

Strengthening Head Start

Overview

Head Start provides grants to local public and private agencies to provide comprehensive child development services to children and families. In FY 2002, Head Start's budget is \$6.5 billion, and President Bush has proposed to fund it at \$6.7 billion in FY 2003. The program serves 915,000 children – approximately 65 percent of all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds – through a network of 1,545 local grantees.

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. Head Start children also receive comprehensive health services, including immunizations, physical and dental exams and treatment, and nutritional services. Head Start engages parents in their children's learning and helps them make progress toward their educational and employment goals. Head Start programs are evaluated through on-site monitoring at least once every three years.

In 1994, the Early Head Start program was established because of the mounting evidence that the earliest years, from birth to 3 years of age, also are crucial to children's growth and development. In FY 2002, an estimated 62,000 toddlers will be served under the Early Head Start program.

During the 1999 reauthorization of Head Start, Congress mandated that Head Start programs implement standards of learning in early literacy, language, and numeracy skills. These standards of learning set the following goals for children enrolled in Head Start:

- Develop phonemic, print, and numeracy awareness.
- Understand and use language to communicate for various purposes.
- Understand and use increasingly complex and varied vocabulary.
- Develop and demonstrate an appreciation of books.
- In the case of non-English background children, progress toward acquisition of the English language.
- Know that the letters of the alphabet are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.
- Recognize a word as a unit of print.
- Identify at least 10 letters of the alphabet.
- Associate sounds with written words.

These standards of learning, however, have yet to be fully and effectively implemented. The Bush Administration will strengthen Head Start by ensuring that Head Start programs are evaluated on whether they effectively prepare children to meet standards of learning and by training Head Start teachers to use the best methods of early reading and language skills instruction in order to better teach to these standards.

Summary of Initiatives

Ensure Cognitive Development for Children in Head Start. President Bush has directed HHS to develop a strategy to ensure that, for the first time, every Head Start center assesses the standards of learning in early literacy, language, and numeracy skills. This new accountability system will be field tested in the 2002-2003 academic year, with full implementation planned for Fall 2003.

Every local Head Start program will be required to assess all participants between the ages of 3 and 5 on these indicators at the beginning, middle, and end of each year and to analyze the assessment data on the progress and accomplishments of all enrolled children. Federal program monitoring teams will conduct on-site reviews of a program's implementation of these requirements.

HHS is also designing a national reporting system to collect data from every local program. This system, together with ongoing Head Start research and from Head Start on-site program monitoring reviews, will create comprehensive information on local program effectiveness. Local program data will be used to target new efforts in staff training and program improvement to enhance the capacity of Head Start to increase children's early literacy and school readiness. In addition, data on whether a program is successfully teaching standards of learning will be used in HHS evaluations of local Head Start agency contracts.

Provide Training for Head Start Teachers. Project STEP, Head Start's Summer Teacher Education Program, will provide all Head Start programs the opportunity and funding to participate in a series of intensive early literacy training activities. This year-long training effort will be based on a nationally recognized and research-based teacher training model.

This summer, 2,500 Head Start teachers and child care providers representing programs across the country will attend one of a series of four-day regional training sessions to become Early Literacy Specialists. They will receive 32 hours of training in curriculum topics including fostering phonemic awareness, classroom arrangement to support a literacy rich environment, and basic resources and materials necessary in each classroom to promote literacy. Early Literacy Specialists will then return to their respective Head Start programs and begin training other classroom teachers to provide enhanced early literacy teaching, materials, and learning opportunities for children when centers reopen this fall. The program goal is to train every Head Start teacher in the country by the end of next year.

This unprecedented training initiative will also provide follow-up mentoring and coaching of individual teachers to assist them in implementing teaching strategies and responding to diverse groups of children. A comprehensive, independent evaluation will be designed and implemented to assess the impact of this training effort on teacher knowledge, classroom practice, and effectiveness for children.