

This copy is for your personal, noncommercial use only. You can order presentation-ready copies for distribution to your colleagues, clients or customers here or use the "Reprints" tool that appears next to any article. Visit www.nytreprints.com for samples and additional information. Order a reprint of this article now.



January 3, 2012

Raising Standards for Head Start

The Head Start program, which prepares disadvantaged 3- and 4-year-olds for school, has served nearly 30 million children since it was created in 1965. While there is little doubt that the federal program is critically important for these children and their parents, quality varies widely among programs.

Over the years, Congress has tried to strengthen oversight and improve the \$8 billion program. In December, the Obama administration put into effect a sensible evaluation system that will allow federal officials to judge the effectiveness of individual Head Start centers and to shut down chronic low performers.

Last month, scores of Head Start grant recipients in about 40 states — including those in New York City, Los Angeles, Baltimore and New Haven — were informed that they will be required to reapply for their grants because they do not meet certain administrative requirements. Those programs will now have to compete with other potential providers, who will have a chance to show that they can do a better job.

These reforms are part of the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, which required programs to raise teacher qualifications, improve classroom offerings and broaden access to vulnerable groups, including children who are homeless.

In the next few years, all the country's 1,800 or so Head Start grant holders will be evaluated for performance, including the effectiveness of teachers as measured by visiting evaluators. The classroom rating system will begin this year, and deficient programs will be reviewed for eligibility for federal money. The reforms, which also include more technical assistance for program providers, have the backing of Head Start defenders like the National Head Start

Association, which supports greater accountability from the preschool centers.

Even as the Obama administration strengthens performance measures, financing for Head Start may be at risk in fiscal 2013, when big federal spending cuts start to kick in. Education is a major part of the nondefense discretionary budget that falls under the spending caps approved by Congress. Preschool for disadvantaged children should not be another casualty of the budget wars.