

Strengthening the Federal Investment in Early Childhood Education
Education and the Workforce Committee
U.S. House of Representatives
January 21, 2015

Background

The federal investment in early childhood services began in the 1930s as part of the Works Progress Administration's response to unemployment. An initial investment in child care centers evolved under the Lanham Act of 1940 into a work support program for mothers participating in the war effort. What started as an effort to serve young children impacted by the war, has grown into a multi-billion dollar commitment funding dozens of programs across the federal government.

In 2012, the nonpartisan Government Accountability Office (GAO) released a report which identified 45 early learning and child care programs spread across multiple federal agencies with a total annual cost exceeding \$13 billion. According to the report (emphasis added):

The federal investment in early learning and child care is fragmented in that it is administered through 45 programs that provide or may support related services to children from birth through age 5, as well as five tax provisions that subsidize private expenditures in this area. The programs are concentrated within the Departments of Education (Education) and Health and Human Services (HHS)—the principal administrators of the federal government's early learning and child care programs—but are also administered by the Departments of Agriculture, the Interior, Justice, Labor, Housing and Urban Development (HUD), the General Services Administration (GSA), and the Appalachian Regional Commission.

*Some of these programs overlap in that they have similar goals for children under the age of 5 and are targeted to similar groups of children. For example, five programs, administered by Education and HHS, provide school readiness services to low-income children, and programs in both Education and the Interior provide funding for early learning services for Indian children. Among the 45 programs, 12 have an explicit program purpose of providing early learning or child care services.*¹

While not all of the 45 programs have an explicit purpose of delivering early learning or child care services, the GAO noted that many permit the use of funds for this purpose or provide supportive services to facilitate such care. Some programs are also multipurpose block grants for which early learning or child care is not the primary purpose but are nevertheless known to provide significant funding for child care.

The findings of the GAO report assert that this fragmentation and program overlap can raise administrative costs and prevent both children and families from being served efficiently and effectively. The report also noted previous attempts to foster cooperation and efficiency did not

¹ U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO); *Opportunities to Reduce Duplication, Overlap and Fragmentation, Achieve Savings, and Enhance Revenue*; Washington, DC; February 2012. p. 193-194, GAO-12-342SP

sufficiently provide comprehensive oversight across all the relevant agencies to improve services.

Head Start

One of the most significant early childhood education and development programs is Head Start. Created in 1965 during the Johnson administration, Head Start provides comprehensive services to low-income three- and four-year-old children to help prepare them to enter kindergarten by improving the conditions necessary for success in school and life. The 1994 reauthorization of the *Head Start Act* created an Early Head Start program in order to expand services to children from birth to age three. The authorization for the Head Start program expired in September 2012.

At the federal level, Head Start is administered by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which awards funds directly to local grantees. Programs are locally designed and administered by a network of roughly 1,600 public and private nonprofit and for-profit agencies. Head Start agencies are required to comply with detailed federal performance standards. In fiscal year 2014, Head Start was appropriated \$8.6 billion, and the program currently serves approximately one million children.

Head Start Impact Studies

The 2007 reauthorization of the *Head Start Act* required the department to issue a number of scientific studies designed to measure the long-term impact of Head Start. On January 15, 2010, HHS released the Head Start Impact Study, which determined gains from participating in the program do not last through the end of the first grade.² In December 2012, HHS released the results of a Head Start Third Grade Follow-Up Study, which evaluated the same cohort of children through the end of third grade.³ The department's study concluded:

By the end of 3rd grade there were very few impacts ... in any of the four domains of cognitive, social-emotional, health, and parenting practices. The few impacts that were found did not show a clear pattern of favorable or unfavorable impacts for children.

Universal Pre-K Proposal

In his 2013 State of the Union address, President Obama introduced a "Preschool for All" proposal that would significantly expand the federal government's role in early learning services. The proposal includes \$75 billion in new mandatory spending (over 10 years) for a universal program that would provide funds to states to support preschool access for four-year-olds from low- and moderate-income families. This proposed program would encourage states to expand preschool services to families of all incomes. The president's proposal would also direct the

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); *Head Start Impact Study Final Report*. Washington, DC; January 2010. For more information, see:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/executive_summary_final.pdf.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS); *Third Grade Follow-up to the Head Start Impact Study Final Report*. Washington, DC; October 2012. For more information, see:

http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/head_start_report.pdf.

Secretary of HHS to convert Head Start slots for four-year-olds into Early Head Start slots for children ages three and under, which would virtually eliminate the Head Start program as it has existed for more than 50 years.

Moving Forward

Quality early childhood education plays an important role in the health and success of the nation's most vulnerable children. Research has shown early education can help children be better prepared to succeed in their academic career and even help them develop key interpersonal skills that will serve them well later in life. Recognizing the very real fiscal challenges facing the country, policymakers have a responsibility to examine and reform existing early care and education programs *before* creating new programs and promises.

That is precisely the path Congress pursued in 2014 when it reformed the *Child Care and Development Block Grant Act* for the first time in nearly two decades. Leaders in the House and Senate reached a bipartisan agreement that included important reforms to enhance parental choice, strengthen child safety, and promote high-quality care. President Obama signed this bipartisan, bicameral agreement into law on November 19, thereby improving this vital lifeline for millions of working families.

Congress should build on this progress by strengthening the Head Start program. Toward that end, the committee intends to pursue reforms to the Head Start program that would help achieve the following goals:

1. Reduce unnecessary regulatory burdens;
2. Encourage local innovation;
3. Strengthen coordination between Head Start and programs at the state and local levels;
4. Improve the quality of eligible providers; and
5. Enhance parental engagement to support their children's best interests.

As it moves forward with an effort to reform the Head Start program, the Committee is interested to receive public feedback on ways to turn these policy goals into a responsible legislative solution. Answers to the following questions by interested stakeholders will help inform the Committee's work.

Questions for Stakeholder Consideration

1. What role should the federal government play to promote the quality of learning within the Head Start program?

2. What steps can agencies take to enhance coordination of existing early learning programs across the federal government?
3. What innovative steps are states taking to improve the quality of early education for their unique populations?
4. How can the federal government best support states' efforts to maximize parental involvement in early childhood education? How can Congress ensure parents remain the ultimate decision-maker in the life of their child?
5. What kind of information could the federal government provide to help parents understand the options available for their children's early care and education?

The public is encouraged to respond to these questions and provide additional feedback on reforming the Head Start program. Please respond to headstart.reform@mail.house.gov by June 1, 2015.