

Head Start is one of our nation's premier preschool programs. Begun in 1965 during the "War on Poverty," it is one of the most rigorously evaluated preschool programs in the nation. Over 21 million low-income children have entered kindergarten better prepared because of their enrollment in Head Start. Social liberals and fiscal conservatives agree on the program's success and cost effectiveness. This consistent bipartisan support has fostered the program's continuation and expansion. But more can be done to strengthen the program's workforce and improve its educational performance standards. The U.S. Senate has an opportunity to address both issues when it considers the reauthorization of Head Start.

Two measures pending in the Senate offer thoughtful suggestions for promoting school readiness and increasing the quality of services for all children enrolled in Head Start. The *Head Start Coordination and School Readiness Act* authored by Senators Christopher Dodd and Edward Kennedy is the more comprehensive approach. Under their bill, Head Start would continue to be locally administered and retain its full array of services, but would also be better coordinated with parallel state and local early care and education programs. The bill goes further by: requiring every Head Start teacher to have a bachelor's degree within the next 8 years; strengthening the program's literacy, math and language components; and expanding enrollment to cover all eligible children.

The *Head Start Coordination and School Readiness Act* also addresses a major flaw in the current administration of the program – how to adequately identify and close existing barriers to collaboration with other early childhood initiatives. Instead of creating new bureaucracies or programs, the legislation builds upon and strengthens existing Head Start state collaboration offices. These expanded offices would help bring together federal, state and local stakeholders to develop more integrated state early childhood and education systems, help direct a portion of Head Start teacher training funds, and increase each state's participation in monitoring the effectiveness of local Head Start programs and designation of new program sites – input specifically proposed in policy endorsed by the bipartisan National Governors Association.

Senators Dodd and Kennedy also propose greater alignment of Head Start's curriculum with state education standards. This along with an expanded collaboration role for states will ensure that more low income children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Most importantly, the bill includes realistic funding levels needed to meet these goals, instead of new unfunded mandates.

Expanding the state's role in Head Start would not undermine the program's integrity. Indeed, former governor, now Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander embraces the premise – that states should be more involved with Head Start, in his bill which would create 200 Head Start Centers for Excellence. Under the *Head Start Centers for Excellence Act*, governors would help select most of these Head Start model programs based on their records of success in achieving school readiness. Each center would receive supplemental funds to increase its effectiveness. Senator Alexander's bill would continue the customary practice of local Head Start agencies receiving grant funding directly from the federal government.

Both of these proposals create mechanisms that allow states to strengthen and better coordinate local Head Start programs without taking them over. That's why the Head Start bill passed by the House of Representatives last month is especially troubling. It authorizes an 8-state demonstration for states to experiment with administering local

Head Start programs. Putting aside the question of whether all preschool programs are best left locally controlled, this new authority for states comes with expensive new program requirements, but almost no new money to pay for their implementation. States simply can't afford to pay for further lofty goals set by Washington – passed on to state taxpayers.

The reauthorization of the Head Start program gives us the opportunity to expand the reach of this successful program and help ensure that children benefit even more from participation. Few will dispute that adequate preparation for kindergarten is critical to truly “leaving no child behind” during the school years. Our challenge is to work together to keep intact the best features of Head Start, including local control and parental involvement, while improving the quality of instruction and increasing access and collaboration. Failure cannot be an option.