



July 24, 2003

Dear Representative,

On behalf of the more than 600,000 members and supporters of People For the American Way, we urge you to support Congresswoman Woolsey's Amendment to H.R. 2210, the "School Readiness Act of 2003," that would restore important civil rights protections against employment discrimination. As part of an ongoing effort to undermine workers' civil rights and religious liberty protections across a range of federal programs, the bill removes key anti-discrimination provisions that have been part of Head Start since its inception. The Woolsey Amendment strikes these anti-discrimination provisions and should be adopted. In addition, we continue to oppose the block grant features of H.R. 2210 that transfer responsibility to the states without either the funding or the accountability necessary to maintain the quality standards for which Head Start is so well known.

In particular, H.R. 2210 would create demonstration projects across the country by transferring federal control to as many as eight different states without any guarantees that the quality of services would be maintained. This is the wrong direction for Head Start. Whether as "demonstration" projects or not, these provisions threaten Head Start's core by shifting federal responsibility to the states, without the necessary tools or accountability to maintain the quality for which Head Start has been known for more than twenty years. And it is particularly ironic to see such a shift with respect to early childhood education at a time of increased accountability requirements in the bipartisan No Child Left Behind Act.

The bill's attack on bipartisan, anti-discrimination provisions that have been part of Head Start since its creation in 1981 is also extremely troubling. It represents an unnecessary and dangerous attack on the civil rights and religious liberties of over 198,000 Head Start employees.

Elimination of the anti-discrimination provision in the Head Start program prohibiting employment discrimination based upon religion should not be tolerated. Such actions undermine a half century of public policy aimed at protecting individuals from discrimination in the workplace and further erode the fundamental protections against discrimination based on one's religion that are absolutely central to our democracy.

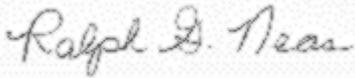
Proponents of the anti-civil rights provisions of H.R. 2210 claim there is a need to exempt religious organizations from anti-discrimination laws in order to protect the religious identity of that organization. This is simply not true. For decades, religious organizations have partnered with the government to provide social services. They have done so by separating their worship and related activities from their government-funded services and, where necessary, creating a separate non-sectarian 501(c)(3) organization to provide the services. For more than twenty years, under this model, religious organizations have provided an invaluable contribution to the education of thousands of Head Start students and to the communities in which they live. Congress should not adopt changes that would alter this beneficial relationship, particularly when there is no evidence that religious organizations are actively seeking the religious exemption in question.

In this connection, it is also important to note that Head Start programs not only offer opportunities to thousands of low-income children, they also enrich their communities by providing job opportunities to over a third of the parents whose children have participated in the program. Eliminating Head Start's current anti-discrimination protections, however, could block this road out of poverty for parents of the wrong religion.

H.R. 2210 would immediately harm Head Start teachers, students and their parents. In addition to encouraging decreased accountability, H.R. 2210 would undermine a half-century of public policy aimed at protecting individuals from discrimination in the workplace. The current delicate balance encouraging the participation of religious organizations and compliance with our Constitution should not be disrupted. For these reasons, we urge you to oppose H.R. 2210, unless the employment anti-discrimination language is restored and block grants are removed from the bill.

Thank you for your attention to this matter.

Sincerely,



Ralph G. Neas  
President



Tanya M. Clay  
Deputy Director Public Policy