

The Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act

Brief Summary

The Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act reauthorizes Head Start through 2008. Head Start works. The program could work better under this legislation, which will: strengthen the Head Start workforce by requiring stronger education credentials for Head Start teachers and wages more comparable to public school pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers; improve Head Start's academic focus, particularly in preliteracy instruction; expand Head Start to more children, including more younger children through the expansion of Early Head Start; and, promote better coordination across all early care and education programs in the state.

STRENGTHENS THE HEAD START WORK FORCE.

- **Requires all Head Start classrooms to have a teacher with a bachelor's degree.**

Currently, only one-quarter of Head Start teachers hold a bachelor's degree, and compensation for such teachers is half that of kindergarten teachers. Current law requires half of Head Start teachers to hold at least an Associates degree. Under the Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act, within 3 years, all newly hired Head Start teachers must have a minimum of an Associate's degree (or be enrolled within 1 year from date of hire in a program leading to an AA degree) and all classrooms must have a teacher with a Bachelor's degree (within 8 years or by a date specified by the Secretary). All full-time staff must have a professional development plan, which includes a plan for all teachers with an Associate's degree to obtain a bachelor's degree. In order to comply with the minimum educational requirements of the Act, \$3 billion is authorized over the next 5 years for each Head Start agency to develop a plan to raise salaries of classroom teachers taking into consideration their training, level of education, and experience and average salaries of prekindergarten, and kindergarten teachers with similar levels of education, training, and experience employed by the local school district in which the Head Start agency is located. The Secretary may give additional wage assistance to Head Start agencies in high cost areas. Grants would be provided to assist current Head Start staff to further their education and college work-study and loan forgiveness would be available for students and teachers to work in Head Start agencies.

- **Strengthens Training and Technical Assistance.**

The Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act includes a set-aside of at least 3 percent for training and technical assistance of which not less than 50 percent shall be made available to local Head Start agencies to comply with performance standards; not more than 25 percent shall be made available to support State training and technical assistance systems (in collaboration with the Secretary and regional HHS offices); not less than 10 percent shall be made available to support literacy training and other literacy related activities; and, not more than 15 percent shall be made available to the Secretary to assist local programs to meet the performance standards and to provide funds for distance learning to assist rural communities and Indian reservations to expand access to degree programs.

STRENGTHENS HEAD START'S QUALITY, PARTICULARLY PRE-LITERACY AND LANGUAGE SKILLS.

- **Strengthens Head Start's focus on children's pre-literacy and language skills.**

Head Start's quality standards lead the field. In order to provide greater support for early language and preliteracy development of Head Start children and to provide Head Start children with high quality oral language and literature-rich environments, the Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act requires that all Head Start teachers receive ongoing training in language and emergent literacy, including appropriate curricula and assessment to improve instruction and learning. Such training shall include methods to promote phonological and phonemic awareness and vocabulary development in an age appropriate and culturally appropriate manner. Literacy training would include specific methods to best address the needs of children who are English language learners, have speech and language delays, including problems with articulation, or other disabilities. Funding is provided to help Head Start agencies provide books for Head Start classrooms, partner with libraries, and foster books in the homes of Head Start children.

- **Requires coordination between Head Start and local schools to align services with the skills children need to enter kindergarten.**

All Head Start programs should coordinate closely with schools to improve curriculum and teaching in the program, and to identify opportunities for greater collaboration (i.e. outreach, transportation, and support services). The Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act requires that each Head Start agency coordinate specifically with the state child care agency, state prekindergarten programs, Early Reading First, Even Start, other preschool programs carried out under Title I, programs operated under Part C and section 619 of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, and with local educational programs Head Start children will enter at the age of compulsory school

attendance. Each Head Start agency would be required to coordinate and collaborate with the local educational agency serving the community involved to ensure that the curriculum and classroom experiences for Head Start are aligned with the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical skills that children entering kindergarten are expected to demonstrate. In addition, the Act requires Head Start agencies to conduct effective annual program self-assessments, which would include a representative of the local school district to assist in reviewing each Head Start agency's educational performance, a representative of the state, and a representative of the regional HHS office.

- **Improves the use and quality of child assessments in Head Start.**

Child assessment in Head Start provides an important role in improving classroom instruction and services to meet the needs of Head Start children. The School Readiness and Coordination Act requires the Secretary to contract with the National Research Council, to establish, within 90 days of the enactment of this Act, an independent panel of experts on early childhood assessment. The panel is to review the research in the social, behavioral and biological sciences related to early childhood development and make recommendations as well as oversee the development of a new Head Start National Reporting System.

EXPANDS ACCESS TO HEAD START TO MORE ELIGIBLE CHILDREN.

- **Expands Head Start to Additional Children**

Head Start currently serves about 60% of eligible preschool children and 3% of eligible infants and toddlers. The Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act would expand Head Start to all eligible preschool children and double the current set-aside for Early Head Start (serving infants and toddlers) from 10% to 20% over the next 5 years. In addition, outreach would be expanded for under-served populations such as migrant families, English language learners, Native American programs, and homeless children.

IMPROVES HEAD START'S COORDINATION AND COLLABORATION.

- **Expands Head Start Collaboration Offices in the states to enhance coordination among Head Start programs and other state partners, and to promote school readiness for Head Start children.**

A Head Start Collaboration office in each state currently facilitates the coordination of Head Start with other programs and services. States would be given a greater role in working with Head Start programs through expanded collaboration offices called State Head Start Quality Improvement and Collaboration Offices to enhance services to children, better align Head Start with state kindergarten classrooms, and expand opportunities for training Head Start teachers. The Head Start School Readiness and Coordination Act provides \$24 million for State Head Start Quality Improvement and Collaboration Offices to better coordinate Head Start with the Child Care and Development Block Grant and resource and referral services in the state to expand full-working day and full-year services to children; promote alignment between Head Start and state school readiness standards, and assist each Head Start agency in developing a plan to improve coordination and improve outcomes and services for children and families. States would be required to designate or establish an advisory council on Early Care and Education to develop a strategic plan to strengthen efforts throughout the state addressing the needs of children from birth to the age of school entry.

- **Strengthens Head Start's Flexibility.**

In order to enter school on par with their more affluent peers, low-income children need more than part-day intervention and services for 9 months of the year. About 60 percent of Head Start children are enrolled in the program part-time, and less than 30 percent of children receive Head Start services for more than one year. The School Readiness and Coordination Act requires Head Start agencies to coordinate and collaborate with other local community providers of child care or preschool services to provide full-working day, full calendar year services. Pursuant to a need demonstrated by a local community needs assessment, programs may apply to regional offices to—convert part-day sessions, particularly double-back part-day sessions into full-day sessions and serve low income children up to the state's income eligibility threshold under the Child Care and Development Block Grant.

IMPROVES HEAD START ACCOUNTABILITY—

- **Strengthens the monitoring, evaluation, and technical assistance provided to Head Start programs**

Each Head Start program would be required to conduct an extensive program self-assessment each year and implement an improvement plan to address any area of weakness. Grantees would be required to maintain ongoing monitoring systems. In addition, the Secretary would be allowed to conduct periodic monitoring visits without prior notice to the local agency or program.