

STATEMENT BY

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BEFORE THE

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Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, I appreciate this opportunity to testify before you today on the President's plan to strengthen Head Start, including those programs serving American Indian and Alaska Native children and families. Head Start is an important means of helping to ensure that every child has the opportunity to enter school ready to learn. Recently, the House took a major step toward making certain that each Head Start child will have the skills they need to succeed in school by marking up H.R. 2210, the ASchool Readiness Act of 2002@ to reauthorize and strengthen the Head Start program. We look forward to action on Head Start reauthorization in the Senate in the coming days.

I would like to focus my time today on the President's goals for improving Head Start, both through reauthorization and also through direct changes in program services. I also want to share some highlights and insights into Head Start services and operations within American Indian and Alaska Native programs (AIAN Head Start), that I know are of special interest to this Committee. The President remains committed to maintaining the current Federal to local relationship with American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs and working with these programs to address the unique challenges they face.

As you know, Head Start was launched in 1965 as part of a bold, Abig idea@-- that no child should be disadvantaged in their education because of the circumstances of their families. Our common goal remains - to prepare our children for success in school and later life. What you may not know is that I am one of the lucky ones B one for whom the Head Start program goals and ideals became a vivid reality. I am here today as a living legacy of the fulfilled promises that Head Start can and must make for every child and family. I am here not only as the Associate

Commissioner of Head Start, but also as a former Head Start child and the mother of a Head Start child who is now an accomplished high school student. As a child growing up in rural Texas, no one could have imagined that I would one day testify before the U.S. Congress. No one could have imagined that I would introduce the President of the United States during his recent public address at a local program. No one knew for sure, but everyone believed in the power of Head Start to change lives and influence futures.

None of us should be satisfied until we have achieved the vision reflected in the bold ideas that have become synonymous with Head Start, which is that economically disadvantaged children should arrive at school on a level playing field with their more economically advantaged peers. Any current shortfalls in achieving this goal should not label the Head Start program as a failure. We must all see it as a challenge for the program to do even better.

Recent research shows that although Head Start children make progress in areas of school readiness during the Head Start year, they continue to lag behind their more economically advantaged peers. Even Head Start graduates making significant progress continue to lag too far behind age norms on a number of important indicators of emerging literacy and numeracy skills. Consequently, the President and Secretary Thompson sent a clear message to the Head Start Bureau. Given this compelling evidence, more has to be done to strengthen the educational outcomes for children. In response to the President and Secretary Thompson's charge, we must look for ways to improve the effectiveness of the Head Start program. Much about the program works, and works well, but we know the program needs to move ahead particularly in the areas of educational gains and coordination.

As part of the President's *Good Start, Grow Smart* initiative, we were directed to increase the knowledge and skills of Head Start teachers in the area of preschool language and literacy and to create and manage a National Reporting System that will help measure children's progress in mastering the skills necessary to enter school ready to learn.

In response, the Head Start Bureau has already undertaken a number of efforts aimed at bolstering the school-readiness of Head Start children. The Strategic Teacher Education Program, known as STEP, launched last summer, was designed to ensure that every Head Start program and every classroom teacher has a fundamental knowledge of early development and literacy, and of state-of-the-art early literacy teaching techniques. More than 3,300 local program teachers and supervisors, including representatives from AIAN programs, have received this training and have served as trainers to the nearly 50,000 Head Start teachers across the country. I am pleased to report that these trainers and Head Start directors are reporting that this early literacy training is making a difference in their classrooms.

Following the summer training sessions, the Head Start Bureau hosted national training conferences on mentor-coaching and social-emotional development. These events expanded the skills of teachers and supervisors in fostering effective classroom practices. A national Web-based resource, called STEP-Net, has been created to help early literacy specialists access and use resources and tools, and to exchange information and promising practices. We see AIAN grantees actively participating in these nationally convened and sponsored Head Start trainings. Because the President has made accountability a guiding principle of his Administration, we are working to make sure that we measure the outcomes of our efforts, not merely the processes and procedures that make up each of our programs. To that end, the most important indicator of any

program's efficacy is whether it is, in fact, helping the individuals it is intended to help by achieving important outcomes. Throughout Head Start's history, critical outcomes have been reported for child health, child development, parent education, adult literacy and GED's, and other aspects of Head Start's hallmark comprehensive service design. However, in many Head Start programs, the cognitive aspects of school readiness have not been a priority and cognitive outcomes have not been included in annual program reports.

Good Start, Grow Smart, therefore, calls for not only the improvement and strengthening of Head Start through intense, large-scale efforts in the areas of early language and literacy, but also for a method to track the results of this effort. As the President often reminds us, good intentions, although better than bad intentions, are not good enough. This Administration believes that we must also challenge ourselves to determine whether or not good intentions are translating into good outcomes. We must, therefore, do a better job of determining how well Head Start children across the country are being prepared for academic success once they enter school.

This fall we are beginning implementation of the national assessment system of the congressionally-mandated school-readiness indicators for all the four-year and five-year old children in Head Start. Children will complete these assessments upon entering and exiting Head Start. We have just completed eight national events to train and certify local staff in the conduct of this national assessment and reporting system. Across the country, an initial 181 AIAN staff were certified in the assessment procedures, trained in the data entry and are now in the process of training and certifying additional local staff.

The President's Proposal

The Administration's efforts to improve the quality of Head Start services for all children continue with the President's proposal for reauthorization of Head Start. The President believes there must be a stronger focus on the educational program of Head Start and the measurement and assessment of outcomes which will move the Head Start program to a higher level of overall school readiness for low-income children. The President also believes even more must be done about the lack of adequate coordination between Head Start and state-administered programs which undermines the program's ability to provide high quality preschool services to as many children as possible throughout every State. Where coordination is not currently occurring, we are finding gaps and patchy areas in our services to the detriment of young children and their families. Nationwide, approximately 62,000 funded Head Start slots go empty each year. Lack of coordination often makes worse the troubling and avoidable under-enrollment problem in Head Start. Therefore, to strengthen the Head Start program, improve services to low-income children, and promote the coordination and integration of early care and education services, President Bush is asking Congress to include in the reauthorization of the Head Start Act a provision that will allow interested and qualified States to include Head Start in their overall plans for preschool services.

As part of the solution, under the President's proposal, eligible States would have the opportunity to coordinate their preschool programs and child care programs with Head Start in exchange for meeting certain accountability, maintenance of effort and programmatic requirements. States wishing to participate must submit a State plan for approval to the Secretary of Health and Human Services, in consultation with the Secretary of Education, that addresses several fundamental issues.

Each State must indicate in its plan how it would better coordinate Head Start with State-administered preschool programs. In addition, the State plan must address how it will work to develop educational goals for all preschool children in the State and devise an accountability system to determine whether children are achieving the goals. States must describe in their plan how they will maintain the comprehensive range of services for children supported by Head Start funds, including the provision of social, nutrition, and health services, and guarantee that they will continue to provide at least as much financial support for state preschool programs and Head Start as they are currently providing.

Let me be clear that the President is not proposing to block-grant Head Start funding to States. Only in those instances where eligible States apply for integrated preschool services and are approved by the Secretary of Health and Human Services will States be allowed to manage Head Start programs. Under the bill passed by the House, Head Start will continue to be managed as a Federal-to-local program in all but eight States and for all AIAN programs. To be clear on this point, no State will be required to take advantage of this opportunity nor is anyone proposing that the Head Start program be turned over to States with no strings attached.

The President's proposal does not allow States who may qualify for participation in a State option to do away with the comprehensive services currently available through Head Start. Indeed, States taking advantage of this option must make a commitment to maintain the comprehensive services currently available through Head Start for those children who, under the State plan, are supported with Head Start funds.

The President's plan also makes clear that the Federal government will not cease or relinquish its oversight responsibilities for the Head Start program. Under the President's proposal, even States who choose this option and who have their plans approved will still be accountable to the Federal

government for their use of Head Start funds and for achieving positive outcomes for children. In cases where a State does not choose this option or where a State's plan is not approved, the Federal government will continue to administer the Head Start program as a direct Federal-to-local program. I also want to mention that the President's plan would prohibit States from supplanting State preschool funds with Head Start dollars.

Finally, our proposal would change the current set-aside for training and technical assistance to provide the Secretary with greater discretionary authority to allocate these resources each year in a manner that will maximize benefits to children and families. Our proposal would also provide flexibility in targeting funds to quality improvements. Training and technical assistance resources have grown considerably in recent years at a rate well above the growth of Head Start while, at the same time, grantees have had access to quality improvement funds that provide them additional resources for these activities. These changes will allow the Secretary to determine the appropriate level of funds for these activities taking into account all the other needs of the program and the children and families served.

I would like to turn to AIAN Head Start and share some insights into services and operations.

AIAN HEAD START

Head Start programs can be found throughout all parts of our country, from inner city neighborhoods where violence and substance abuse are a daily part of life to remote Alaskan villages where there are poor facilities, few jobs and limited access to education and training opportunities. Head Start programs are embedded in some of the most economically disadvantaged and geographically isolated areas of the country, including Indian reservations.

The Head Start program has provided Head Start services to Indian Tribes since 1965 when the Department funded 43 grantees in 14 States. Since that time AIAN Head Start has grown many times and we are currently funding 165 grantees in twenty-six States to provide Head Start services to 23,837 children; 2,532 of whom are served in our Early Head Start program. There are 5,587 staff working in AIAN Head Start programs, 80 percent of whom are Native Americans. Twenty-six percent of the families served by AIAN Head Start programs receive public assistance and 39 percent are single-parent households. Twenty two percent of AIAN Head Start parents are without a high school diploma and only four percent have college degrees. Head Start has long been designed as a program that can bring support and multiple opportunities to families and children.

Head Start programs throughout the country promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services that enable each child to develop and function at his or her highest potential. Head Start children receive comprehensive health services, including immunizations, physical and dental exams and treatment, and nutritional services. Over eighty percent of children in AIAN Head Start are immunized.

In addition, at least ten percent of the enrollment opportunities in each program must be made available to children with disabilities. Annually, AIAN grantees report between 12 and 13 percent of the enrolled children have diagnosed disabilities.

Head Start engages parents in their children's learning and help them in making progress toward their educational, literacy and employment goals. The Head Start program also emphasizes

significant involvement of parents in the administration of local Head Start programs. In FY 2004, there will be increased efforts made to assure that Head Start programs are achieving their primary purpose of promoting school readiness -- that all children, including all American Indian and Alaska Native children, leave Head Start with the cognitive, emotional and social skills they will need to be successful in school.

This is particularly challenging to AIAN Head Start programs since the number of teachers with degrees is below the rest of the country (51 percent overall but only 29 percent for AIAN Head Start), compounded by difficulties in recruitment and retention of qualified teaching staff in both Head Start and Early Head Start. For example, in the last Program Information Report, AIAN grantees report a turnover of 313 teachers during the year, with 117 of those vacancies left unfilled for more than three months.

Additionally, in terms of local program support for helping children achieve school readiness, 73 percent of the AIAN grantees reviewed between 2000 and now, have significant review findings in the critical areas of curriculum planning, implementation and individualizing for children's learning.

Under the President's proposal, AIAN Head Start programs will continue to be funded directly by the Federal government. Governed by relevant laws and regulations, each will design a program that works **B** one that is sensitive to the culture and history of the families; one that respects the rich traditions of the tribe and that recognizes the uniqueness of language and customs. HHS understands that Indian children and families deserve special attention **B** that too many Indian

families face the challenges of poverty, unemployment, substance abuse, and medical conditions such as diabetes, in significantly higher rates than in non-Indian populations.

We have tried to respond to several unique needs by making available funding that permits many Indian programs to reach all or a substantial part of their Head Start eligible families. For example, we have issued regulations to implement the statutory provision which expands the ability of AIAN grantees to serve children from over-income families.

Over the past several years we have worked in partnership with the Indian Health Service agency addressing the many health and safety concerns of Head Start programs, concerns that are often exacerbated by environmental factors beyond the control of the local Head Start program or the community in which the program is located.

In partnership with the Indian Health Service we are currently finalizing a Report to Congress on the overall status and condition of facilities occupied by AIAN Head Start programs. Let me share a few of the overall findings from that report:

- The on-site survey assessed 364 AIAN Head Start facilities B 58 percent of the total 624 American Indian centers.
- A small majority of these centers, 52 percent were identified as being in Agood@condition, 40 percent were in moderate condition and eight percent were cited with major structural or other physical problems.
- Over 50 percent of these facilities were built prior to 1984; nearly one-third were constructed in 1990 or later and 21 percent were built during the 1980s.

- A majority of the 364 centers surveyed, 298 facilities or 82 percent are owned by the AIAN Head Start grantees.

We have invested over \$25 million in the last three years for renovations and construction to improve classrooms and playgrounds as well as work and meeting space for AIAN Head Start programs. In 2003 alone we have invested over \$9 million in these facilities, and in 2004 we anticipate funding an additional \$4 million in pending requests for facility renovations and improvements.

We are also investing in new Head Start buses for AIAN Programs at a rate that is twice the national average; because we recognize that many of these programs must drive children many miles on roads that are often unpaved. We share these investments with you not to say that our job is complete, but to acknowledge our awareness and intent to address the needs of AIAN Head Start. We recognize that we still have a long way to go to give our AIAN programs the full support they will need to make both a short and long-term difference in childrens lives. We are committed to doing that.

We look forward to working with this Committee and with the Congress to continue to address these and other challenges. Together we must do all we can to bring to fruition the goals and dreams of our nation's first families.

One of the reasons the Head Start program has remained strong over the course of nearly four decades is that it adapts to accommodate to the changing needs of children, families, and

communities. We cannot afford to dissipate precious resources through overlapping or poorly coordinated Federal or local services. Most importantly, we cannot afford to have children slip through the gaps that patch-work methods often create, particularly when children with the greatest need for support continue to remain below national norms of school readiness. Children and families deserve the best support that we can provide.

Head Start is part of our nation's commitment to the big idea that no child should be left behind because of the circumstances of their families or communities. Hence, while recognizing the important contribution that Head Start has made over the past 38 years, we can, should and must do more, for we have not yet fulfilled the full promise of the boldest ideas that helped to create and sustain the Head Start program.

The Administration is committed to strengthening the Head Start program and improving the coordination of services to benefit school readiness of children and the support services for families.

Thank you, Mr. Chairman, for your commitment and dedication to the well-being of our nation's children, and thank you, Members of the Committee, for your interest in hearing more about our proposal to make Head Start stronger, and about some of the specific efforts that impact AIAN programs. I look forward to continuing our dialogue as we work together on the reauthorization of the Head Start program.