

HEAD START

By Attorney Michael H. Wald

Poverty is a self-perpetuating state. Those born into poverty tend to remain in the low income bracket. Their children in turn continue this cycle. One method of alleviating this dilemma is to strengthen the ability of low income, disadvantaged children to cope with their social environment and to deal effectively with the educational system. By giving these young children a higher degree of confidence in their intellectual and emotional abilities as well as giving them proper medical and nutritional care, much can be done to assure them a brighter future. It is with these goals in mind that the federal organization known as Head Start originated in 1964.

Head Start began as an eight-week summer program for children from three to school entry. Over the years it has evolved to be a full year in duration. The agency itself is basically a federal organization that selects and funds local agencies such as public school districts, private non-profit organizations, and public agencies. Head Start funds about 80% of the money necessary for the local agencies to exist. The remaining 20% is provided by the local agency in question. The funds allocated by Head Start go directly to the local agencies, bypassing any involvement with state agencies. In addition to selecting grantees, Head Start's duties involve monitoring the recipients' compliance with its performance standards. It is empowered to suspend or terminate the grants made to recipients who do not conform to these performance standards. Head Start also monitors individuals' transitions from the Head Start program into the public school system.

Head Start is responsive to the needs of handicapped children. By law, ten percent of the enrollment opportunities in Head Start in each state must be provided for the handicapped. It is

believed that by teaching handicapped children to interact with non-handicapped at this early age they can learn to relate to their environment and peer group.

Head Start also recognizes the health problems faced by many of its recipients. Many low income children have seldom been to a doctor's or dentist's office. Head Start, therefore, provides children with a comprehensive health care program. This includes medical, dental, mental health and nutritional needs. All children receive complete physical exams, including vision and hearing tests, immunizations and dental exams. Follow-up treatment is provided for the identification of health problems.

In order to meet the nutritional needs of the recipients of the program, children are served a minimum of one hot meal and snack each day. This allows them to meet at least one-third of their daily nutritional needs.

Mental health and psychological services are provided to children of low income families in order to promote their emotional and social development. Parental involvement is a cornerstone of the Head Start program. Parents' participation in classes and workshops on child development is encouraged. Through staff visits to the home, parents learn about educational activities that can be carried out in the household.

Still another component of Head Start involves social services. The Head Start social services coordinator assists Head Start families by referring them to local agencies that help them obtain the services they require.

It has been proven that Head Start children score higher than comparable non-Head Start children on preschool achievement tests. In addition, Head Start children tend to perform better than their peers upon entrance to regular school, and there are fewer grade retentions and special class

placements.

The Head Start program faces an uncertain future. Head Start now serves one out of six eligible low income preschool children. Although the program is not in immediate danger of termination, it is not being allocated funds to expand due to federal government budgeting constraints.

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