

Early Education and Care: What is the Federal Government's Role?

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Testimony

Mr. Chairman and members of the Subcommittee, I am pleased to have this opportunity to appear before you today to discuss programs in the Administration for Children and Families that primarily focus on early childhood education and care of children under six -- the Head Start and child care programs. The Administration is committed to helping to ensure that children enter school ready to learn and looks forward to working with the Congress to improve the effectiveness and coordination of all programs that support the healthy development and school readiness of our Nation's young children.

With an appropriation of nearly \$7 billion, Head Start's mission is to promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of low-income children. Some 1,600 Head Start grantees throughout the country strive to fulfill this mission through the provision of comprehensive education, child development, health, and social services to enrolled children and their families. This year the program will serve nearly 910,000 children in nearly 50,000 classrooms located across the country.

In addition to the Head Start program, the Administration for Children and Families administers the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF). Through CCDF, we provide \$4.8 billion in funds to States, Territories and Tribes to subsidize child care for low-income working parents and improve the quality of care for all families that use child care. In addition, States have the flexibility to use TANF funds for child care both by transferring up to 30 percent of TANF funds to CCDF, and by spending additional TANF money directly for child care. When TANF funds are considered, as well as other State and Federal funding sources, over \$11 billion currently is available for child care and related services for children. This funding will provide child care assistance to an estimated 2.2 million children this year. While available for children under age 13, most child care funds are used for preschoolers, infants and toddlers.

Combined, the Head Start program and child care assistance provided through the CCDF offer an enormous opportunity to influence the healthy development and school readiness of low-income children. I would like to share with you the steps we have taken to improve the quality and effectiveness of these programs, including our efforts to integrate and coordinate our efforts within HHS and with other agencies with related goals. I would like to begin by discussing the research that is guiding our efforts.

Research on Early Childhood Programs

The bottom line for the President in early childhood learning is school readiness – improving the learning experiences and strengthening the focus on accountability for outcomes from those experiences. Research tells us a great deal about the skills and knowledge children need to be successful in school. And success in school is a strong predictor of success in life, as reflected in lower delinquency rates, less teen pregnancy, higher incomes, fewer health issues, less suicide, and so forth.

To help States make informed early care and education policy decisions, we are equipping them with relevant research findings about effective practices. Research into child development, with a recent focus on early literacy skills, gives us a progressively clearer picture of what knowledge and skills children need in the preschool years and predict later school success. For instance, we know that children need exposure to language and a variety of vocabulary words, mainly through meaningful conversations and reading with adults. We also know that children need exposure to the sounds and letters that are the basic building blocks of language. Equally important, they need well-developed social and emotional skills that allow them to participate in group activities and have positive interactions with adults and peers. We also know that the knowledge and skills that help children prepare for kindergarten can be nurtured in a variety of settings, including Head Start programs, preschools, and home-based child care providers.

The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is at the center of our research on the quality and effects of Head Start. FACES, an ongoing longitudinal study of Head Start programs, drawing on a nationally stratified random sample of between 2,400 and 3,200 children, provides in-depth information on such areas as child outcomes, family involvement, and key aspects of program quality and teaching practices.

FACES data have been collected for children entering Head Start in 1997, 2000, and 2003. These data show that children enter Head Start with levels of academic skills and knowledge far below national norms. Although children demonstrate progress in early literacy and social skills, their overall performance levels when they leave Head Start still remain below national norms of school readiness.

Research on Early Head Start programs demonstrated that children in Early Head Start functioned significantly better than a randomly assigned control group in cognitive and language development and their parents report they were more likely to read to them regularly. However, like older children in Head Start, children in Early Head Start leave the program still lagging behind their more advantaged peers in some areas of development.

Another important element of our research agenda is the Head Start Impact Study, now underway. It is the first large-scale, nationally representative study of Head Start using a randomized control group research design. This study will compare outcomes for Head Start children with what they would have been in the absence of the program, and will show how impacts differ among children, families, and programs with different characteristics. We hope to publish the first findings from this study shortly.

In addition, we are funding several projects that are testing the effectiveness of innovations and improvements in Head Start, Early Head Start and related services for young children. Through partnerships among local Head Start programs and universities and other research organizations, we are sponsoring the development and testing of cutting-edge approaches to literacy, children's approaches to learning, measurement of children's development, and the use of assessment to enhance teaching.

We also have implemented a National Reporting System (NRS) to collect child outcome data from every local Head Start program. This reporting system was launched in the fall of 2003 when approximately 436,000 4 and 5-year-old children received a common standardized assessment of a limited set of key school readiness indicators. The participation rate was greater than 99 percent of all Head Start programs and families in this largest-ever assessment of young children. Each local Head Start program that participated received a report on the average levels of performance of both English and Spanish-speaking children on each of the four sections of the assessment: language comprehension, vocabulary, letters of the alphabet and early mathematics skills. The reports allowed programs to compare their results to national averages and to results for agencies with similar characteristics. Programs will use the data from the NRS to improve the delivery of services in those areas in which the NRS suggests improvement is needed. We will assist them in this effort.

With respect to child care, we also are funding a comprehensive research and evaluation agenda that focuses on: the effectiveness of strategies to improve children's early learning; the impact of professional development efforts in changing caregiver skills and practice (including coordination of training efforts across early care and education systems); and the impact of partnerships and collaborations among Head Start, child care, and pre-kindergarten in promoting child, provider, and family outcomes. We launched a four-year, multi-site study of alternative approaches that show promise for improving the knowledge, skills, and performance of child care providers across the range of care settings. This research will help States make informed decisions about how to use their CCDF quality improvement dollars to support children's early learning.

Many of our research and evaluation efforts are coordinated with others in HHS and the Department of Education. For example, we are supporting an enhanced analysis of early learning indicators in the National Household Education Survey. Further, to ensure that policymakers and administrators have easy access to key research findings, a Child Care and Early Education Research Connections archive was launched a year ago. Research Connections is an online, interactive database of research, information, and data sets on topics related to early care and education.

In addition, the Interagency School Readiness Consortium, a multi-million dollar collaborative program between HHS and the Department of Education, supports research on the effectiveness of early childhood curricula, programs, and interventions in promoting the range of cognitive, social, and behavioral skills necessary for the child's successful entry into school. Eight research teams are rigorously evaluating cutting edge

early childhood intervention implementation in public settings – including Head Start, child care, State pre-kindergarten and blended programs.

Further, in partnership with the National Institute of Health (NIH) National Institute for Child Health and Development (NICHD), we are creating additional measures that may be used to replace or to extend the current measures with the National Reporting System. With its investment of \$3 million annually in Head Start Research, Development and Evaluation funds during FY 2005 through FY 2009, the work governed by the ACF and NICHD partnership will support the Administration's commitment to our nation's most vulnerable children who remain at risk for not achieving success in school.

Efforts to Improve Head Start and Child Care

I believe that we all would agree that Head Start makes positive contributions to the lives of thousands of children and families. But if the program is to achieve its full potential, we must integrate new research findings about early childhood learning into the program. The same holds true for child care services.

Key to the Administration's efforts to focus on an integrated and coordinated approach to early childhood learning, is the President's Good Start, Grow Smart Early Childhood Initiative announced in 2002. The President's Good Start, Grow Smart initiative provides a clear charge not only to Head Start but to the entire early childhood education field, including child care programs. The initiative contains three key elements related to partnering with States to improve early learning:

- (1) research-based early learning guidelines in each State that describe what it means to be kindergarten ready, no matter what care setting a child is coming from;
- (2) statewide professional development plans, linked to the early learning guidelines, for educating and training child care and preschool teachers and administrators; and
- (3) coordination across major early childhood programs and funding streams.

Good Start, Grow Smart encourages program coordination across early learning efforts, particularly among four key programs--CCDF, Head Start, public pre-kindergarten programs, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF). Through joint planning and information sharing, we are working together to ensure that State Good Start, Grow Smart partnership efforts are coordinated with other related State initiatives, such as the State Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems grants funded by the Maternal and Child Health Bureau, our sister agency at HHS. These grants are helping States work across programs to develop and implement collaborations that support families and communities to raise children that are healthy and ready to learn.

Further, an Interagency Good Start, Grow Smart workgroup representing early childhood programs at HHS and the Department of Education coordinates Good Start, Grow Smart activities and works together to achieve school readiness goals for young children. This workgroup is focused on creating and maintaining a shared vision for early childhood education at the Federal level and with State and local constituents.

We also are paying particular attention to the needs of children with disabilities. For example, this summer ACF's child care, Head Start and developmental disabilities staff along with staff from the Department of Education will be co-sponsoring the National Early Childhood Inclusion Institute to develop better collaborative relationships and cross-agency systems to support early childhood inclusion for children with special needs.

To promote Good Start, Grow Smart goals, we have created strategic partnerships with States to improve early childhood programs through a significant infusion of guidance, training and technical assistance. Within the Head Start program, we implemented an intensive national teacher training program in early literacy. Project STEP, Head Start's Summer Teacher Education Program, provided training to all of the nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers in early literacy teaching techniques. Project STEP has enhanced the effectiveness of Head Start teachers by providing intensive teacher training on strategies to foster children's progress in specific indicators of early language and pre-reading skills, including phonological awareness, vocabulary, print and book awareness, letter knowledge, and early writing.

Within the child care program, States have been encouraged to include Good Start, Grow Smart objectives in their CCDF State plan and we have provided technical assistance and training for States, Tribes, and Territories to assist in this effort.

States have embraced the Good Start, Grow Smart goals and made tremendous progress. Every State successfully submitted plans for Good Start, Grow Smart only one year after its launch. Many States are engaged in embedding the early learning guidelines in expanded professional development systems. All States have created partnerships with key early care and education programs in their States and are coordinating with these stakeholders in the establishment of their professional development systems.

Since 2002, a series of regionally-based meetings have been conducted with State stakeholders from child care, Head Start and education to develop a strategic plan for implementing Good Start, Grow Smart in their States. ACF's child care and Head Start staff have partnered with Department of Education to provide national training for States, Territories, and Tribes, including a Forum on Child Care and Early Literacy and two State Roundtables on early learning guidelines and professional development. We also have provided individualized technical assistance for many States, including onsite consultation.

States are taking the initiative to advance coordination efforts as well. For example, Ohio recently launched the Early Learning Initiative where programs in Ohio integrate Head Start, Child Care and public pre-kindergarten into a program with the same standards and requirements. ACF is providing funds to support Ohio's efforts to evaluate whether and how partnerships between programs improve the quality of education that children receive. This project will study observed quality and children's school readiness in child care-Head Start partnerships in randomly-selected child care center classrooms and family child care homes, and examine whether, and under what conditions, these

partnerships are related to observed quality and the school readiness of children.

Next Steps

We will continue these efforts to forge significant partnerships on behalf of children and families to maximize the number of children served and the positive impacts provided by these programs. Coordination is essential at the Federal, State and local levels. Nobody benefits by a fragmented approach to meeting pre-school children's needs and, working together, we can be greater than the sum of our parts. Although many States have demonstrated significant interest in, and commitment to, building strong early childhood systems in recent years, no State has a comprehensive system of early care and education that makes high quality services available to all low-income families who want them for their children.

To help us accomplish greater coordination among all early childhood players, we look forward to working with the Congress on several fronts. First, to strengthen the Head Start program, improve services to low-income children, and promote the coordination and integration of comprehensive early care and education services, we are asking Congress to include in the reauthorization of the Head Start Act a provision that will allow interested States to include Head Start in their preschool plans. Under the proposal, States are offered the opportunity to coordinate preschool programs with Head Start programs in exchange for meeting certain accountability requirements.

Moreover, to improve coordination, the President's welfare reform reauthorization plan proposes allowing States to integrate funding and program rules across a broad range of State welfare and workforce programs, including CCDF and other early childhood programs. States can request demonstration authority to integrate aspects of Federal programs, including program eligibility and reporting requirements. The goal of each of these legislative initiatives is to provide maximum flexibility in order to allow coordination across program lines.

Conclusion

I appreciate your strong interest and ongoing commitment to strengthening coordination across early childhood programs to improve the quality, effectiveness and coordination of services and in turn, the care and education of the Nation's low-income preschool children. Working together we can make this vision a reality.