



## **BROKEN PROMISES: HOW THE BUSH ADMINISTRATION IS FAILING AMERICA'S POOREST CHILDREN**

### **EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

The Head Start program, begun 38 years ago, takes a comprehensive approach to helping the nation's poorest children and families. The program has provided high quality early education, health care, nutrition, and social services to more than 20 million children as well as supports to their families. President Bush's proposal for Head Start would allow the federal government to abandon its promise to truly give children a head start. The program would be handed over to the states, without federal standards for quality, without the requirements of comprehensive services, and without the funds needed to ensure that our most vulnerable children enter school ready to learn.

**It is clear that the Administration is playing politics with one of America's most successful programs for low-income families.** For the first time, Head Start reauthorization is being discussed without its historic bipartisan support. The Administration is using state flexibility as a guise to weaken crucial protections for poor children in Head Start just as it is doing for many other programs, such as Medicaid, foster care, and Section 8 housing.

Head Start is working for thousands of families across America and there is no reason to risk the program's success on an untested strategy. The Head Start program serves more than 900,000 children every day in classrooms and homes across the country. Countless research studies, including the recent Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) conducted by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, confirm that Head Start is giving America's poorest children exactly what it promises—a head start in preparing them for school. We should not jeopardize the program by removing the very elements that make it work for children and families.

**Head Start currently operates under the direction of federal performance standards that ensure quality, comprehensive services for children. These standards are not guaranteed under the Administration's proposal.** Research shows that children learn better when they have good physical and mental health and have families whose own needs are met so they can devote their energies to nurturing and educating their children. Therefore, the Head Start performance standards emphasize not only children's cognitive development but also their social, emotional, and physical development, as well as parent involvement. This comprehensive approach is very rare among early childhood programs, even though each of these components—health care, social services, education, and parent involvement—are essential to children's readiness for school.

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A sampling of Head Start's performance standards include the following mandates for comprehensive services and innovative educational programs:

- ∓ Within 45 days of entry into the program, children are screened for developmental, sensory, and behavioral concerns. Screenings must be developmentally-, linguistically- and age-appropriate.
- ∓ Programs are required to work collaboratively with families to enable them to access, either directly or through referrals, services and resources that are responsive to their needs.
- ∓ Programs must support emerging literacy and numeracy through materials and activities according to the developmental level of each child.
- ∓ Programs promote children's social and emotional development by building trust, fostering independence, and encouraging self-control by setting clear, consistent limits, and having realistic expectations.
- ∓ Head Start grantees must recruit and provide services for children with disabilities through contacts with local education agencies, medical and social services providers, and community-based organizations that serve children with disabilities.
- ∓ Programs must develop relationships with health care providers, mental health providers, nutritional service providers, family preservation and support services, child protective services, local elementary schools and other educational and cultural institutions, providers of child care services, and other organizations or businesses that may provide support and resources to families.
- ∓ Programs must be open to parents at any time during operation, involve parents in the development of program curriculum, and provide parents opportunities to volunteer or become staff.

**Giving Head Start to the states, without performance standards and without additional funding, as proposed by this Administration, will not improve services for poor children and families.** States are facing budget deficits of \$70 billion to \$85 billion for state fiscal year 2004, according to the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities (CBPP). In response, states are currently cutting early education and child care services, leaving many children without the supports they need to prepare for school. In this environment, instead of improving and building on Head Start's success, states will be tempted to use Head Start dollars to fill in gaps in their own programs and spread dollars more thinly.

In 2002, 10 states, including Hawaii, Maine, Massachusetts, Missouri, Montana, New York, North Carolina, Ohio, South Carolina, and Virginia, reported cuts in state investments in prekindergarten programs. A report by the General Accounting Office (GAO), released in May 2003, analyzed proposed budgets for fiscal year 2004 and found that 11 states are planning to cut funding for child care assistance programs. These forced cuts in funding will dilute the quality of services states can offer low-income families and will limit the ability of state prekindergarten programs to prepare children for school. While the Administration's plan claims that states will have to offer comprehensive services, it eliminates the standards that require them, skimps on the resources to provide them, and includes no enforcement mechanism to ensure that states would provide children these supports.

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**States have not demonstrated a commitment to comprehensive standards and do not have the track record of providing the health, social, and emotional supports to children and families. Evidence suggests that state prekindergarten programs fall far short of the standards and requirements established and maintained by Head Start.** An extensive study of state-funded prekindergarten programs found that the programs show significant variability in scope and quality. The analysis also found that state-funded programs tend to be quite weak in the provision of comprehensive services. In addition, there is currently no evidence that state-funded preschool programs are more successful than Head Start in closing children's achievement gap.

Many states have child care and prekindergarten programs that lack the quality assurances of Head Start's federal performance standards:

- ∄ Fourteen states do not establish any requirements or offer any encouragement for programs to provide comprehensive services. Even when they plan to include these services, it is often difficult for state prekindergarten programs to provide these resources due to lack of funding and other obstacles. Head Start's performance standards require programs to provide comprehensive services for all of the children and families served.
- ∄ Thirty states allow teachers in child care centers to begin working with children without receiving any training in early childhood development. The Head Start performance standards currently require all teachers to earn a Child Development Associate credential and 50 percent of Head Start teachers must have an Associate's degree by the fall of 2003.
- ∄ According to a new report from SERVE, only 27 states maintain standards that promote school readiness. These state standards, however, vary enormously and rarely address the full range of developmental needs of young children, as they do in the Head Start Performance Standards.

**This year's budget makes empty promises to young children.** It barely increases funding for Head Start to cover higher costs, cuts child care assistance for at least 200,000 children over five years while increasing work requirements for poor mothers, and strips basic health protections for millions of children – all this during the worst fiscal crisis for states in more than 50 years. The Administration's proposal does not strengthen Head Start but instead puts its success in jeopardy. If enacted, the Bush proposal will allow the federal government to abandon its commitment to helping our poorest children get ready for school and will leave states without the resources necessary to ensure that children are ready to learn.

**Our nation has high expectations for young children and wants to see Head Start improved and expanded to help children reach their full potential.** It is critical that we maintain both the federal standards for quality as well as the federal funding commitment to Head Start children and families. If we truly want to improve the program, Congress should fully fund Head Start so that all eligible children are reached, and expand Early Head Start to help our poorest infants and toddlers. Congress should also ensure that Head Start teachers are the very best, by requiring that they have Bachelor's degrees in early childhood and by providing compensation to ensure that these teachers remain in Head Start classrooms.

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