

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 and over _____ low-income children have entered kindergarten better prepared because of their enrollment in local Head Start programs. 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 both strengthen the program's workforce and improve its educational performance standards. The Senate will have an opportunity to address both these issues when it returns from recess and begins its discussion on the reauthorization of the Head Start program.

It is time to make school readiness a national priority. Just as states and local school districts aligned their K-12 standards, set measurable performance goals and moved to aggressively improve professional development requirements, Head Start instruction should also be better aligned with and coordinated with federal, state and local early education programs standards.

Two measures pending in the Senate take such a long-term view and suggest thoughtful policies that will promote school readiness and quality services for all children enrolled in Head Start. The Head Start Coordination and School Readiness Act by Senators Christopher Dodd and Edward Kennedy offers the more comprehensive approach. Under their bill, Head Start would retain its full array of services, but a process to enhance the program's coordination and collaboration with other parallel state and local early care education programs would be put in place. The bill also goes further, in requiring every Head Start teacher to have a bachelor's degree within the next 8 years; strengthening the program's pre-literacy component focus and expanding enrollment to cover all eligible children.

The Head Start Coordination and School Readiness Act would address a major flaw in the current administration of the program – how to adequately identify and close existing program – state barriers and make the program more effective. The sponsors' solution avoids the obvious – creating a new, larger bureaucracy – and instead gives the states a more expanded role in attracting highly qualified Head Start teachers and opens Head Start Collaboration Offices in each state to ensure that the collaborative process works. The bill's proposed alignment of Head Start's curriculum with state education standards, along with an expanded collaboration role for states will ensure that more low income children enter kindergarten ready to learn. Most important, the bill includes realistic funding levels needed to meet the announced goals.

Parents consistently look to state and local policymakers to set realistic K-12 education policies and goals. Expanding the state's role in the Head Start program would not undermine the program's integrity. Former governor – now Tennessee Senator Lamar Alexander starts at this very same premise – that states should be more involved with Head Start -- in his bill which calls for the creation of 200 Head Start Centers of Excellence. Governors would nominate a selected number of these Head Start models of best practices. The US Secretary of Education would make the final selection. Under Mr. Alexander's bill, local Head Start grantees would continue to receive direct federal funding for their programs.

Both of these proposals create mechanisms that allow states to strengthen and better coordinate local Head Start programs. While local administration has been successful and should not be undermined, states should be more involved in the oversight of these programs in order to better coordinate early childhood quality initiatives in the States and to assure more collaboration and the development of a seamless transition for these programs. The bipartisan National Governors Association is on record supporting local administration of Head Start programs, while simultaneously recommending specific ways in which the program could be strengthened. Its most prominent suggestion involved giving states a more direct role in monitoring program quality and designation of new grantees.

The vast majority of governors have no interest in taking over local Head Start programs. 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. While we are wary of such an approach for a number of reasons, our primary concern is that it fits the current practice where lofty goals promising greater state autonomy are set out by Washington but in reality it only means new mandates and increased state funding requirements.

Lofty goals alone are not enough to strengthen the head Start program. The program's reauthorization is critical to truly "leaving no child behind". And offers the last best chance of aligning Head Start curriculum with state education standards and putting in place a rigorous professional development plan for its teachers. As the legislation moves through the Senate, we would encourage Senators and other interested groups to work with states in strengthening Head Start programs so that all its children can productively realize their dreams.