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"Head Start: Improving Results for Children"

**Hearing before the
Subcommittee on Education Reform
Committee on Education and the Workforce
United States House of Representatives**

March 6, 2003

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee:

I appreciate the opportunity to appear before you to discuss the federal Head Start program. In particular, I am gratified to discuss how incorporating a language-rich curriculum into Head Start could result in significant educational gains for America's children from low-income families. Two items form the focal points of my testimony:

- I. **A Quality Curriculum Results in Significant Gains for At-Risk Children:** I will present how a successful Head Start Program in Dallas establishes that incorporating a language-rich curriculum into Head Start produces outstanding results for children from poverty—and how hard data backs this up.
- II. **Such a Language-Rich Curriculum Would Complement Existing Head Start Programs—and Not Take Away from Them:** Enhancing Head Start by including such a language-rich curriculum would involve adding such a curriculum, and would not involve discontinuing any of the health, nutritional, and other valuable social services that Head Start currently provides.

A Critical Need: Preparing the Nation's Children for School

**Failing to Prepare Children for School:
The Large Costs**

"Children who start behind, stay behind," noted Tom Hehir, former director of the U.S. Department of Education's Office of Special Education Programs. The gap between a child's achievement and potential widens over time—and leads many frustrated students to drop out of school. Personal losses from dropout are high, as are the costs to society. On average, a high school dropout results in lost lifetime productivity and wages and other costs ranging from \$470,000 to \$750,000 (in 1997 dollars). Particularly at risk of falling behind are children from

low-income families, who have less access to academic resources than their better-off peers. They often begin school with language abilities that lag a year and a half behind those of children from middle-class families.

**A Replicable Example of Success:
Producing Significant Educational Gains for
Children from Low-Income Families in Dallas**

**The Road to Results:
Developing a Quality Curriculum for Kids from Poverty**

In 1989, the Texas Instruments Foundation committed to improving the educational performance of children from low-income families in the Dallas community. Central to the Foundation's approach was collaboration. It first commissioned a study by the University of Texas at Arlington to determine whether establishing a model preschool program could prepare disadvantaged children for educational success. The Foundation then teamed with Head Start of Greater Dallas in 1990 to establish a model preschool—the Margaret H. Cone Head Start Center—for 90 four-year-old children in a predominately African American neighborhood. Its location is next door to federal housing projects in one of the most economically depressed Dallas neighborhoods—an area plagued by high rates of crime and unemployment. In 1990, families served by the Center had an average income of about \$7,000, a single parent headed 90% of their households, and 39% of Cone parents graduated from high school.

**Hitting Social Services First:
Effective for Social Development,
But No Educational Gains**

During the Center's first two years (1990-1992), the Foundation funded a comprehensive array of services—beyond those usually available through a Head Start center. It offered a year-round program, extended hours, a full-time staff that included a nurse practitioner and two social workers, a parent employment program, and increased staff benefits and salaries. The services were beneficial to many, and resulted in gains by Cone children in various developmental areas. But crucially, data produced by UT Arlington research revealed that—after two years of the enhanced social service program—Cone children were still not making gains in language and cognitive skills. After their year at Cone, children were no more ready for elementary school than those who had not benefited from Cone's services. Their scores on the Iowa Test of Basic Skills after completing kindergarten were consistently in the 20th-30th percentile. The TI Foundation determined that it had to do more to improve the academic curriculum at Cone.

**The Next and Necessary Step:
An Enhanced and Effective Educational Program**

In 1993, the Foundation approached the Southern Methodist University (SMU) Learning Therapy Program, of which I am the Director of the Language Enrichment Activities Program and Head Start Initiatives, to create a pre-reading curriculum. The result was the Language Enrichment Activities Program (LEAP), a research-based, scientifically-based program that is age appropriate, interactive, and consistent with Head Start's focus on emotional and social development. LEAP aligns with the Head Start performance standards and NAEYC accreditation standards. LEAP focuses on enhancing vocabulary development, phonological awareness, listening skills, and fine motor skill development. It also includes basic math and science concepts, such as sorting, measuring, and counting. Children are not situated at desks; rather the day involves play and enjoyment. Learning experiences flow from self-initiated activities and multisensory experiences around the classroom. LEAP is not a scripted program, but teachers receive a LEAP instruction guide to assist them and provide ideas. The program curriculum and materials cost \$1,000 per classroom. Teacher training is available for an additional cost of \$900 per teacher, which includes all course training materials. Designed for four-year-olds, a companion curriculum—Baby LEAP for three-year-olds—is scheduled for distribution in summer 2003. In addition, a dual language LEAP curriculum is available for Hispanic students.

What Constitutes a Language-Rich Preschool Curriculum

Among preschoolers, vocabulary, letter knowledge, and phonological awareness—in addition to social and emotional factors—have a significant impact on later success in school. A language-rich preschool curriculum focuses on developing these crucial preliteracy skills.

The curriculum uses a developmental, interactive teaching methodology in conjunction with an enriched language program. Classroom activities are intended to stimulate intellectual curiosity, develop logical thought processes, support cognitive growth, enhance language opportunities, and build phonological and print awareness skills.

The program emphasizes the areas of receptive and expressive language in both oral and written form. At the center of the curriculum is the availability of quality children's books. In addition to reading to children every day, teachers include language in a variety of activities: games, pictures, experiences, and interactions. These activities serve to build vocabulary and phonological awareness, knowledge of the letters of the alphabet, and a basic awareness of math and science concepts like measuring, counting, and sorting. Teachers are encouraged to talk to the children in conversation as often as possible during the day, modeling correct grammar and a rich vocabulary. By incorporating counting and word games, nursery rhymes, fairy tales, and creative play in learning centers, children learn oral language in a child-centered environment. In addition, activities that involve print, literature, writing, and language experience charts encourage print awareness. In sum, the knowledge and skills gained through the curriculum increase children's chances for success in kindergarten and beyond.

**The Result:
Significant Gains in Academic Achievement**

Performance data from assessments of the children both before and after their year at Cone (and beyond) have proven the success of LEAP.

Improvement in Preschoolers' Cognitive Skills After Participation in LEAP

Children who took the Iowa Test of Basic Skills (ITBS) after their year at Cone in 1990-1992—prior to the implementation of LEAP—scored on average in the 20th-30th percentile. Average scores on the ITBS from 1995-2001, after the implementation of LEAP, increased to the 60th-70th percentile. Last year, under a new test—the Stanford 9—children who had just completed their year at Cone using the LEAP curriculum scored in the 75th-87th percentiles, well above the national norm.

Academic Gains from LEAP Lasting into Elementary School

High Percentage of Cone Children Reading At or Above Grade Level at the End of Third Grade: In spring 2001, 85% of third graders who had participated in the LEAP program at Cone and had attended the local elementary school—Frazier Elementary (which uses a curriculum that emphasizes literacy)—could read at or above grade level on the Stanford 9. This 85% compared with only 66% of Frazier third graders who had not attended Cone who were able to read on grade level. Cone third graders also scored higher in 2002 on the Stanford 9, with 90% of Frazier third graders who had attended Cone reading at or above grade level, as compared with 74% of Frazier students who had not attended Cone.

LEAP Students Surpass Their Peers on State Assessments: On the Texas Assessment of Academic Skills, students who attended Cone score on average 15 percentage points above peers at Frazier Elementary who did not attend Cone. Frazier's scores are among the best in the state, which is in itself a remarkable success story involving collaboration, leadership, professional development, enhanced accountability measures, and the provision of supplemental services. In 2001, 100% of third graders who had attended the Cone Center and kindergarten through third grade at Frazier passed the Texas assessment. Partly as a result of this performance by former Cone students, Frazier earned the coveted Texas Education Agency rank of "Exemplary"—an exceptional feat in light of the fact that 97.9% of Frazier's students are from low-income families (2001 percentage).

**Three Central Elements of LEAP that Contribute to Success:
Teacher Training, Volunteer Involvement,
and Preschool-Elementary School Collaboration**

Crucial to the success of LEAP is the teacher training. Many instructors of preschoolers—at Head Start and elsewhere—have not received quality education in writing, spelling, reading, and learning strategies. Thus, a central component of LEAP is the SMU teacher training program, with a focus on instructors' language skills and the application of LEAP materials. Participants receive 40-45 hours of training, which includes lecture as well as practice. There are two training programs, which differ in requirements and focus. Teachers in one program receive three-hours of undergraduate credit from SMU. Teachers in the second type of training are those who hold a Bachelors or Masters degree; they obtain three hours of graduate credit. As of February 2003, about 1,600 teachers and teacher's assistants had received LEAP training. Those who provide the training must satisfy some exacting requirements: they must hold a Masters Degree, participate in extensive LEAP training, and have experience as a LEAP teacher.

Volunteers enhance the program; they visit classrooms weekly to read and talk with children. In addition, collaboration between the Cone Center and Frazier Elementary (where most Cone children attend elementary school) is ongoing and communicative. Cone's teachers and director meet with Frazier's principal and kindergarten teachers quarterly. Each spring, Frazier receives a list of incoming Cone students along with information about their developmental levels.

**Spreading the Benefits of LEAP
Expanding the Program to Benefit Preschoolers
in the City, State, and Nation**

The success of LEAP at the Cone Center has led various groups to adopt the program—both in Texas and across the country. As of May 2003, approximately 45,000 children will have benefited from the LEAP curriculum. These children attended preschool in over 1,100 Head Start and public school classrooms. While most of these classrooms are currently in Texas, teachers and children in several other states are also embracing LEAP.

Expanding the LEAP program has become a joint venture of Head Start, the private sector, and the state. We believe that the federal government should encourage the adoption of quality, language-rich preschool curricula for children from poverty in every state—and that such assistance should encourage collaboration between state, private, and federal sectors. The following is an overview of the expansion that has taken place—and displays the promise of what could come about through increased federal assistance.

**City Leaders Form Collaboration;
Commit to Having All Children from Poverty Benefit from LEAP**

Approximately 1/3 of the 31,000 at-risk children in Dallas (based on 2000 Census data) do not attend preschool. Of the over 20,000 who do, most will receive the benefits of LEAP by the end of the 2002-2003 school year. LEAP's implementation is widespread in the city

because major early childhood education providers in Dallas have embraced it—including the Dallas Independent School District, Head Start, Child Care Group, and Child Care Management Services (CCMS) (with each CCMS provider participating on a voluntary basis).

In addition, community leaders from a broad range of organizations have collaborated to close the gap for the remaining children. They desire that every disadvantaged child in Dallas County be prepared for reading and learning in kindergarten as a result of experiencing the research-based and proven LEAP curriculum. The collaboration—formed through the efforts of the nonprofit Foundation for Community Empowerment and its founder, J. McDonald Williams, Chairman of the Trammell Crow Company—includes a cross-section of community and educational leaders in Dallas. Members include:

- Child Care Group
- Child Care Management Services
- Dallas Citizens Council
(CEOs of the top 250 companies in Dallas)
- Dallas Housing Authority
- Dallas Independent School District (DISD)
- Foundation for Community Empowerment
- Greater Dallas Chamber of Commerce
- Head Start of Greater Dallas
- National Center for Educational Accountability
- Southern Methodist University
- Texas Instruments Foundation
- WorkSource for Dallas County

Head Start of Greater Dallas has implemented LEAP in all of its 26 Dallas area sites. In addition, the DISD began using LEAP in all of the district's Title 1 preschool classrooms—which total 240—during the 2002-2003 school year; approximately 500 DISD teachers trained in LEAP lead these classrooms. And the Texas Work Force of Dallas has granted funding for LEAP training and materials for 100 of its child care providers. By the summer of 2003, these efforts will begin to impact a total of over 12,500 at risk children in Dallas each year. These significant expansions of LEAP establish a well-nourished seedbed for meeting the collaboration's goal: having all disadvantaged preschoolers in Dallas County benefit from the LEAP curriculum.

Expanding LEAP Across Texas and the Nation

Texas Expansion

Early childhood educators in approximately six large Texas cities and forty Texas towns currently employ LEAP. This includes over 500 classrooms in Dallas and approximately 100 in Houston and Austin, respectively. The Texas Legislature and Texas Education Agency have served as primary supporters—and initiators—of this widespread adoption of LEAP by passing legislation and establishing grant programs.

Expansion Across the Nation

Upon learning of LEAP's effectiveness, educators from across the country have sought out the program—and are implementing it. Preschoolers in school districts and Head Start programs in Alabama, Louisiana, and California currently benefit from LEAP while LEAP pilot sites are active in Maine and Virginia.

Alabama: Five hundred and forty preschoolers in Tuscaloosa County, Alabama experience LEAP. These children—in both the city's school system and Head Start centers—come almost entirely from economically disadvantaged circumstances. Yet their gains after only one year of the LEAP curriculum are substantial: preschoolers who experienced the curriculum increased their score on the DIAL-3 assessment of developmental skills from an average percentile rank of about 31-32% at the beginning of the school year to an average percentile rank of about 58% at the end of the school year.

California: Members of the California Reading and Literature Project have implemented the program in 125 classrooms in California in 2002. LEAP staff has trained over 125 California preschool teachers in the curriculum.

Expansion into Additional States in 2002-2003: Young children living in Louisiana, Maine, and Virginia are beginning to experience the curriculum during the current school year at pilot sites—and educators in all three states plan to expand to additional classrooms next year. LEAP instructors, through SMU, have trained classroom teachers in these states that use the curriculum. School districts and Head Start agencies in Alaska, Arizona, Florida, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Oklahoma, Pennsylvania, South Carolina, and Washington have sets of the curriculum. Many are interested in teacher training as well as the LEAP curriculum; participation appears to be limited principally by the need for funding.

A Beneficial Fit: LEAP and the Federal Agenda

As the Head Start Reauthorization moves forward, serious consideration should be given to replication of quality preliteracy programs similar to LEAP in Head Start programs across the country—and, indeed, in every program that serves pre-kindergarten children from poverty. I urge the committee to consider measures that would encourage the use of such research-based,

substantive preschool curricula in programs in every state. The goal is for each at-risk child to enter kindergarten prepared to read and to learn. Research documents the resulting benefits to children during kindergarten and their later years—and to society as a whole. LEAP and similar substantive programs can serve to fulfill this need. Through data, LEAP has been modified, improved, and proven effective; it is replicable across the country; and it could form a valuable key to opening the door to a quality—and crucial—preschool experience for the nation's children.

This concludes my remarks. Thank you again for this opportunity to appear before you. I am glad to respond to any questions that members of the committee have.

APPENDIX
Assessment Instruments for Preschoolers:
Using Effective and Age-Appropriate Tools

Types of Tools: Child-Friendly and Reflective of Skill Levels:

Assessments of preschool children focus on a broad range of abilities. Primary among them are a child's receptive language skills, expressive language ability, motor skills, concept knowledge, vocabulary, and phonological awareness. Often these assessments ask children to simply point to a picture that corresponds with what the administrator expresses. Other assessments require a child to answer orally. For samples of the type of questions asked, see Appendix I. In addition, Appendix II contains a description of the various assessments employed at Head Start Centers where Texas Instruments has funded program evaluations. Both sets of materials display the child-centered and child-friendly nature of the assessments.

Time Involved and Number of Questions:

The amount of time necessary to complete an assessment varies depending upon which assessment a program uses and how experienced the administrator is. An estimated administration time for various assessments is 15 to 20 minutes while others may take an hour or more to perform. The number of questions also varies from assessment to assessment. And, when taking an assessment, the number of questions each child is asked varies depending upon a child's level of ability. An assessment administrator stops asking questions when a child gets a high proportion of questions incorrect at a certain difficulty level. A rough estimate of the number of questions asked of children on the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test, for example, at Dallas Head Start programs funded by TI is approximately 60 items for the majority of three-year-olds and approximately 72 items for the majority of four-year-olds.

Response of Children to Assessments

Bill D. Ball, a licensed specialist in school psychology who assesses children at various Head Start centers in the Dallas area, describes the children's positive reaction to the assessments:

"Most children enjoy the assessments. They get one-to-one attention from an adult. We let them select stickers at the end of assessment. They view the assessment as fun, like a game. They enjoy showing assessment administrators what they know. If a child does not want to participate in the assessment, we don't force the issue. We tell the child "OK." Then we try back in a few days. Children typically agree to assessment the second time they are asked. If a child is sick or is having a rough day, they are removed from the assessment list for that day. The most common problem is that once children in a class get to know the assessment administrators, they all beg the administrators to take them next."

Almost all children are able to be assessed. As Ball explains, "We do encounter some children who we are not able to assess. However, with receptive language measures like the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test-Third Edition, this occurs with only about 2% of 4 year old children and 4% of very young three year old children."

