

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 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 will **has** an opportunity to address both issues when it considers the reauthorization of Head Start.

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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 other parallel state and local early care and education programs. The bill also goes further: by requiring every Head Start teacher to have a bachelor's degree within the next 8 years; by strengthening the program's literacy, math and language components; and by expanding enrollment to cover all eligible children.

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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 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 the 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, which, 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 burdens.

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The Dodd/Kennedy proposal creates a mechanism that allows 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 the implementation to meet those requirements. States alone simply can't afford to pay for more lofty goals set out in Washington and passed on to state taxpayers.

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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.

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