

The facts about Head Start

I would like to take this opportunity to address some of the issues that have been raised about Congress' latest action on H.R. 2210, the School Readiness Act, which would reauthorize the Head Start program. I hope that this letter will clarify the intent of this legislation and my vote to support the changes to the Head Start program.

Many have expressed their concern that H.R. 2210 would move Head Start out of the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) and into the Department of Education. However, this is not the case and this legislation keeps Head Start within HHS where it belongs. Head Start has succeeded immensely under HHS and now is not the time to change.

Another issue that has been widely misrepresented is the five year "state demonstration project". Many have been lead to believe that such a project would dismantle Head Start by allowing states to integrate their own early-childhood education programs into the Head Start program, thereby solving some of the state budget problems. Unfortunately, vital information was left out of the discussion. The bill contains strong protections to ensure that all states who participate in the demonstration project provide services that are at least as strong, or stronger, than those in the existing Head Start program. Furthermore, some have claimed that the demonstration project is a block grant. However, a block grant, as defined in the American Heritage Dictionary, is an "unrestricted federal grant." In fact, the demonstration project comes with a number of key restrictions: demonstration states must increase their spending on pre-kindergarten programs; continue to provide comprehensive services; utilize existing high-quality Head Start grantees; and use all Head Start funds for Head Start-related purposes.

In all, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) retains federal oversight of the pilot program, and will conduct an independent evaluation of the project after three years. Furthermore, no state that has cut early childhood education will be eligible to participate in the demonstration project.

Having said all this, the demonstration project is limited to a total of eight states. Considering that California's early-childhood education has not met the outlined criteria, it is not eligible to participate in this program. Basically, **the Head Start program in California will not change.**

On another note, many have attacked this

legislation by saying that faith-based Head Start organizations should not be allowed to make hiring decisions ("discriminate") based on religion. However, for nearly 40 years, civil rights laws have protected the hiring rights of religious employers with the U.S. Supreme Court upholding the issue unanimously in 1987. Furthermore, faith-based groups have been receiving Federal money since 1996 when President Clinton signed the first of four "charitable choice" statutes without losing their hiring rights. Finally, faith-based organizations have a special interest in taking religion into account when making employment decisions. Just as an environmental group can hire persons who share its views on conservation, so too must a religious organization be able to take its religious views into account in making hiring decisions.

The final, and probably most important issue, is the confusion over funding levels for Head Start. Many have claimed that Congress intends to cut the funding for this key program. In fact, Congress is doing the exact opposite and intends to fund Head Start at \$6.87 billion in fiscal year 2004, an increase of over \$202 million from last year. Furthermore, the plan is to increase the funding steadily every year until 2008. On a significant issue for the San Joaquin Valley, I worked to guarantee \$17.2 million in funding for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start.

Honestly, I have to say that I supported the School Readiness Act because it strengthens the academic focus of Head Start, preserves Head Start's health and nutrition services, places an emphasis on proven early childhood education methods, and closes the "readiness gap" felt by so many San Joaquin Valley children. This legislation restructures Head Start to emphasize what works in preparing students for school – topics such as language, pre-reading, and pre-mathematics. Furthermore, this legislation seeks to improve teacher quality, by ensuring that Head Start teachers are adequately trained in early childhood education in order to meet the needs of our children.

I hope this information clears up any confusion about the recent actions of Congress on the Head Start program. Certainly, these are common-sense reforms that will allow Head Start to give thousands of low-income children the chance they need to succeed.

Dorin Nunes

Quick Facts

Rep. Nunes and Rep. Richard Pombo with João Bosco Soares Moto Amaral, President of the Assembly of the Republic of Portugal and his delegation. (July 2003)

