

Statement of Chairman Michael N. Castle
Subcommittee on Education Reform
Committee on Education & the Workforce
Markup of H.R. 2210, the School Readiness Act of 2003
June 12, 2003

We are here today to consider H.R. 2210, the School Readiness Act of 2003, which reauthorizes the Head Start program. This legislation improves the Head Start Act by emphasizing that every child, regardless of their economic status, should have the best chance possible to succeed.

In 1965, Head Start was created to give economically disadvantaged children access to the same educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services that were enjoyed by their more affluent peers. The goal of the program was, as it remains today, to provide children a solid foundation that will prepare them for success in school and later in life. As the centerpiece of the Federal government's efforts to support quality early childhood education for our nation's most disadvantaged youth, Head Start has served nearly 20 million low-income children and their families.

We all can agree on the need for Head Start and its astounding successes. We must also recognize that Head Start can produce even greater results for children. Students who attend Head Start programs do start school more prepared than those with similar backgrounds that do not attend Head Start. Head Start students, however, continue to enter kindergarten well below national norms in school readiness. By moving to close this school readiness gap, this bill will improve results for Head Start students across the nation.

The School Readiness Act strengthens Head Start's academic focus while maintaining its comprehensive nature, improves teacher quality, demands grantee accountability while providing assistance to those that are underachieving, increases funding for Head Start, requires collaboration between early childhood education and care providers, and creates a demonstration program allowing some states to further coordinate state early childhood programs with Head Start.

Under H.R. 2210 Head Start children will enter school with demonstrated pre-reading, language, and pre-mathematics skills, as well as the benefits from the nutritional and health services that Head Start has always provided. Children's progress will be based on scientifically based and clear criteria that will enable parents and teachers to accurately view a child's progress.

Title I will also require Head Start teachers to be more prepared to equip young children for school. By 2008, 50 percent of all Head Start teachers must have a baccalaureate degree, and after three years no new teachers will be hired without an associate degree.

This bill also improves the accountability of Head Start programs. As under current law, local grantees will be responsible for their use of the federal funds. Those that are identified as underachieving, however, will receive additional assistance. This bill demonstrates our commitment to Head Start by authorizing a \$202 million dollar increase, making it a \$6.87 billion dollar program.

Title II of the School Readiness Act creates a limited state demonstration program. Today, unlike in 1965, governors have a host of initiatives to serve disadvantaged citizens, including WIC, TANF, CSBG, and state-run pre-kindergarten programs. Most of these programs are run through the states, making coordination easy. In Head Start, however, grantees receive funding directly from the federal government, yet states are required to coordinate the program with their own state initiatives. This can often be a daunting task for a Governor.

Those Governors who have demonstrated a commitment to early childhood programs will now have an opportunity to fully coordinate all of these programs. By empowering those states who are committed to early childhood education to coordinate their already existing patchwork of child care and preschool programs we will be producing greater results for children

This legislation has always been designed to strengthen Head Start, but we are also listening to those with concerns. I believe the accommodations we are going to make in the Substitute will address concerns that have been raised about Title II and ultimately strengthen the state demonstration program. Today's substitute will limit the number of states that could participate in the pilot project to eight, require states in the pilot project to demonstrate a commitment to funding early childhood programs, and explicitly require pilot project states to have high standards for all Head Start-related services to ensure that children in the participating state continue to receive services that are as good as, or better than, the services Head Start students in that state currently receive.

To even be considered for participation in the pilot, a state would have to demonstrate high standards with respect to all services to be provided to children, educational standards to promote school readiness among disadvantaged children, administrative and financial management, and the condition and location of facilities operating the programs.

The School Readiness Act of 2003 builds upon the reforms of previous reauthorizations of Head Start, as well as the recommendations of President Bush. We all want to do what is best for the children and I truly believe this bill does that.