree or beyond by 2003, and required prioritized inclusion of reading and math readiness skills in Head Start curricula.

Beyond Head Start, federal legislation has created several other preschool programs aimed primarily at enhancing the development of poor and disabled children. These include the Title I preschool program to help prepare children for school in high poverty communities; Early Head Start to promote healthy prenatal care for pregnant mothers and to enhance the development of infants and children under age 3; and the Special Education Preschool Grants and State Grants program and the Special Education Grants for Infants and Families program, which between them provide funds for states to build early education programs for children with disabilities between birth and age 5. In addition to these preschool programs with an educational focus, the federal government provides states with \$4.8 billion through the Child Care and Development Block Grant to pay for child care programs, and states have also used as much as \$4 billion annually from the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) block grant program to pay for child care that serves working poor and low-income mothers.

These federal programs are no longer the only preschool and child care programs available to low-income families. Since 1980, the number of states offering a pre-kindergarten alternative to Head Start rose from 10 to 39 states and the District of Columbia. In addition, a recent study of U.S. early childhood care and education indicates every state provides at least some funding to make access to early childhood care and education available to low-income families through Child Care Development Funds (CCDF) and TANF. With annual state

spending on preschool education and child care currently exceeding \$5 billion, Head Start no longer is the only choice for low-income parents in many communities.

Both state and federal governments fund a wide variety of programs that are either intended to enhance children's educational development or that could, with some adjustments, do a better job of preparing children for school. But because these programs have developed independently, they are not easily coordinated to best serve the children and families who need them. There are obstacles that can be addressed in order to ensure that early childhood programs focus on learning and cognitive development as well as social and emotional development. These include:

- Most states have limited alignment between what children are doing before they enter school and what is expected of them once they are in school;
- Early childhood programs are seldom evaluated based on how they prepare children to succeed in school; and
- There is not enough information for early childhood teachers, parents, grandparents, and child care providers on ways to prepare children to be successful in school.

Are All Children Prepared to Enter School?

Since Head Start was created in 1965, research about the importance of high quality early education in preparing children to be successful in school and in life has advanced dramatically. In addition, the passage of the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 gives states an even greater interest in ensuring that all children are ready to learn.

The Importance of Early Childhood Education

An important question facing the nation is whether this wide variety of programs and immense outlay of federal and state funds is helping to prepare children for school. When Head Start was created in 1965, it was initially guided by the hope that providing a nurturing environment, adequate nutrition, help for families, and opportunities for socialization for low-income children would develop the cognitive, social, and emotional foundations that would make learning easy once they entered school. While some evidence has indicated that children attending Head Start programs perform better on cognitive measures after a year in preschool, these benefits are short-lived and fade quickly. Indeed, after over three decades of noble service by Head Start programs, low-income children continue to perform significantly below their more advantaged peers in reading and mathematics once they enter school.

Since 1965, our scientific knowledge of the major factors that promote cognitive, social and emotional development in early childhood has increased and informs us of what it will take to promote a genuine “head start” for low-income children. This new knowledge clearly indicates that promoting school readiness in Head Start programs is more complex than initially envisioned. We now know that while the development of healthy bodies, social competencies and emotional health are necessary to succeed in school, they are not sufficient. To do well in school, each child must learn to understand and communicate with language, to recognize letters of the alphabet, and to hear the individual sounds in spoken language. For many children living in poverty, a high-quality early childhood setting can help them learn these skills.

Research on the effects of small-scale, high-quality early education programs show unequivocally that high-quality infant and preschool programs can produce large and lasting benefits. Most researchers believe that very high-quality programs can prepare children to perform better in the public schools, to avoid special education placement, to avoid grade retention, and to boost graduation rates. In addition, these programs have often led to reduced delinquency and crime, increased rates of college attendance, increased employment rates and earnings, and reduced dependence on welfare.

But when the school readiness of the nation’s poor children is assessed, it becomes clear that Head Start and other large-scale preschool programs have failed to have widespread impact on the school preparation of these children. The Early Childhood Longitudinal Study, Kindergarten Cohort, an ongoing assessment of the skills and characteristics of a sample of 20,000 children from across the nation who entered kindergarten in 1998, indicates that the transition to school is marked by difficulty for many children. Teachers report that one-quarter of beginning kindergartners are either never or only sometimes eager to learn, and that one-third never pay attention in class or do so only sometimes. Consistent with teacher perceptions, many

children perform at low levels on assessments of skills and knowledge at kindergarten entry. The children who are least prepared for kindergarten are those whose parents did not complete high school, those coming from low-income or welfare-dependent families, those living with single parents, and those speaking a language other than English. Forty-six percent of kindergartners in the U.S. have one or more of these four risk factors, with the proportion at-risk rising to 65 percent among children in large cities and 75 percent among African-American and Hispanic children. As compared with children with no risk factors, children with one risk factor are twice as likely to have pre-reading scores that fall in the lowest 25 percent of the overall skill distribution. Children with two or more risk factors are around three times as likely to score in the bottom quarter in pre-reading. Children from families with multiple risks typically do not know their letters and cannot count to 20, nor can they associate letters with sounds or make judgments about relative length.

These differences at entry to kindergarten exert major impacts on academic achievement as children proceed through the elementary grades. About 60 percent of the children who were proficient in letters at entry to kindergarten can read words in context at the end of first grade. By contrast, only 21 percent of children who were not proficient in letter knowledge at kindergarten entry can read words in context.

States are recognizing the importance of high quality early education and preschool programs in preparing children for school and are taking steps to improve both the quality and quantity of these programs. State funding for early education programs has increased from \$190 million in 1988 to almost \$2 billion today. Twenty-six states target their programs to children from low-income families. Fifteen states and the District have specific standards for prekindergarten, and 5 more are working on standards.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001

Although states have been increasing their support for preschool programs for at least the past decade, they were recently given an additional reason for developing high quality preschool programs. Under the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, the most important federal education reform since the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965, states must create strong standards for what each child should know and learn in reading and math in grades 3-8. States, districts, and schools will then be held accountable for improving the performance of all student subgroups, so that every student is performing at proficient in reading and math by 2014. This Act brings a new level of accountability to our schools to ensure that the achievement gap is closed and that every child receives a quality education.

The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001 also implements the President's Reading First initiative by increasing federal funding for scientifically-based reading programs to over \$1 billion each year to ensure that every child can read at grade level by the third grade. Since every state, district, and school will be held accountable for ensuring that children are proficient in reading and math, schools are now highly motivated to improve student performance.

Given what we know about the importance of early childhood programs in preparing children for school in conjunction with states being held accountable for the academic progress

of all students, states should have the authority to coordinate high-quality preschool programs. Schools would then have a much better chance to ensure that their students from disadvantaged backgrounds achieve at grade level. States understand that high quality and accountability are just as important in the preschool years as they are in grades K-12.

The President's Proposal to Strengthen Head Start and Improve Preschool Programs

The single most important goal of the Head Start reauthorization should be to improve Head Start and other preschool programs to ensure children are prepared to succeed in school. Given the vital role states already play in conducting preschool programs, the President believes there should be a state option in the Head Start program to foster comprehensive, high quality preschool programs.

Under the President's proposal for improving preschool programs in general and Head Start in particular, Governors are offered the opportunity to integrate preschool programs with Head Start programs for the state or a region within the state in exchange for meeting certain accountability requirements. Governors from states wishing to participate must submit a state plan for approval to the Secretary of Health and Human Services and the Secretary of Education that addresses several fundamental issues concerning preschool education. The issues that must be addressed by the state plan include:

- **State Preschool Goals and Activities.** States will explain how they will work with the public schools at the state or local level to develop the skills and behaviors that children must possess to perform well in kindergarten. Each state will also explain how it will develop and implement a set of guidelines for use by individual programs to develop these skills and behaviors during the preschool years. The skills and behaviors should include: language development; pre-reading skills including phonological awareness, letter knowledge, and vocabulary; numeracy; and social and emotional competence.
- **State Accountability Program.** States must develop an accountability program that will indicate how well children in individual programs are performing relative to the skills and behaviors identified by the state as prerequisites for effective kindergarten performance. Accountability results by program will be made public and states will be encouraged to conduct activities designed to help parents understand the results for their child and their child's program.
- **Coverage and Maintenance of Effort.** The state plan must result, at a minimum, in the same coverage to serve at least as many Head Start eligible three- and four-year-olds as are currently being served through Head Start. The state plan should identify the number of state dollars that were spent on state preschool programs and Head Start programs in the most recent fiscal year, and provide assurances that it will, at a minimum, maintain this level of state spending each year. States must also continue to provide comprehensive services, including social, family, and health services. States should ensure that all their preschool programs are coordinated with the Medicaid and State Child Health Insurance Program as well as with social service programs that provide help to poor and low-income families.
- **Professional Development.** States will provide information on their plan for assuring professional development opportunities for preschool teachers and administrators.

- **Preschool Program Coordination.** States will explain how they intend to coordinate the use of funds across all state and federal programs that have the purpose of promoting school readiness and how they will administer the program. These may include Head Start, Early Head Start, Title I preschool, the special education preschool program, and state-funded preschool programs. States are encouraged to include child care programs in their plan, especially programs supported by funds from the Child Care and Development Block Grant. To the maximum extent possible, states should allow parents choice in the selection of preschool programs.

The Administration's proposal includes an additional feature that is designed to help fund the development of preschool guidelines and accountability programs. Under current law, the Department of Health and Human Services spends about \$165 million per year to provide technical assistance to improve Head Start programs. The Administration intends to make a significant portion of this money available to states to meet their needs in designing and implementing state plans.

Actions by the Bush Administration to Improve Head Start

The President is determined to help prepare poor and other at-risk children for success in the public schools. In April 2002, building on his Administration's emphasis on preschool programs, President Bush announced *Good Start, Grow Smart*, a preschool education initiative with three goals:

- Strengthening Head Start;
- Partnering with states to improve early childhood education; and
- Providing information on child development and early learning to teachers, caregivers, parents, and grandparents and closing the gap between research and practice in early childhood education.

The Good Start, Grow Smart initiative was based on recommendations made by the nation's leading early childhood education authorities during the White House Summit on Early Childhood Cognitive Development in July 2001. It is now being implemented by the Department of Health and Human Services and the Department of Education. These two Departments responded to the Good Start, Grow Smart initiative by establishing an interdepartmental task force dedicated to achieving its three goals.

Strengthening Head Start

As affirmed by the No Child Left Behind Act, accountability must be an important component of education programs to ensure that recipients of services achieve program goals. In the case of Head Start, achieving program goals means not only improving children's health and nutrition, but preparing them to succeed in kindergarten and beyond. To accomplish this goal, the Head Start Bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services is implementing an accountability system aimed at ensuring that every Head Start program assesses standards of learning in early literacy, language, and numeracy skills. Called the Child Outcomes and National Reporting System, the Head Start Bureau is field-testing new procedures in more than 100 local Head Start programs. Implementation across Head Start programs is scheduled for the fall of 2003.

Having well-trained teachers is the single most important component of any preschool program. Thus, the Head Start Bureau has implemented a national training program with the goal of training nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers in early literacy teaching techniques. To date, more than 3,000 early literacy specialists in Head Start and 65 child-care administrators have been trained in the use of research-based classroom activities designed to promote literacy. In turn, these literacy specialists serve as trainers for the nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers across the country. The literacy specialists also visit individual Head Start programs to ensure that newly-trained teachers are implementing the literacy instructional activities. In order to continue building the capacity of this program, the Bureau will offer training to new staff. In addition, the Head Start Bureau will offer training during the summer of 2003 to help prepare Head Start staff to implement the Child Outcomes and National Reporting System.

Partnering with States

Today, states are dedicating increasing resources to preschool education. In addition, states have recently started to incorporate literacy, language, and pre-reading development into programs that serve preschool children.

The Child Care Bureau and regional offices of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) have conducted a series of regional roundtable discussions with state child care administrators, state departments of education, and Head Start officials to promote the development of state guidelines for early learning practices. In addition to prompting states to develop early childhood learning guidelines and practices, these roundtable discussions were used by HHS officials to encourage professional development and the coordination of early childhood programs called for under the 1996 federal child care reform. As part of the current biennial planning process for CCDF, states are being required to describe their progress in developing guidelines for early learning as well as professional development and coordination of early learning programs.

Providing Information to Preschool Teachers, Caregivers, and Parents

To close the gap between what is known from research about early childhood development and what happens in the daily lives of preschool children, the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services have published and distributed guidelines on language and literacy development for young children. These publications were written for parents, grandparents, early childhood educators, child care providers, and preschool teachers with the hope of getting information about the importance of early literacy into the hands of the adults who care for young children.

What About States That Do Not Participate in the State Option?

For those states that do not elect to participate in the state option, the Bush Administration will continue the Good Start, Grow Smart initiatives currently being implemented to ensure cognitive development for children in Head Start and provide training for Head Start teachers. In addition, the President proposes several changes to the Head Start program for those states that do not participate in the state option

Specifically, the current Head Start Act does not offer the flexibility to target funds where they are needed most. The statute requires that at least two percent of the amount appropriated must be set aside for training and technical assistance, with fifty percent of these funds flowing directly to grantees to use in purchasing training and technical assistance services. Training and technical assistance resources have grown considerably in recent years and considerable investments have been made in Head Start training resources apart from the set-aside funds. However, Head Start enrollment and Head Start grantees have increased only slightly. Under the President's proposal, the set-aside language in the Act would be modified from "at least" two percent to "up to" two percent. This will afford the Secretary with more discretionary authority to allocate these resources each year in a manner that would maximize the benefit to children and families.

Similarly, additional flexibility is needed to better target the quality improvement funds provided under the Act. First, this proposal would provide the Secretary with flexibility to expend up to 25 percent of funds resulting from any increased appropriations to quality improvements. In addition, this proposal would provide flexibility on what portion of these funds should be allocated to improving compensation for classroom teachers and Head Start staff and authorize the Secretary to use a portion of the quality improvement funds to reward high-performing programs.

In keeping with the Bush Administration's commitment to improved quality and accountability, a focus on child outcomes and a yearly training and technical assistance review would be included as part of the Secretary's responsibility for monitoring Head Start agencies. This change provides a proactive approach to ensuring the continuous quality improvement of all grantees and delegate agencies and reflects a commitment to capacity building and evaluation. This approach will allow for the identification and quick response to new and emerging issues and challenges confronting Head Start agencies, while also helping Head Start agencies devise annual plans consistent with their service needs.

Finally, this proposal supports a greater degree of collaboration between all early child care providers, including Head Start, in the provision of early childhood education services. As part of the collaboration grant process, a central point in the Governor's office would be created to establish a meaningful link between Head Start and other statewide partners in order to ensure that services for children and families are delivered in a more holistic manner and work to further the goal of school readiness for all children.