

Head Start was mentioned in President Bush's plan for education reform but in the context of an early reading initiative, not in moving the program to the Department of Education. His staff has indicated that move may come at a later date, perhaps reauthorization of the Head Start program in 2003. NHSA has been and will continue to educate the president, his staff, Congress, our community, and other early education organizations on why the move is unnecessary and how well the program is already doing in getting children ready for school, including readiness in language and early literacy. Below is NHSA's position on the move.

Head Start Should Remain in the Department of Health and Human Services

Children born into families in poverty start at a marked disadvantage to their peers in middle-income and wealthy families. Studies suggest that they do not have the richness of books in the home, proper nutrition, access to a continuum of health services, and a wide array of at-risk factors for low-income families. Programs like Head Start were begun to address these issues -- improving the richness of the early learning experience for not only young children, but for their parents as well. In fact, it is Head Start's focus on families and fighting poverty in a comprehensive manner which has led to the program's success in getting children ready for school, improving their literacy and numeracy skills, and giving their parents the skills in becoming their child's first and best teacher.

During the presidential campaign, George W. Bush proposed moving the Head Start program from the Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) to the Department of Education as part of an effort to stress school-readiness.

While the National Head Start Association (NHSA) shares the commitment to strong Head Start and early childhood development programs in order to ensure all children are ready for school, NHSA opposes transferring oversight, administration, and review to the Department of Education.

- Throughout Head Start's history, each administration continually has made improvements to strengthen the program through recommendations from Head Start practitioners and experienced early childhood experts. As those recommendations have become policy changes, programs have embraced and implemented them. Policy makers have taken proactive and strong actions in promoting quality and education, and strengthening all aspects in Head Start programs. They have specifically left intact the comprehensive nature of the program to address the social, cognitive, and physical needs of children and the coordinated involvement of parents in the program so they are committed to their child's education.
- In 1998, the 105th Congress forged a bipartisan agreement reauthorizing the Head Start program. In that legislation, provisions were added to augment performance standards and outcome measures so that programs focus on children, further increasing their language, pre-reading and numeracy skills. Other quality improvements were made in the 1998 legislation including improving the skills of Head Start children through program staffing patterns and training as well as through the employment of appropriate research in improving those skills. Head Start programs across the country embraced the new provisions, implementing them within the context of sound child development principles.
- The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is providing a nationally representative picture of what Head Start children know and can do as they complete the program year and prepare to enter kindergarten. The assessment shows Head Start children are ready for school with the typical four-year-old completing Head Start having the knowledge and skills in early literacy and numeracy as well as the social skills signifying readiness to learn in kindergarten. It also finds that Head Start classroom quality is good; no Head Start classrooms scored below the "minimal quality" rating, unlike other large studies of center-based preschools.

The Head Start community stands by its commitment to promote high quality, strong Head Start programs under the oversight of the Department of Health and Human Services. DHHS administration ensures greater collaboration and integration of all the components providing the education, health, family, and community supports and services that contribute to children's readiness, especially for low-income children and families. It makes Head Start a successful program for children and their families not only for school readiness, but beyond. Transferring the program to the oversight of the Department of Education holds no guarantee that key program components such as comprehensive services, career development of community residents, and meaningful parent involvement, including substantial governance responsibilities, will remain the approach. If components are to be strengthened within the program, DHHS has the ability and history to do so.

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