

# Why Obama's plan to fix Head Start is not enough <sup>[1]</sup>

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## EXCERPTS:

Just four years after the federally funded preschool program Head Start began in 1965, it was slapped by a report, commissioned by the Johnson Administration, that questioned its effectiveness. Forty years later, not much has changed. While Head Start's aim to prepare low-income students for kindergarten is noble, it's still faces questions about its demonstrable benefits. Seeking to finally turn the program around, President Obama on Tuesday announced a plan that will require each Head Start center to meet a new set of benchmarks or risk losing its funding.

Under Obama's plan, each of the 1,600-plus Head Start centers nationwide, which operate some 49,000 classrooms, will be evaluated for their effectiveness by the Department of Health and Human Services over the next three years. Low-performing centers will have to compete for federal dollars; if another preschool program can demonstrate better results than the Head Start center that organization will get the funding.

The programs will be evaluated on a series of benchmarks such as students' readiness for kindergarten, teachers qualifications and curriculum quality. In addition, Head Start centers will lose automatic funding if their state or local licensing is revoked, or if they mismanage federal funds. "Up until now all Head Start programs have had their funding renewed automatically-in some cases for decades-unless there was a glaring problem," Secretary of Health and Human Services Kathleen Sebelius said on Tuesday. "[Now] we're holding them to a higher standard."

However, Head Start's shortcomings can't entirely be explained by a lack of oversight. Its current book of regulations is as thick as the Yellow Pages and compliance with those standards has been carefully monitored. According to W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, many of those guidelines dictate trivial classroom rules - is each napping cot separated by at least three feet of space? - rather than evaluate how well the program teaches kids.

And while he approves of Obama's plan, Barnett says much more is needed to make Head Start "highly effective." First, he says, programs should be given more freedom to innovate and redirect resources to the classroom, including the ability to raise teacher pay to public school levels and reduce class sizes. Both those steps could improve a problem that has consistently plagued Head Start: poor quality teachers. Because Head Start does not pay teachers as well as K-12 schools, which is hardly a high paying job in itself, it's extremely hard to attract highly skilled, well-trained people to the program.

Second, Barnett says Head Start should ease some of its performance monitoring standards and instead monitor centers on financial accountability and no more than three indicators of performance, including the quality of teaching. And, finally, he says Head Start should develop a system to assess children's progress that can inform overall evaluation of the program.

- reprinted from Time Swampland

**Region:** United States <sup>[2]</sup>

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