

September 19, 1989

## WHY AMERICA'S KIDS DON'T NEED ANOTHER FEDERAL PRESCHOOL PROGRAM

### INTRODUCTION

A bill to set up federal schooling for four-year-olds will be considered by the full House this fall. Sections of this bill (H.R. 3), sponsored by Augustus Hawkins, the California Democrat, are the House version of the "Act for Better Child Care," the federal day care legislation passed by the Senate in June. In addition to setting up a federal day care system, however, H.R. 3 would spend almost \$2 billion over four years in federal early childhood education programs. The Head Start program, which provides education, health, and nutrition services to poor preschoolers, would be extended to 10 hours a day, year round, and eligibility for the program would be expanded to families with incomes up to \$31,200 a year. Now, Head Start's enrollment is restricted to children in families below the poverty level and most of the 1,300 programs are held during the school year for half a day.

The Hawkins bill would provide half the additional funding to local educational agencies to set up pre-kindergarten programs in the public schools. In addition, the new program would function as a day care system by being available all day and year round for families making up to \$33,300 a year. The Congressional Budget Office (CBO) estimates that the total four-year cost of H.R. 3, as reported by the Committee on Education and Labor, would be \$7.6 billion.

**Excluding Private and Religious Schools.** Early next year, the full Senate will consider legislation introduced by Edward Kennedy, the Massachusetts Democrat, that would distribute federal grants to states and cities to help them provide education programs for four-year-olds. Under the legislation

(S. 123), known as "Smart Start," children from families of all income levels would be eligible for federally funded preschool programs.<sup>1</sup> These programs would have to meet federal standards, including requirements that they operate all day and year round to meet the day care needs of working parents. No for-profit or religious program would be eligible for funding, however. S. 123 would authorize \$500 million in federal funding in fiscal 1990; \$750 million in fiscal 1991; and \$1 billion in fiscal 1992, 1993, and 1994.

**Restricting Parental Choice.** Research evidence shows, however, that the massive federal funding associated with these bills will not appreciably benefit poor children, and actually could harm many middle-class youngsters by introducing them to formal education at too early an age. Moreover, both bills would in practice severely restrict the preschool choices of many parents, while other parents who believe that child rearing does not belong in government hands will be forced to subsidize a government system of preschools.

Labor Secretary Elizabeth Dole and Health and Human Services Secretary Louis Sullivan notified Congressman Hawkins this June that they would urge George Bush to veto H.R. 3. The Bush Administration is correct in opposing this unwise attempt at social engineering and curtailing the rights of parents. Congress instead should focus on curing the deficiencies of the Head Start program, and improving the public school system, by expanding parental involvement.

## ARE CURRENT PRESCHOOL PROGRAMS A SUCCESS?

Almost 90 percent of American five-year-olds now attend kindergarten, although such schooling is compulsory in only a handful of states. In recent years there has been increased interest by states in providing formal education for four-year-olds. Twenty-eight states now fund pre-kindergarten programs, the majority focusing on compensatory programs for disadvantaged children. Some states have established special programs, while others, like California, provide services by adding state funds to the federal Head Start program.

The enthusiasm for early education programs for poor children stems from a belief that these programs have been proven to yield long-term benefits which more than repay the taxpayers' investment. Lawmakers are invariably, but incorrectly, told by program boosters that a dollar invested in preschool education saves as much as \$6 in the future costs of special education, teen pregnancy, welfare, and crime. This impressive financial equation, regrettably, is not supported by research on the benefits of early compensatory education programs.<sup>2</sup>

---

1 S. 123, like H.R. 3, would require middle and upper income parents to pay a fee for the program, on a sliding scale according to income.

2 Ron Haskins, "Beyond Metaphor, The Efficacy of Early Childhood Education," *American Psychologist*, February 1989, pp. 274-282.

**Disappointing Results.** About 460,000 children, of whom 80 percent come from families below the poverty line, attend Project Head Start, the federally funded compensatory preschool program. This program provides health, nutrition, and education services to youngsters aged three and four. In 1985, exactly two decades after the program's inception, results of the most comprehensive study ever undertaken on the effects of Head Start were released.<sup>3</sup> The chief findings: although children show significant immediate gains as a result of Head Start participation, "[B]y the end of the second year [of elementary school] there are no educationally meaningful differences on any of the measures."<sup>4</sup> Besides, short-lived educational improvements, the study found only short-term gains with respect to tests of self-esteem, achievement motivation, and social behavior.<sup>5</sup> The meaning of this comprehensive study: There is no measurable mid-term or long-term benefit from Head Start.

This conclusive finding is disputed mainly by a 1985 study of a single program – and the results of the study never have been replicated. This study of the Perry Preschool Program in Ypsilanti, Michigan, tracked 123 black youths into young adulthood and concluded that the 58 students who had attended the high-quality preschool program at ages 3 and 4 incurred half the rate of teen-age pregnancy shown by their non-preschool counterparts, had a much lower rate of arrests and juvenile delinquency, and were half as likely to become dependent on welfare.<sup>6</sup>

**Spurious "Proof."** This study of the experiences of only 58 graduates of one experimental preschool program stands in stark contrast to studies that have examined the records of millions of children and found that they have enjoyed no such long-term success after their Head Start experience. Yet the Perry Preschool study is widely quoted as "proof" that the American taxpayer can expect to save millions of dollars by investing in early education. Senator Kennedy, for instance, cites the Perry Preschool Project in support of his "Smart Start" legislation, arguing that this federal schooling of four year olds is "...a dropout prevention program, a teenage-pregnancy prevention program, and a crime prevention program."<sup>7</sup> Kennedy's reliance on the Perry Preschool study ignores the warnings of experts that the Perry Preschool study should not be used to justify major new expenditures.<sup>8</sup>

---

3 The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families, and Communities: Head Start Synthesis Project, DHHS Publication No. (OHDS)85-31193, June 1985.

4 *Ibid.*, p. 8.

5 *Ibid.*, pp. IV 8 – IV 11.

6 J.R. Berrueta-Clement, L.J. Schweinhart, W.S. Barnett, A.S. Epstein, and D.P. Weikert, *Changed Lives: The Effects of the Perry Preschool Program on Youths Through Age 19* (Ypsilanti, Michigan: High/Scope 1985).

7 Senator Edward M. Kennedy, "Dear Colleague" letter, December 19, 1988.

8 Edward F. Zigler, "Formal Schooling for Four-Year-Olds? NO," in Sharon L. Kagan and Edward F. Zigler, eds., *Early Schooling, The National Debate* (New Haven, Connecticut: Yale University Press, 1987), pp. 30-31, and Haskins, *op. cit.*



There are good reasons why the experts are very skeptical of Perry as a guide to the likely results of "Smart Start." For one thing, the sample at Perry was small. For another, the excellent results at Perry have not been seen elsewhere. After an extensive review of the research on both model preschool programs and Head Start, Ron Haskins, a developmental psychologist and a senior staff member of the House Ways and Means Committee, concludes in the February's *American Psychologist*:

... the considerable research literature on preschool education will not support the claim that a program of national scope would yield lasting impacts on children's school performance nor substantial returns on the investment of public dollars.<sup>9</sup>

**Key Factor.** A probable reason for the heartening results at Perry is that the level of parental involvement in the program was intense. Example: Perry teachers visited each home weekly throughout the school year. Indeed, studies of compensatory preschool education find repeatedly that increased parental involvement in the education of their children appears to be the key to long-term gains for poor youngsters.<sup>10</sup> The Perry program's home visits guaranteed involvement by every parent. But neither the national Head Start program nor the federal bills provides for a similar level of participation by parents. Kennedy's "Smart Start" would make things even worse, sending four year olds out of the home and off for formal schooling by professionals.

## WHY UNIVERSAL PRESCHOOL EDUCATION WOULD BE A MISTAKE

To date, federal and state efforts in early childhood education have focused on disadvantaged children, seeing the purpose of government programs as compensating for shortcomings in poor families. Both H.R. 3 and "Smart Start," however, would expand provision of these services to middle income children. The assumption is that the earlier children receive formal education the better.

Many experts warn, however, that such formal schooling for four-year-olds could be damaging. David Elkind, author of *The Hurried Child* and *The Miseducation of Children: Superkids at Risk*, is dismayed at the current enthusiasm for schooling of very young children and accuses its proponents of "...blatantly ignoring the facts, the research, and the consensus of experts about how young children learn and how best to teach them."<sup>11</sup> He tells of the harm of exposing children to formal instruction too early:

We miseducate children whenever we put them at risk for no purpose. The risks of miseducating young children are both short- and long-term. The

---

9 Haskins, *op. cit.*, p. 280.

10 Head Start Synthesis Study, *op. cit.*, VI 24-34; Zigler, *op. cit.*, p. 29.

11 David Elkind, "Formal Education and Early Childhood Education: An Essential Difference." *Phi Delta Kappan*, May 1986, p. 632.

short-term risks derive from the stress, with all its attendant symptoms, that formal instruction places on children; the long-term risks are of at least three kinds: motivational, intellectual, and social. In each case, the potential psychological risks of early intervention far outweigh any potential educational gain.<sup>12</sup>

**“Misguided Enterprise.”** Edward Zigler, Director of the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University and the architect of Head Start in the 1960s, also criticizes universal preschool education as a “misguided enterprise” that does not improve the quality of education.<sup>13</sup> Such proposals, says Zigler, reflect “insensitivity” to the different needs of children and their families. When parents do not both work full-time, preschool education would “needlessly deprive parents and children of valuable time they could spend together.”<sup>14</sup> Although a proponent of compensatory education with comprehensive health and family services for poor youngsters, Zigler believes it is a “fundamental error” to advocate the educational component for middle-class students. The gains enjoyed by poor preschoolers generally are a result of medical and social services provided by a comprehensive program – not the formal schooling advocated by “Smart Start” and H.R. 3. “Those who argue in favor of universal preschool education,” says Zigler, “ignore evidence that indicates early schooling is inappropriate for many four-year olds and that it may even be harmful to their development.”<sup>15</sup>

Currently, 49 percent of four-year-olds attend preschool programs operated by private organizations, churches, and public schools, with the great majority in private schools.<sup>16</sup> Black four-year-olds attend at the same rate as white children.<sup>17</sup> For middle-class parents who feel that preschool programs do help four-year-olds, there are a variety of such programs. But under the proposed legislation, families would have their choices sharply curtailed, since both federal bills would subsidize only public school programs or a narrow range of non-profit programs.

---

12 *Ibid.*, p. 634.

13 "A Few Words of Caution on Schooling the Very Young," *The New York Times*, May 5, 1985.

14 *Ibid.*

15 Zigler, *op. cit.*, p. 35.

16 *Digest of Education Statistics*, 1988, National Center for Education Statistics, U.S. Department of Education, Table 38, p. 55.

17 School Enrollment – Social & Economic Characteristics of Students: October 1986, *Current Population Reports*, Series p. 20, No. 429, U.S. Department of Commerce, August 1988, Table 2, pp. 10-11.

## HOW CONGRESS CAN IMPROVE HEAD START'S IMPACT

In light of the well-documented, disappointing short-term benefits of Head Start, and the lack of any measurable longer term benefits, policy makers should be focusing on ways to strengthen that program for disadvantaged youngsters. rather than spending vast new funds to expand the program to the middle class. It would be wasteful and poor policy to create new programs that resemble Head Start, but ignore the evidence of the program's strengths and weaknesses. Integrating Head Start programs into the public school system, moreover, would destroy the unique role Head Start plays in the community, and inevitably would lead to less parental influence and involvement over the program's operation and design. Such a state-run, formalized program could never provide the comprehensive services, or enjoy the local support, of independent Head Start projects. The National Black Child Development Institute, a non-profit policy research organization in Washington, D.C., focusing on the needs of black children, is concerned that new preschool programs would adopt the methods of elementary education which often have segregated black children, labeling them as "nonachievers," and which have not been responsive to the concerns of black parents.<sup>18</sup>

**Parents as Partners.** Improving the existing Head Start programs thus should be the priority, not creating a universal preschool education program. Research suggests that increased parental involvement in the program is the key to benefitting children permanently. The Bush Administration has proposed a \$250 million increase in Head Start's \$1.2 billion budget, and this new funding should be used to experiment with ways to ensure that all parents become full partners in the education of their youngsters. Children would certainly benefit if this parental activism continued as children began formal schooling.

Policy makers also must recognize that no preschool program can hope to compensate for the staggering deficiencies of the American public school system – shortcomings which are most damaging in the case of minority students.<sup>19</sup> Providing education programs at an earlier age is no substitute for improving the quality of public education.

**Local Focus.** In addition, Congress must realize that disadvantaged children cannot be assisted effectively if their family situation is ignored. Almost half of all Head Start children come from families on welfare. The 1,300 local Head Start projects thus should be coordinating their activities closely with local welfare agencies, with the shared goal of helping families achieve self-sufficiency. Many parents of children in Head Start are employed by the program, and Head Start centers often do service as a focus for community efforts to deal with social problems and to provide parents with

---

18 Evelyn K. Moore, "Child Care in Public Schools: The Black Child," in Kagan and Zigler, *op. cit.*, pp. 86-90.

19 *Ibid.*, p. 86.

better information on available social services. However, the emphasis placed on this help for the families of children in the program depends on the local-center. Head Start's role as a ladder for the family on welfare should be expanded.

The welfare reform legislation passed last year offers an opportunity for strengthening Head Start impact on the families of disadvantaged children.<sup>20</sup> The work, training, and education programs in the new welfare reform act will affect thousands of parents on welfare. Mothers with children under the age of six will have to participate in these programs. Head Start centers should reserve spaces for children whose parents are participating in these new work and training programs. If Head Start were to treat these families as a priority, the preschool program could help secure independence from welfare — the first and vital step in ensuring a bright future for poor children.

**Potential Harm.** Both Head Start's increased funding and the monies available under the new welfare law should be used to enroll these children, and to expand the program's hours to meet the needs of welfare parents in training programs. The aim of Congress, in other words, should be to provide a better range of services to poor families, not to expand its educational component to middle-class children, as H.R. 3 proposes.

Some argue that if the Head Start program were expanded to include a far larger number of middle-class children, disadvantaged children would somehow benefit from this association. However, even those experts, such as Yale's Edward Zigler, who agree that the mixing of middle-class children into Head Start could benefit underprivileged children caution that the harm from preschool education to middle-class children will outweigh the benefits to poorer children.<sup>21</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Universal preschool education is the latest in a series of panaceas offered to cure America's education ills. Like so many other putative panaceas, the proposals to create a federal program are based on highly selective and misleading data.

**Strengthening Parental Involvement.** Preschool education potentially may have significant benefits for disadvantaged children if parents became more closely involved with them and if they serve to rally community efforts to reduce welfare dependency. Thus federal policies to boost preschool education for poor children should focus on strengthening parental involvement in Head Start and in making the program more readily available to assist families in becoming independent of welfare. The program should remain targeted on the poverty population, and precious slots should not be allocated to middle-class youngsters who do not need Head Start's services.

---

20 The Family Support Act of 1988, PL 100-485.

21 Zigler, *op. cit.*, p. 33.



There are plenty of private programs available for those middle-class parents who believe that preschool education is desirable. However, child development experts caution that such formal schooling can be damaging to young children. The federal government would be irresponsible to encourage and subsidize any program for youngsters with the potential to do more harm than good.

Kate Walsh O'Beirne  
Visiting Fellow

*All Heritage Foundation papers are now available electronically to subscribers of the "NEXIS" on-line data retrieval service. The Heritage Foundation's Reports (HFRPTS) can be found in the OMNI, CURRNT, NWLTRS, and GVT group files of the NEXIS library and in the GOVT and OMNI group files of the GOVNWS library.*