

Bush seeks big changes in Head Start, drawing criticism from program's supporters [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

President Bush called today for a major overhaul of Head Start, the popular Lyndon Johnson-era preschool program for poor children, that would add an academic focus to its traditional emphasis on health and nutrition and give some states the right to control its financing.

Head Start programs, the president said, are "working O.K.," but "we want better than O.K. in America. We want excellence."

Mr. Bush spoke in support of a bill in the House that includes a pilot program that would allow up to eight states to take over Head Start and combine it with existing state preschool programs.

But more broadly, Mr. Bush is seeking a fundamental change for a program that has always been directly financed by the federal government, bypassing the governors with whom President Johnson was at war over civil rights when it began as an eight-week summer program in 1965. Even now Head Start advocates fear governors might use the money elsewhere, a temptation that grows in times of budget crisis.

Mr. Bush's words were immediately denounced by the president and chief executive of the National Head Start Association, a nonprofit group that promotes Head Start. The executive, Sarah Greene, has been in an intensifying battle with the White House over its plans to change the 38-year-old program, which serves one million children.

Mr. Bush's speech at a Head Start center at Highland Park Elementary School in suburban Washington, some seven hours before his scheduled departure tonight for a five-day trip to Africa, reflected the White House concern that the president stay focused on domestic policy in the run-up to his 2004 re-election campaign. But his words unleashed a new torrent of criticism from advocates for the poor and political opponents who said that the administration could not be trusted on the issue.

The White House position is that the bill, and Mr. Bush's plans for the program, would improve Head Start in two ways: by merging it with often-overlapping state programs and then imposing new academic standards on the combined program, which would still be called Head Start. Mr. Bush's advisers argue that Head Start, which serves the poorest of the nation's 3- and 4-year-olds and focuses on meals and medical care, has not kept up with new research showing how soon young children can learn.

The bill would require Head Start employees to teach early reading, writing and math skills, much like many state-financed and private preschool programs. "We want Head Start to set higher ambitions for the million children it serves," Mr. Bush said.

The president also promised that there would be safeguards to ensure that Head Start money sent directly to a state would, in fact, be used for Head Start. "What we really don't want to do is say we're going to focus on Head Start, the Head Start money goes for, you know, the prison complex," Mr. Bush said.

Head Start advocates and the president's opponents said they remained skeptical about the administration's motives and worried that the eight-state pilot program would be, as one education expert put it, "the camel's nose." Critics say that states cannot be counted on to uphold the quality of Head Start programs and that the centers, which are often staffed by former Head Start mothers and operate like neighborhood centers, will lose their character and close ties to their communities.

Other Head Start advocates said they were worried that the nurturing approach of Head Start would change if there was increased emphasis on early literacy skills.

Some 40 states have state-financed preschool programs that would be eligible for the pilot program, if they qualify and chose to participate. The 10 states without such programs could not qualify, but the bill would still impose new academic standards on their Head Start services.

The bill also calls for at least half of Head Start teachers to have four-year college degrees by 2008. In addition, Mr. Bush called today for an evaluation program to judge if the proposed new academic standards are met, although he said it would be "absurd" for a 4-year-old to take a standardized test like those the administration has required for older students.

New York State's 176 Head Start programs, which serve more than 49,000 children, received \$208.2 million from the federal government last year. If Mr. Bush's proposed overhaul becomes law and New York enters the pilot program, the federal money would go directly to the governor.

The Head Start bill could be voted on as early as this week in the House, where it has a good chance of passing. But Congressional aides say that any Senate bill that includes the pilot program would face a certain and protracted fight from Mr. Kennedy and other Democrats.

-Reprinted from The New York Times

Region: United States [2]

Tags: poverty [3]

funding [4]

pre-school [5]

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<https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/funding> [5] <https://childcarecanada.org/category/tags/pre-school>