

Giving Children a Head Start on Education -- March 2007

One of the most critical issues Congress deals with is the education of our children. And when it comes to helping prepare economically disadvantaged young children for school, one of the best programs we have is the Head Start Program. Head Start provides these children with the necessary educational, health, nutritional, and social services at a young age so they can come to kindergarten ready to learn. Currently in Delaware, Head Start programs serve over 1,500 children, with almost 500 additional four year olds receiving assistance through state government funding.

I have been proud to play a role in improving this program in the past by making it work better for the children and this year, the House Education and Labor Committee, of which I am a senior Member, has again passed legislation to strengthen the program. The full House will consider this legislation that I helped write in the coming weeks.

I had a number of goals in writing this legislation, but my primary goal has been to retain the objective of ensuring that our children are beginning school with a solid foundation and the preparation needed for success in the future. Over time, this program has provided this service to nearly 20 million low-income children and their families.

However, while realizing the successes of Head Start, we must also recognize that the program 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. However, Head Start students continue to enter kindergarten well below national norms in school readiness and we must remain focused on how we can close this school readiness gap.

To this end, my legislation builds upon efforts made in the last Congress to establish education performance standards to ensure Head Start students develop language knowledge and skills; pre-reading knowledge and skills that prepare children for early literacy in schools; pre-mathematics and pre-science knowledge and skills; cognitive abilities related to academic achievement and child development; social and emotional development, early learning, and school success and sustained academic gains; and in the case of limited-English proficient children, progress toward acquisition of the English language.

I also sought to create a greater role for states and local school districts in Head Start. I believe strongly in these coordination and collaboration efforts, and as more and more states create, and expand, their pre-K programs, it becomes crucial to demonstrate active partnerships with local school districts focused on facilitating smooth transitions to kindergarten for their students.

Finally, this legislation also takes strong steps to address any fraud and abuse in the Head Start program. Unfortunately, there have been stories in other parts of the country of programs in which funds were being diverted away from the overall purpose and services for early childhood education. This legislation includes increased transparency and disclosure requirements, as well as the required employment of well-qualified fiscal staff to prevent future abuses.

The importance of early childhood education and services cannot be overstated. I believe that is why both Democrats

and Republicans have come together on this issue with a common cause and a willingness to work together to ensure that every child in America start their earliest education with a solid foundation.