



Testimony of Helen Blank, Director of Leadership and
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Services, Education and Related Agencies
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Chairman Obey, members of the Subcommittee, thank you for the opportunity to testify about the importance of Head Start and Early Head Start to improving the futures of young children.

I am testifying today on behalf of the National Women's Law Center. The Center is a nonprofit organization that has worked since 1972 to advance and protect women's legal rights. The Center focuses on major policy areas of importance to women and their families. We work to increase low-income women's access to Head Start, Early Head Start, and child care because they are all key to ensuring these families' economic security and their children's futures.

I welcome the opportunity to speak to you today about Head Start and Early Head Start and your strong support for the programs most recently evidenced by the increased funding included in the ARRA and the Omnibus appropriations bill. The Center believes that Head Start and Early Head Start are exceedingly important and special programs because of the comprehensive supports they offer to the most disadvantaged low-income women and children. Head Start was founded on one very common sense principle: children don't come in pieces. Helping children to succeed involves addressing the full array of factors that affect their development—most notably the role their parents play in their lives. With their comprehensive approach to early childhood, Head Start and Early Head Start are fundamental building blocks of the high-quality early care and education system that the President aims to achieve.

Children coming into Early Head Start and Head Start face many barriers. The majority live in families with incomes below the federal poverty level. Nearly one-third of parents with children in Head Start have less than a high school diploma or GED.¹ Over one-quarter of children served in Head Start come from homes where English is not the primary language spoken at home.² Thirteen percent of Head Start children have a disability—most commonly a speech or language impairment.³ Slightly over half of those children determined to have a disability are diagnosed after entering Head Start.⁴

Studies have demonstrated that low-income children such as those targeted by Head Start often start out at a disadvantage. Low-income children may have more limited vocabularies, be read to less often and live in homes with fewer books.⁵ Without the strong start that they need prior to

entering kindergarten to set them on the path to success, low-income children often fall even further behind their peers once they are in school. For example, first-graders from non-poor families are more likely to recognize words by sight than first-graders from poor families and twice as many first-graders from non-poor families are proficient at understanding words in context, multiplication, and division as first-graders from poor families.⁶

Head Start is dedicated to the children who need the most intensive help, and it offers these children high-quality early education as well as an extensive range of other supports. This comprehensive approach is key to the program's success—and is not replicated in most other early education programs. In Head Start, social workers help stressed families work through the challenges of unstable jobs, abusive relationships, and inadequate housing, as well as the depression and sense of hopelessness that comes from living on the edge. Health workers make sure that children are screened and treated for their health problems and help parents navigate their community's health care system, finding hospitals that can offer life-saving treatment for their children or bringing children in rural areas to dentists that are miles away. Trained staff help parents become partners in their children's education. Programs collaborate with job-training programs at local colleges to aid parents in gaining skills and returning to school. Fathers are given opportunities to strengthen their connection with their children and their families.

What does this mean for a child or a parent in a Head Start program?

- In one rural area in Pennsylvania, pediatric dentists were rare. Head Start made several trips each year to Scranton, taking to the dentist children whose mouths need so much work that local dentists won't treat them. Parents didn't have the means to drive 180 miles, so the Head Start program arranged for their transportation.
- A four-year-old boy came to an Oregon program quiet and very withdrawn. Through the annual screening process, he was identified as hearing impaired, and after a referral to a local pediatrician and audiologist, was found to be profoundly deaf. Through the efforts of Head Start staff members, the child is currently receiving intensive sign language education and staff are working with the family, who only speaks Spanish, to access high-quality medical services. They are also assisting the family in obtaining cochlear implants for their son.
- In a Massachusetts program, a Bosnian family with limited English proficiency received extensive support through Head Start. With the mother not driving, the family support worker with Head Start took the family each week, sometimes by train to help the family become familiarized with the public transportation system, to their child's dental appointments at Tufts University, The Head Start program has helped the family to apply for and receive Food Stamps, and through Head Start, the mother participates in a weekly program designed to help non-English speakers learn basic English communication skills.

- In Washington state, Ellie was born six weeks premature, addicted to the heroine that her birth parents had used. At two, she was adopted by her aunt, who brought her to Head Start at age four. She had temper tantrums that lasted for two hours. While the program's teachers worked with Ellie on her pre-reading and math skills, Head Start social workers and nurses found Ellie and her aunt the counseling and other services they needed to help Ellie deal with abandonment and all the other issues she faced. Ellie became a successful elementary school student.

Head Start is comprehensive in its approach to early learning as well. Head Start standards address language, math, literacy, and science, as well as physical health, approaches to learning, social and emotional development, and creative arts. In many communities, Head Start and Early Head Start programs are the only early education program addressing this range of development and learning areas.

Nearly four decades of research establish that Head Start improves the school readiness of young children. Despite the barriers they face, poor children—with the help of Head Start—catch up. Head Start children, on average, enter the program below national norms on early literacy. After kindergarten, they are close to national norms in early reading, writing, and math skills, according to the Family and Child Experiences Survey.⁷ The program narrows the gap between disadvantaged children and all children in vocabulary and writing skills. The Head Start Impact Study, a national random assignment study using data collected during the fall 2002-spring 2003 school year, found that the program had statistically significant impacts on cognitive, social, and emotional development, health, and parenting practices.⁸

Head Start has been a dynamic program, constantly working to improve services to children. For the past four decades, Head Start has incorporated child development research and worked to increase the quality of programs while expanding the number of children served. Program quality standards have been continually updated. With increasing evidence demonstrating that the earlier children and their parents are reached, the better their chance of success, Head Start responded. In 1993, recognizing the importance of the earliest years to a child's development, Early Head Start was created.

The last reauthorization in 2007, approved with broad bipartisan support, continued to strengthen the program through several measures, including:

- Stronger program standards in literacy and math.
- Stronger requirements for teachers and assistant teachers. The legislation requires all teachers to have an AA degree by 2011 and sets a goal that at least half of all teachers have a BA degree by 2013.
- Tougher accountability and transparency requirements for Head Start Boards of Directors.

- Increased program accountability. In addition to a comprehensive monitoring review every three years, programs will be subject to unannounced visits.
- A requirement for more programs to compete to renew their grants.
- Increased requirements for collaboration with local school districts.
- Increased focus on infants and toddlers. Recognizing the importance of the earliest years, half of all Head Start expansion funds are now targeted to Early Head Start. In addition, there are increased opportunities for programs serving preschool-age children to convert to serving infants and toddlers.

Unfortunately, until the much-welcome increase for Head Start and Early Head Start included in the ARRA and the increase in the recently passed Omnibus Appropriations bill, Head Start's funding had been virtually flat since 2002, making it challenging for programs to accomplish the goals of the reauthorization. Instead, programs were forced to make do with less while striving to give children and families what they need. Programs cut the number of hours and days they offered during the school year, eliminated summer hours, reduced staff, cut training, could not replace equipment or buy new books, and reduced or eliminated transportation for children to the core program as well as transportation to medical and dental appointments, threatening the poorest children's access to Head Start.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs also have had less access to child care funds with Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) discretionary funds frozen from 2002 until this year, making it more difficult to combine Head Start and child care funding to support full-day services for families who need it. Seventy percent of Head Start families have at least one working parent, and 14 percent include a parent in school or job training,⁹ but many Head Start programs only operate on a part-day schedule. As a result, the lack of child care funds is a significant challenge for Head Start parents and for countless others. Only one in seven children eligible for federal child care assistance currently receive help.¹⁰ That is why we are also grateful for the increase in CCDBG included in the ARRA.

With the current economy, more families than ever need the type of support that Head Start and Early Head Start offer. The funding included in the economic recovery legislation demonstrated a recognition that Head Start helps our economy today—by employing teachers, directors, and support staff and offering job training and employment supports to parents—and helps our economy tomorrow—by giving children the skills and motivation they need to succeed. It made a significant down payment on the President's commitment to improving early childhood as the cornerstone of any education improvement effort. With increased support, Head Start can continue to strengthen its role in bolstering our economic well being now and in the future. We look forward to working with the Committee to ensure that Head Start and Early Head Start continue on the growth path that the Administration has set out in the ARRA because it underscores the importance of investing in the critical early years of a child's development. It is essential in FY 2010 to enable these programs to continue to effectively meet the needs of the low-income young children and families that they serve, as well as reach the growing number of

unserved children ages 0 to 5 who could benefit from a comprehensive early learning and care experience.

¹ Katie Hamm, *More than Meets the Eye: Head Start Programs, Participants, Families, and Staff in 2005* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2006), 5, *available at* http://www.clasp.org/publications/hs_brief8.pdf (last visited Mar. 12, 2009).

² Center for Law and Social Policy, *Head Start Participants, Programs, Families, and Staff in 2006* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2008), 2, *available at* http://www.clasp.org/publications/hs_pir_2006.pdf (last visited Mar. 12, 2009).

³ Hamm, 3.

⁴ Hamm, 3.

⁵ Betty Hart and Todd R. Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experience of Young Children* (Baltimore, MD: Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co., 1995); Federal Interagency Forum on Child and Family Statistics, *America's Children: Key National Indicators of Well-Being, 2008* (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2008), Indicator ED1: Family Reading to Young Children, *available at* <http://www.childstats.gov/americaschildren/tables.asp> (last visited Mar. 12, 2009); Pamela High, Marita Hopmann, Linda LaGasse, Robert Sege, John Moran, Celeste Guterrez, and Samuel Becker, "Child Centered Literacy Orientation: A Form of Social Capital?" *Pediatrics*, 103 (4), 1999.

⁶ Kristin Denton and Jerry West, *Children's Reading and Mathematics Achievement in Kindergarten and First Grade* (Washington, DC: National Center for Education Statistics, 2002), x.

⁷ Nicholas Zill and Alberto Sorongon, *Children's Cognitive Gains during Head Start and Kindergarten*, Presentation at the National Head Start Research Conference, Washington, DC, June 28-30, 2004.

⁸ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings* (Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005).

⁹ Center for Law and Social Policy (2008), 2.

¹⁰ Jennifer Mezey, Mark Greenberg, and Rachel Schumacher, *The Vast Majority of Federally-Eligible Children Did Not Receive Child Care Assistance in FY 2000* (Washington, DC: Center for Law and Social Policy, 2002), *available at* www.clasp.org/publications/1in7full.pdf (last visited Jan. 10, 2008).