

ADDITIONAL MATERIAL

PREPARED STATEMENT OF WINDY M. HILL

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to testify before you today on the President's plan to strengthen Head Start as one means for helping to ensure that every child has the opportunity to enter school ready to learn. I testify before you not only as the Associate Commissioner of Head Start, but also as a former Head Start child and the mother of a Head Start child who is now an accomplished high school student following her "great start" in Head Start. I truly believe that the President's plan will help ensure that our preschool children will indeed have the opportunity to enter kindergarten ready to learn and prepared with knowledge and skills they must have to succeed no matter where they started.

I believe the House took a major step toward ensuring that Head Start children have the skills they need to succeed in school by marking up legislation to reauthorize and strengthen the Head Start program. We look forward to building on the momentum created by H.R. 2210, the "School Readiness Act of 2003", and your hearing today to move the Head Start reauthorization forward in the coming weeks.

Head Start was launched in 1965 as part of a bold, "big idea"—that no child should be limited in his or her education because of the circumstances of their families. For 38 years this country has demonstrated a national, bipartisan commitment to this "big idea". Congress has sustained funding for the Head Start program and has shown a willingness to make changes when necessary to improve outcomes for children such as the addition of the Program Performance Standards and raising teacher qualifications. We have the same goal—to prepare children—many like me—for success in school and later in life. Given that goal, none of us should be satisfied until we have achieved the vision reflected in the "big idea" that is synonymous with Head Start—that economically disadvantaged children should arrive at school on a more level playing field with economically advantaged peers. While anything short of fully achieving this goal should not be seen as a failure, we must all see it as a challenge for us to do even better.

Consequently, when research showed that Head Start graduates, even those making significant progress, continue to lag too far behind on a number of important indicators of early literacy and math skills, the President and Secretary Thompson sent a clear message—given this compelling evidence, more had to be done to strengthen the educational outcomes for children. As part of the President's Good Start, Grow Smart initiative, we were directed to increase the knowledge and skills of Head Start teachers in the area of preschool language and literacy and to create and manage a National Reporting System that will help measure children's progress in mastering the skills necessary to prepare them for a lifetime of learning.

Furthermore, the broader social context has changed dramatically since 1965 when many States were just beginning to implement universal kindergarten and no State had a publicly funded preschool program primarily targeted to low-income children. In 1965 there was no need for Head Start to coordinate with State-run preschool programs because there weren't any. Today, more than 40 States and the District of Columbia have early childhood programs of their own. Numerous States are creating or revising their standards for child care and preschool programs. Research also supports the importance of providing comprehensive services, so States now are involved in trying to integrate a multitude of other programs aimed at young children and their families—including Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), the State Children's Health Insurance Program (SCHIP), Medicaid, special education, developmental screening, and outcome assessments.

In response to the President and Secretary Thompson's charge and our changing social context, we looked for ways to improve the effectiveness of the Head Start program. Much about the program was working, and working well, but we knew the program needed to move ahead—particularly in the area of educational gains and coordination. I would like to briefly describe our on-going efforts to improve the educational component of Head Start over the past 2 years, as well as provide detail on the President's innovative proposal.

The Bottom Line is School Readiness

The bottom line for the President, and now underscored in H.R. 2210, is school readiness—improving early childhood learning experiences while holding programs accountable for achieving positive educational outcomes. Research tells us a great deal about the skills and knowledge children need to be successful in school. Success in school is a strong predictor of success in life, as reflected in lower delinquency

rates, less teen pregnancy, higher income, fewer health issues, less suicide, and so forth.

Federal and State governments currently spend more than \$23 billion each year for child care and preschool education—and much more than that when you consider the other State health, nutrition, and welfare-related programs that serve these same children and families. Never has there been such a clear commitment on the part of Federal and State governments to enhance the well-being of children and families. Never have we known so much about what children need for healthy growth and development. Never have so many programs been focused on meeting these needs of our most vulnerable children and families.

At this same time, however, though Head Start children make progress in areas of school readiness during the Head Start year, they continue to lag behind their more economically advantaged peers on a number of important measures of early literacy and math skills at kindergarten entry.

The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is at the center of our research on the quality of Head Start and the outcomes for children. In the FACES studies, child outcomes are measured through direct assessment, observation, and parent and teacher ratings, drawing upon a nationally stratified random sample of 3,200 children. FACES provides national data on Head Start child outcomes, family involvement, key aspects of program quality and teacher practices.

Research findings from FACES allow us to compare the performance of Head Start children enrolled in 1997–1998 with children served in 2000–2001. Both groups of children entered Head Start with levels of academic skills and knowledge far below national norms. Both groups demonstrated progress in early literacy and social skills and that is good news. However, their overall performance levels when they left Head Start still remained significantly below national norms for school readiness and that is not good news for these children. Therefore, we must do more to ensure that Head Start children enter kindergarten with strong early literacy and math skills.

In responding to the President's Good Start, Grow Smart initiative, the Head Start Bureau has already undertaken a number of efforts aimed at bolstering the school-readiness of Head Start children. The Strategic Teacher Education Program, known as STEP, launched last summer, was designed to ensure that every Head Start program and every classroom teacher has a shared, basic, fundamental knowledge of early language and literacy development, and of state-of-the-art early literacy teaching strategies. More than 3,300 local program teachers and supervisors have received this training and have served as "trainers and coaches" to the nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers across the country. I am pleased to report that the local trainers, coaches, and directors are reporting that the STEP training is making a difference in their classrooms.

Following the summer training sessions, the Head Start Bureau conducted national training on mentor-coaching and on the social-emotional development of young learners. These events expanded the skills of teachers and supervisors in fostering effective classroom learning environments and additional teaching practices. A national web-based resource, called STEP-Net, has been created to help early literacy specialists and coaches access and use resources and tools, and to exchange information and promising practices.

As you know, the President has made accountability a guiding principle of this Administration. In keeping with that principle, we are working to make sure that we measure the outcomes of our efforts, not merely the services that make up each of our programs. To that end, one of the most important indicators of any program's efficacy is whether or not it helps those it is intended to help reach certain goals and outcomes.

Good Start, Grow Smart, therefore, calls for not only the improvement and strengthening of Head Start through intense, large-scale efforts in the areas of early language and literacy, but also for a method to track the results of this effort. Good intentions, although better than bad intentions, are not good enough. This Administration believes that we must also challenge ourselves to determine whether or not good intentions and well-designed implementation are translating into good outcomes. We must, therefore, do a better job of determining how well Head Start children across the country are being prepared for kindergarten success. This fall we will begin implementing the national assessment of some of the congressionally-mandated, school readiness indicators for the 4-year-old children in Head Start.

In developing this child outcomes assessment system, we worked with, and will continue to work with a technical workgroup that advises and guides the selection, development, field-testing and use of reliable and valid measurement tools for Head Start children. When no reliable and valid instruments currently exist, we will engage the appropriate researchers to develop or refine them before including them

in this outcomes reporting system. Our short-term goal is to include only those assessment tools that are reliable and valid for use with economically disadvantaged 4-year-old children with the cultural, socio-economic and linguistic differences of Head Start children.

The President's Proposal

We believe this focus on the educational component of Head Start and the measurement and assessment of outcomes will move the Head Start program to a higher level of overall success for low-income children. However, even more must be done as we have heard from Governors, advocates, and even some Head Start directors that a lack of adequate coordination between Head Start and State-administered programs is undermining the program's ability to provide high quality preschool services to as many children as possible throughout every State. Where coordination is not currently occurring, we are finding large gaps and patchy areas in our safety net, to the detriment of young children and their families.

In some places, State pre-kindergarten and Head Start programs are located in the same community and one or both programs are under-enrolled and are competing for the same children and families. Meanwhile, there are other communities where large numbers of children remain unserved by either State pre-kindergarten or Head Start. To further complicate this issue, when services in the early childhood years are not well coordinated, children can end up in three different settings within a single day: for example, early childhood special education services, Head Start and child care.

Lack of coordination accelerates troubling and often, avoidable problems—one of them is under-enrollment. Our most recent statistics indicate that a Head Start program, by mid-year can be under-enrolled by seven percent. Nationwide this would translate as 62,000 slots for children that the Federal Government is paying for, but are going unfilled. We believe a growing problem of under-enrollment is caused, at least in part, by Head Start programs and other early childhood programs competing for the same children, rather than collaborating to serve as many children as possible.

To strengthen the Head Start program, improve services to low-income children, and promote the coordination and integration of early care and education services, President Bush is asking Congress to include a provision in the reauthorization of the Head Start Act to allow interested States to plan for, manage, and integrate Head Start in their overall plans for preschool services.

As part of the solution, under both the President's proposal and in H.R. 2210, States are offered the opportunity to coordinate their preschool programs and child care programs with Head Start in exchange for meeting certain accountability, maintenance of effort and programmatic requirements. States eligible to participate must submit a State plan for approval to the Secretary of Health and Human Services that addresses several fundamental issues.

The School Readiness Act supports the President's plan in other ways as well. Each State must indicate in its plan how it would better coordinate Head Start with State-administered preschool programs. The shared goal in making this option available to the States is to coordinate preschool programs to better meet the needs of more children. In addition, the State plan must address how it will work to develop goals for all preschool children in the State and devise an accountability system to determine whether children are achieving the goals. In keeping with the President's plan, H.R. 2210 concurs that States must describe in their plan how they will maintain the comprehensive range of child development services for children supported by Head Start funds, including the provision of social, nutrition and health services, and guarantee that they will continue to provide at least as much financial support for State preschool programs and Head Start as they are currently providing.

The President's proposal, and now, the School Readiness Act, share characteristics that are frequently misunderstood, misinterpreted or overlooked altogether. I imagine, Mr. Chairman, that you and your colleagues have received numerous phone calls and letters around some of these issues. I would like to speak directly to a few of those areas.

First, neither the President, nor the House is proposing to block grant Head Start funding to the States. In fact, Head Start will continue to be managed as a Federal-to-local program, except in those instances where States are "eligible" to apply and are funded for integrated preschool services that are approved by the Secretary of Health and Human Services. To be clear on this point, no State will be required to take advantage of this opportunity nor is anyone proposing that the Head Start program be turned over to States with no strings attached.

Second, neither the President nor the House proposal allows States to do away with the comprehensive services currently available through Head Start. Indeed, States taking advantage of this option must make a commitment to maintain the comprehensive services currently available through Head Start for those children who, under the State plan, are supported with Head Start funds. In addition, this Administration believes that the need for parental involvement in Head Start is a vital component to its success.

Third, both the President's plan and the House bill make clear that the Federal Government will not cease or relinquish its oversight responsibilities for the Head Start program. Under the President's proposal, States who choose this option and who have their plans approved will still be accountable to the Federal Government for their use of Head Start funds and for achieving positive outcomes for children. In cases where a State does not choose this option or where a State's plan is not approved, the Federal Government will continue to administer the Head Start program as a direct Federal-to-local program.

And the final major area of agreement I want to mention is that neither the President's plan nor H.R. 2210 will allow States to supplant State preschool—or any other State funds—with Head Start dollars. Neither would a State be eligible if they reduced their State spending levels on early childhood programs. Indeed, H.R. 2210 concurs with the President's proposal that States must maintain their current level of State spending on preschool programs.

Current Partnerships

Even in its historical, Federal-to-local program structure, Head Start has always recognized the important role that States play in the formulation and implementation of policies and initiatives that affect low-income children and their families. Partnerships have always been one of Head Start's highest priorities. These include partnerships with local school districts, nearly 450 of which operate Head Start programs, and partnerships with local governments—with 150 city and county governments now operating Head Start programs.

In addition, we currently have State collaboration projects in all 50 States, as well as the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico. One of their roles is to facilitate significant, statewide partnerships between Head Start and the States in order to meet the increasingly complex challenges of improving the quality and efficiency of services for economically disadvantaged children and their families.

Through these and other efforts at the State and local levels, Head Start has sought to support the development and enhancement of State-level efforts to build early childhood systems through linkages, coordination, and integration of goals, policies and services. We will continue these efforts to forge meaningful partnerships on behalf of children and families to remove as many obstacles to partnership as possible. In addition, the reauthorization of the Head Start Act affords us the opportunity to do even more, by offering States the option to include Head Start in their State preschool plans.

The Time is Right

One of the reasons the Head Start program has remained strong over the course of nearly four decades is that it adapts to accommodate the changing needs of children, families and communities. Now, more than ever, economically-disadvantaged children and their families need a strong, coordinated system of early care and education to help families and children succeed.

The time has come to allow full integration of early childhood services and preschool education, including Head Start within States. We cannot afford to disperse resources through overlapping, competing or ill-coordinated early childhood programs.

Most importantly, we cannot afford to have children slip through the cracks that non-systematic approaches create. We do not want any more preschool children—Head Start and others—to be left in the early childhood “learning gap”, particularly when children with the greatest need for support continue to remain well below national norms of school readiness.

Our children and families deserve the best programs that we can provide and that States and communities can support. The President asks that you allow States the option of integrating Head Start—our nation's leading program for low-income preschoolers—into their planning for, and delivery of coordinated services.

Other Improvements

Before concluding my statement, I would like to briefly highlight a couple of other aspects of the President's Head Start reauthorization proposal that will strengthen our ability to ensure program quality and accountability and better support school readiness.

Of particular note, our proposal would change the current set-aside for training and technical assistance to provide the Secretary with greater discretionary authority to allocate these resources each year in a manner that will maximize benefits to children and families. Our proposal would also provide flexibility in targeting necessary funding for quality improvements. Training and technical assistance resources have grown considerably in recent years at a rate well above the growth of Head Start—while, at the same time, grantees have had access to quality improvement funds that provide them additional resources for these activities. These changes will allow the Secretary to determine the most appropriate level of funds, taking into account all the other needs of the program, the children and their families. For example, in fiscal year 2004, the increased flexibility will provide enrollment increases in areas of the country with the greatest unmet needs for Head Start services.

Conclusion

This committee has worked tirelessly over the years to provide a solid support system for our nation's most vulnerable children and families. Head Start remains a part of our nation's commitment to the original "big idea" that no child can be left behind because of the circumstances of their families or communities. This means that while recognizing the important contribution that Head Start has made over the past 38 years, we can, should and must do more—for we have not yet fulfilled the full promise of the Head Start program.

The Administration is committed to strengthening the educational component of Head Start and improving the coordination of services to benefit school readiness for preschool children. Given the current social environment, with the collage of services available, we believe it is time to test a new approach to coordination. Can we guarantee that it will work? That is an empirical question to be answered through assessment of outcomes—and I believe that is one reason that the House concurs with the President's proposal to give at least some States the option to develop new ways to better coordinate services for low-income children and families rather than proposing a block grant. Under this option, the Administration is committed to carefully monitor progress, measure results, and determine whether States can successfully offer alternatives that will result in better outcomes for children. At the same time, our efforts to strengthen the educational aspects of the Head Start program will continue and the outcomes will be examined.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your commitment and dedication to the well-being of our nation's children, and thank you—Members of the Committee, for your desire to hear more about our strategies to make Head Start stronger to impact the lives of children and families. I look forward to any continued dialogue as work proceeds on the reauthorization of the Head Start program. I will be happy to answer any questions you may have.