

Making the Case: Improving Head Start Teacher Qualifications Requires Increased Investment

By Katherine Hart and Rachel Schumacher

Introduction

The federal Head Start program delivers early education and comprehensive support services to low-income children and families. Since its creation in 1965, Head Start has primarily served preschool children ages three to five; currently more than 900,000 children receive Head Start services annually. With the addition of Early Head Start in 1995, the program now serves more than 60,000 low-income infants and toddlers (birth to age three) and pregnant women each year.

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In 2003, the Head Start program was scheduled to be reauthorized by Congress, but despite much debate, the reauthorization stalled. A key focus of the reauthorization debate has been how to improve quality of services. Toward this end, leaders in both the House and Senate considered provisions to increase the number of Head Start teachers with bachelor's (B.A.) degrees. These provisions built on a previous mandate that half of Head Start teachers attain an associate (A.A.) degree by 2003. These proposals are part of a general trend to raise teacher credentials in programs serving young children as a way to improve program quality and child development.

Congress is expected to take up Head Start again in 2005, and

quality improvement and teacher qualifications are likely to be considered again. Increasing the share of Head Start teachers with higher levels of education is a laudable goal and good policy. However, inclusion of a such a provision in Head Start reauthorization legislation must be accompanied by resources and policies to help the program reach this mandate and to ensure that teachers are compensated adequately so that they will be more likely to remain in Head Start programs. Further, changes should be made to the federal financial aid and higher education institutions so that they better support the need for additional early education programs and teachers.

This paper summarizes the research on the importance of

teacher education and salary levels, provides a snapshot of Head Start and Early Head Start staff credentials and related issues, describes recent legislative history and changes on teacher qualifications, and assesses whether states and higher education systems are ready to address a major policy change. We conclude with a discussion of cost implications and policy recommendations for Congress. This discussion draws from both relevant research and federal data from Program Information Reports (PIR) submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) by all federal Head Start grantees.

What Does the Research Say about Teacher Education?

Teachers with higher levels of education in early childhood development can improve outcomes for preschool children. Some studies look at any higher education and include both two- or four-year college degrees, and some studies only look at the four-year level. *From Neurons to Neighborhoods*, a study of early childhood development by the National Research Council and the Institute of Medicine, finds that “both formal education levels and recent, specialized training in child development have been

found quite consistently to be associated with high-quality interactions and children’s development in center-based, family day care and even in in-home sitter arrangements.”¹ The National Research Council’s volume on preschool education, *Eager to Learn*, recommends, “Each group of children in an early childhood education and care program should be assigned a teacher who has a B.A. degree with specialized education related to early childhood.”² The National Child Care Staffing Study found that teachers with B.A. degrees were “more sensitive, less harsh and detached, and more appropriate...than were teachers with less formal education.” Moreover, children with sensitive and responsive teachers scored higher on language measures and exhibited a higher level of peer play than other children.³ The Cost, Quality and Child Outcomes study of quality in child care centers found that the proportion of teachers with a college degree or more was positively related to quality.⁴

Researchers have also found that while teacher education is important, a simple emphasis on teacher preparation and level of education does not assure the long-term quality of the teacher-child relationship and interactions that are so crucial to outcomes for children.

The Head Start FACES study, a longitudinal study of child outcomes, family characteristics, and program quality among Head Start programs, found that “teachers with more experience and higher levels of education tended to be in classrooms rated higher in classroom quality.... However, [these] results are based only on simple correlations, and do not take into account the complex interplay between the various teacher-related factors.”⁵ A study of pathways to effective teaching within a group of primarily African-American and Latino child care teachers serving low-income children found that teacher education levels were important in predicting effective teaching practices. However, other factors, such as a commitment to the community, being mentored, and receiving reflective supervision, were just as important.⁶ Zaslow, Tout, Maxwell, and Clifford acknowledge that more education and training are associated with better quality environments, but they suggest that the linkages are loose and that more research and attention to the content of teacher education programs and the processes for developing teacher-child interaction skills are required.⁷ A recent review of six state pre-kindergarten programs found that while a large proportion of teachers have a B.A. degree (69

percent), the observed classroom quality was lower than would have been expected, given that percentage. The authors note that additional research is needed to determine the necessary additional teacher supports that can improve quality.⁸ In *Eager to Learn*, the authors found sufficient research to connect salary levels to quality: “employing qualified teachers who are satisfied with their compensation is associated with programs providing higher-quality early childhood experiences for children.”⁹

A Snapshot of Head Start and Early Head Start Staff in 2003

Head Start and Early Head Start Teachers and Degrees

In 2003, Head Start employed more than 55,000 teachers. Most (57 percent) had an A.A., B.A., or graduate degree in early childhood education or a related field, exceeding the Congressional mandate that 50 percent of Head Start teachers hold degrees by 2003. The number of Head Start teachers with degrees in 2003 grew by six percentage points from 2002, when 51 percent of Head Start teachers had a degree. (See Figure 1.) In 2003, 27 percent of Head Start teachers had an A.A. degree as their highest formal education level, 27 percent had a B.A. degree, and 4

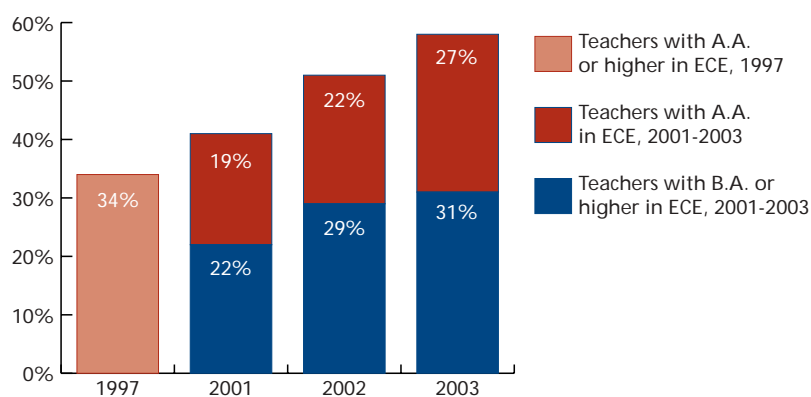
percent had a graduate degree in early childhood education or a related field. Just over a quarter (27 percent) of Head Start teachers held a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential as their highest education, a significant decrease from 2002, when 35 percent of teachers had a CDA. For 16 percent of Head Start teachers, none of the previously mentioned degrees or credentials were noted.

Early Head Start programs are more evenly divided between center-based and home-based programs than Head Start programs. As a result, the two programs have different staffing

needs, and home visitors make up a larger percentage of Early Head Start staff (12 percent) than Head Start staff overall (2 percent). Early Head Start teachers do not currently need particular credentials, although the Senate bill in the last Congress set a minimum of at least an A.A. or CDA. In 2003, 41 percent of Early Head Start teachers had an A.A. degree or higher, an increase from 36 percent in 2002. Sixty-one percent of Early Head Start home visitors, however, had at least an A.A. degree in 2003, and 41 percent of home visitors had at least a B.A. degree. (See Figure 2.)

FIGURE 1.

Teachers with Degrees in Early Childhood Education, 1997-2003

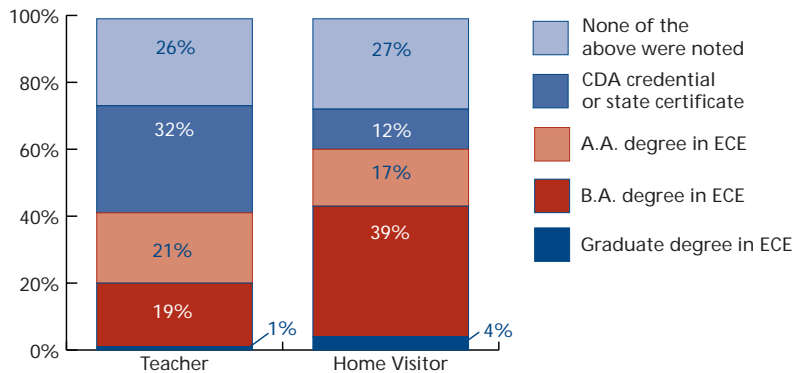


ECE=early childhood education

*Note: PIR data for 1997 simply report whether teachers have a college degree or not and does not break down the proportion with an A.A., B.A., or graduate degree. Therefore, the 1997 column represents all Head Start teachers with any college degree in early childhood education or a related field.

FIGURE 2

Early Head Start Teacher and Home Visitor Education Qualifications, Program Year 2003



Note: The percentages in the chart do not add up to 100% because of rounding.

ECE=early childhood education
CDA=Child Development Associate

Head Start teachers continued to seek education in 2003. Fifty-eight percent of Head Start teachers without a degree or credential were enrolled in an early childhood education or related degree program, and 18 percent were in CDA or equivalent training. In Early Head Start, 44 percent of center-based teachers and 35 percent of home visitors without a degree or credential were in an early childhood education or related degree program, and 37 percent of center-based teachers and 22 percent of home visitors were in CDA or equivalent training.

Salaries and Retention

The average annual salary for a Head Start teacher was \$23,564

in 2003. Salary levels can vary significantly by state and program, however. The average teacher salary ranged from \$27,998 in region two (New Jersey, New York, Puerto Rico) to \$20,937 in region eight (Colorado, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, Utah, and Wyoming). This may occur, at least in part, because grantee program funding levels vary and may reflect variations in state and local costs for compensation.

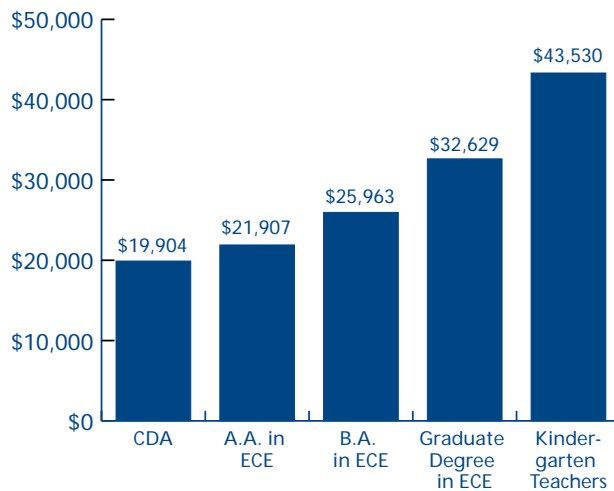
Teachers with higher levels of education had higher compensation levels than their counterparts with less formal education, but their salaries still paled in comparison to kindergarten

teachers in public schools. The average annual salary for a Head Start teacher with a CDA was \$19,904; the average salary for a teacher with an A.A. degree was \$21,907; the average salary for a teacher with a B.A. degree was \$25,963; and the average for a teacher with a graduate degree was \$32,629. (See Figure 3.) Kindergarten teachers, who are typically required to have B.A. degrees, average \$43,530 in salary.¹⁰ Of the 7,522 teachers that left Head Start in 2003, 27 percent reported they were leaving for a similar job in the field at a higher compensation package.

Other Staff

Head Start staff who work in non-center-based programs are not all categorized as “teachers” in the PIR data. Head Start grantees use community needs assessments to choose whether to offer services to children in classroom settings, in the home by working directly with children and parents, in family child care homes, or by combining these approaches. Seven percent of Head Start children were served through home-based, family child care, or combination approaches in 2003. Fifty-one percent of Head Start home visitors had an A.A. or higher in 2003. Among family child care providers, 29 percent had a CDA in 2003, up from 20 per-

FIGURE 3

Average Teacher Salary by Level of Education

Source: 2003 Head Start PIR data. Comparison data for kindergarten teachers from Bureau of Labor Statistics, "November 2003 National Occupational Employment and Wage Estimates: Education, Training, and Library Occupations."

ECE=early childhood education
CDA=Child Development Associate

cent with the credential in 2002. Early Head Start family child care providers also improved their credential levels in 2003, with 29 percent holding a CDA, compared to 24 percent in 2002.

Diversity

Head Start staff remained highly diverse in 2003, with 36 percent of direct child development staff white, 28 percent black or African American, 24 percent Hispanic or Latino origin, 3 percent American Indian or Alaska Native, 2 percent Asian, 1 percent Native Hawaiian or other Pacific Islander, and 1 percent bi-racial

or multi-racial.¹¹ The racial and ethnic background for 5 percent of direct child development staff was other or unspecified. This diversity roughly reflects that of children served in the program. (See Figure 4.) Twenty-seven percent of child development staff were proficient in a language other than English in 2003, which is comparable to the percentage of Head Start children who spoke English as a second language. According to the 2000 U.S. Census, children in immigrant families were the fastest growing segment of the nation's child population. While children of immigrants comprise

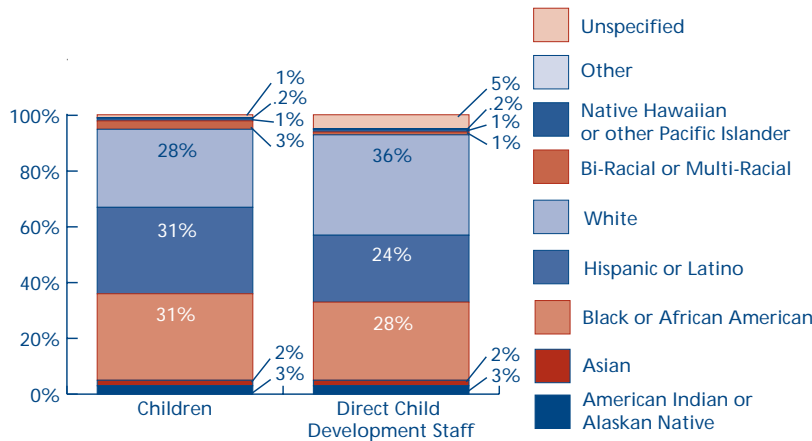
one-fifth of the child population, they comprise over one quarter of all low-income children (children living in households with incomes below 200 percent of the federal poverty threshold).¹² Some research indicates that bilingual teachers may be more effective in helping children who are learning English acquire literacy skills.¹³

Head Start and Teacher Qualifications in Recent Policy History

The most recent reauthorization discussion is not the first to consider raising teacher qualifications. In 1998, Congress passed the Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services (COATES) Act, which reauthorized Head Start through 2003. This bipartisan legislation mandated that by September 2003 at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers nationwide in center-based programs have an A.A., B.A., or graduate degree in early childhood education or a degree in a related field with experience teaching preschool children. In addition to the mandate in the COATES Act, the federal Administration for Children and Families, which oversees Head Start, set as a goal that each Head Start program achieve the 50 percent degreed teacher benchmark by 2003.¹⁴

FIGURE 4

Race/Ethnicity of Head Start Children and Direct Child Development Staff, Program Year 2003



In making the change in policy in 1998, Congress recognized the challenge of raising teacher qualifications. As a result, the legislation also increased the amount of the funding available to help Head Start grantees meet the new requirements. Specifically, the 1998 law required that, when funding for the program overall increased, a certain percentage of the increase would be dedicated to quality. This percentage was 60 percent of new funds in 1999, 50 percent in 2000, 47.5 percent in 2001, 35 percent in 2002, and 25 percent in 2003 (and thereafter until the law is renewed). During the first part of this period, funding for the Head Start program grew and funds available for quality activities and salary enhancements

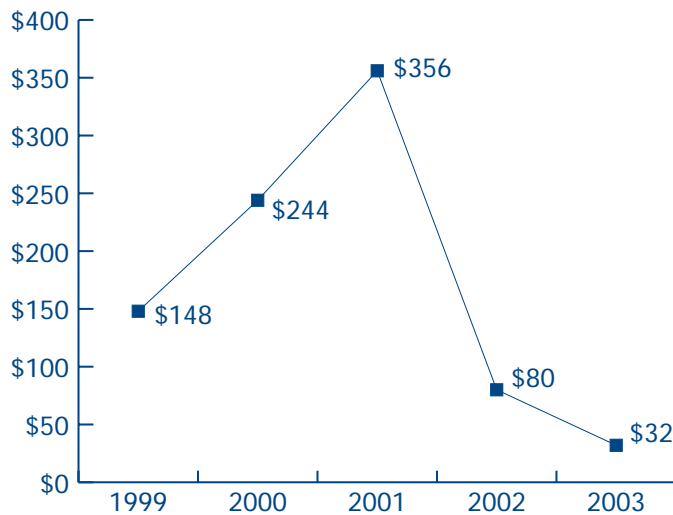
increased. In fiscal years 1999 and 2000, the Head Start Bureau allocated some of the quality improvement funds specifically to address the teacher education mandate; grantees received an additional \$1,300 per teacher without a degree to help address the costs of tuition, books, substitutes, and salaries. New quality funds reached \$356 million in fiscal year 2001. However, in subsequent years minimal overall funding increases have significantly lowered the quality set-aside, and by 2003 the total new quality funding was \$32 million.¹⁵ As a result, two things happened that affected funding for improving teacher qualifications: the amount of new funding for Head Start overall stopped growing, and the share

of new funds that must be devoted to quality improvement declined. (See Figure 5.)

Research on how Head Start programs have implemented the 1998 mandate is also informative. An October 2003 study by the Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that while Head Start had increased the percentage of teachers with required degrees, some grantees were having difficulty competing for graduates with degrees in early childhood education. Grantees identified competitive salaries as the crucial means to attracting qualified teachers and retaining teachers who received assistance to attain a higher college degree. GAO also looked at the early childhood education programs that prepare teachers and their availability across states and communities. GAO did not examine the quality of the degree programs, but it found they existed in all states and that grantees had taken steps to make them more accessible for their teachers through distance learning, scholarships, paying for substitute teachers if necessary, and other means. Access remained a problem in some rural areas where there were fewer colleges. Some colleges did not offer early education teaching programs, and teachers had to travel considerable distances to attend classes.

FIGURE 5

Quality Improvement Funding, Fiscal Years 1999-2003,
in Millions of Dollars



Source: U.S. General Accounting Office. (October 2003). Head Start: Increased Percentage of Teachers Nationwide Have Required Degrees, but Better Information on Classroom Teachers' Qualifications Needed. Washington, DC: Author.

GAO also did not determine whether each classroom in the study has at least one degreed teacher, because programs were not required to report on teacher qualifications at the classroom level.¹⁶

Other studies have examined efforts to increase the qualifications of Head Start teachers, particularly in programs serving special populations. A January 2004 Office of Inspector General (OIG) study found that, overall, Head Start programs both hired degreed teachers to improve qualifica-

tions in their programs and supported current teachers' efforts to pursue degrees. The success in these efforts, however, varied. The report found, "The lack of degreed teachers is particularly acute in 15, mostly southern, states. Additionally, American Indian and Alaska Native, migrant, and Early Head Start programs are well below the 50 percent program goal."¹⁷ Programs serving migrants face special challenges in hiring degreed teachers, since they tend to operate shorter programs to accommodate migrant families, and they

compete for teaching staff with other early education programs that offer longer terms. An evaluation of an effort to help Latino Head Start teachers in Oregon who are limited English proficient (LEP) earn A.A. degrees found that LEP teachers took an average of six to seven years to earn their A.A.¹⁸ These findings suggest that some rural regions and populations of Head Start teaching staff may find it more difficult to meet increased education mandates.

From the beginning of the reauthorization debate in 2003, lawmakers in the House and Senate considered updating the teacher education requirements to encourage more teachers to earn at least a B.A. in early childhood education or a related field within a specified time frame. They also considered making an A.A. degree the minimum level of education for Head Start teachers. Yet, these proposals have not increased funding to cover implementation costs or higher teacher salaries.

Are States and Higher Education Systems Ready to Address a New Head Start Teacher Mandate?

Significantly increasing the number of Head Start teachers with B.A. degrees will require

the assistance of states and institutions of higher learning. Some state initiatives address education levels of early care and education teachers, including child care, Head Start, and pre-kindergarten teachers. These initiatives, however, would need to be substantially expanded to play a key role in meeting a new federal Head Start mandate.

Most states lack statewide programs. North Carolina developed a model that has been replicated in many states, but has far to go to meet potential demand. The T.E.A.C.H. Early Childhood® Project (Teacher Education and Compensation Helps) helps early care and education teachers achieve higher levels of education and then provides higher wages. Since it was created in 1990, at least 14,000 child care providers in North Carolina have participated in the program, and the T.E.A.C.H. model has been replicated in 23 states.¹⁹ It is important to note that T.E.A.C.H. programs are usually available to a broad population of early care and education teachers in a state, which may include but is certainly not limited to Head Start teachers. In fact, 10 percent of T.E.A.C.H. participants last year worked in Head Start programs.²⁰ Also, state funding of T.E.A.C.H. programs varies

and often relies on stagnant federal child care block grant funds, leading some states to cut the program in recent years.

T.E.A.C.H. and other programs targeting non-traditional students have shown that working individuals need a significant amount of time and financial aid to meet new educational requirements. Research suggests that non-traditional students—students who work full-time while enrolled in school or who do not enroll full-time—tend to be more limited in the courses they could choose and the course load they could take each semester.²¹ A study from the National Center for Education Statistics found that, of all adults who enrolled part-time in postsecondary, six years later, only 8 percent had earned an A.A.²² Research on the T.E.A.C.H. program shows that it takes participating early childhood teachers an average of five years to complete required courses for a two-year degree.²³

Although some early childhood teachers pursuing higher education may access other financial aid supports through federal loans and grants or private scholarships, there is great disparity in college affordability across states. The purchasing power of federal Pell grants has not kept pace with the rate of

inflation,²⁴ and many early childhood providers can only attend school part-time, which may make them ineligible for most aid. Title II of the federal Higher Education Act, which is designed to improve the quality of teacher training programs in institutions of higher education, is targeted at teachers in elementary and secondary education. The Act does not address the needs of teachers in early childhood education programs.

In addition, the capacity for early childhood teacher education appears to be limited. A nationally representative survey of institutes of higher education found that while a third of higher education institutions offered early childhood teacher preparation programs, less than half of those offered a B.A. degree. These programs also tended to have a small number of full-time faculty serving a larger number of students compared to their institutions' overall full-time faculty-to-student ratio. One generous estimate of future demand for early childhood teacher education found a need for a 76 percent increase in full- and part-time early childhood faculty members.²⁵

Early childhood teachers with A.A.s may also run into problems when continuing their education toward a B.A. degree

due to a lack of clear articulation policies that allow students to transfer credits earned in one college or university to another. And although 95 percent of the A.A. degree programs report that the age range covered by their program includes infants and toddlers, only 60 percent require one or more courses on the topic.²⁶

Other research shows that higher education can better prepare teachers for the challenges of working with very disadvantaged and diverse children. For example, only 60 percent of early childhood teacher education programs required at least one course in working with children with special needs, yet Head Start programs have a requirement that at least 10 percent of enrollment opportunities be made available to children with disabilities. Head Start programs need teachers with specialized training in this area. And, survey respondents identified “difficulty in attracting and retaining ethnically and linguistically diverse faculty” as the top challenge of early childhood teacher education programs.²⁷

States have found similar issues. A California study found several significant challenges to training an influx of early childhood teachers, including a need for a clearer certification and

credentialing process for the early care and education field, the inability of the early childhood field to recruit and retain many graduates of these programs, and a lack of diversity among early childhood education instructors.²⁸ A Florida study found that while there was willingness in the higher education community to take on an influx of early childhood teacher preparation students, the system would need supports and a realistic phase-in period for any preschool teacher education mandates in order to significantly accelerate the number of graduating students.²⁹

New Jersey offers a rare example of a state taking a comprehensive approach and investing significant resources in preschool teacher education, albeit for only a part of the state. The *Abbott v. Burke* State Supreme Court decision mandated that New Jersey offer high-quality preschool in the state’s 31 poorest school districts. The decision included a provision that required all teachers in preschools covered under the *Abbott* case, including non-school-based child care and Head Start programs, to obtain a B.A. degree with early childhood certification. In response to this staffing challenge, New Jersey created specialized early education-focused teacher training programs with both

alternate and traditional route options at institutions of higher education; a scholarship program for teachers’ tuition; and The Governor’s Abbott Preschool Teacher Recruitment Program, which provides salary incentives between \$3,500 and \$6,000 and a computer to anyone with a B.A. who could qualify for a certificate and teach in an Abbott preschool.³⁰

This level of investment is unusual in budget-conscious states; New Jersey’s court decision forced the state to direct significant new funds toward early childhood education and professional development. The combination of scholarships, coordination with higher education, and guaranteed salary increases on par with public school teachers did help increase many current teachers’ education levels and attract new teachers. In the first three years of the four-year mandate, the proportion of early education teachers in Abbott classrooms located in child care and other community-based programs with B.A.s rose from 35 to 80 percent.³¹ Currently, fewer than 35 teachers of almost 3,000 in the Abbott program do not have a B.A.³² However, it is unclear what proportion of current Abbott district preschool teachers are new and what proportion were existing staff who were able to meet the new

mandate. It is also unclear how the mandate is affecting the ethnic and racial diversity of the teaching force in Abbott districts.³³

What Are the Cost Implications for Head Start of Teacher Education Requirements?

Another issue for Congress to consider is the cost of requiring higher education for Head Start staff and implications for authorized and appropriated funding levels. Additional funding will be needed to meet a mandate to move from two- to four-year degrees, because costs of attending a four-year public college or university are on average more than twice the cost of a two-year program.³⁴ Costs will include: 1) helping current and potential Head Start teachers reach higher education levels; and 2) providing adequate compensation to assure that qualified teachers are attracted to and stay in Head Start programs. The cost of the former is relatively modest compared to ongoing compensation costs.

In 2003, CLASP estimated that the cost of helping 50 percent of Head Start teachers obtain B.A.s by 2008 would be approximately \$298 million. This estimate includes tuition, fees, and books, as well as providing sub-

stitutes for the Head Start teachers who would be required to take time off from work to attend courses.³⁵ In addition, the National Institute for Early Education Research estimated in 2003 the additional compensation costs for requiring *all* Head Start teachers to have a B.A. degree would be \$5.2 billion over eight years.³⁶

Recommendations

Moving more Head Start teachers to higher levels of education should be a provision of Head Start reauthorization legislation but only if the provision is accompanied by dedicated resources to ensure its feasibility. Such a mandate should be an opportunity to partner with state efforts to improve the capacity of higher education systems, to strengthen the effectiveness and diversity of early care and education teachers, and to improve the stability and compensation levels of the workforce.

We recommend that Congress:

- Include a goal to significantly increase the number of Head Start teachers who have B.A. degrees in early childhood education over the authorized period.
- Provide dedicated funding in Head Start to support scholarships, release time, mentor-

ing, and substitutes for Head Start teachers seeking higher degrees, and develop alternative pathways for select Head Start staff with extensive experience or non-early childhood degrees.

- Commit additional funds so that Head Start programs can peg salary increases to teacher education qualifications so that current teachers have an incentive to increase their education and to attract and retain teachers who meet higher education requirements. Head Start teachers with B.A. degrees should earn salaries comparable to kindergarten teachers.
- Target funding and incentives to help teachers in regions with lower levels of current teachers with B.A.s.
- Require Head Start programs to collect data on the impact of new policy mandates, such as the ethnic and linguistic backgrounds of teachers, education levels of child development staff by classroom, and compensation levels for credentialed teachers.

As the second necessary step in ensuring that Head Start teachers have B.A. degrees, Congress should also address needed improvements in the Higher Education Act:

- Expand the use of Title II state grant funds to create, enhance, or expand high-quality postsecondary education programs for preparation of early education teachers of children from birth through age five.
- Allow the use of Title II state grant funds to expand Master's and doctorate level programs to increase the number of early childhood faculty in higher education institutions.
- Expand Pell grants to students attending school less than full-time, raise the amount of earnings Head Start teachers and other low-income working students could have and still qualify for Pell Grants, and assure that Pell Grants keep pace with the rising costs of higher education.
- Create incentives for cooperation and formal articulation agreements between two- and four-year public and private postsecondary institutions and other credit-bearing, high-quality professional development programs so

that all teachers with A.A.s may transfer credits to work toward their B.A. degrees.³⁷

Conclusion

Head Start reauthorization presents an important opportunity for Congress to make the goal of raising early childhood teacher education qualifications real and not another unfunded mandate that places burdens on states, programs, and teachers. An unfunded mandate will likely result in turnover and instability for the many children that rely on Head Start.

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ABOUT CLASP

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP), a national nonprofit organization founded in 1968, conducts research, legal and policy analysis, technical assistance, and advocacy related to economic security for low-income families with children.

CLASP's child care and early education work focuses on promoting policies that support both child development and the needs of low-income working parents and on expanding the availability of resources for child care and early education initiatives. CLASP examines the impact of welfare reform on child care needs; studies the

relationships between child care subsidy systems, the Head Start Program, pre-kindergarten efforts, and other early education initiatives; and explores how these systems can be responsive to the developmental needs of all children, including children with disabilities.

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