

Head Start Faces a New Test

In a First, the Preschool Centers Will Vie for Funds; Weeding Out Low Performers

By [STEPHANIE BANCHERO](#)

Friday, April 27, 2012 - Some local Head Start programs for the first time will have to compete for a share of \$7.6 billion in federal funding under a plan aimed at weeding out low-performing preschool centers.

In its initial move, the Obama administration recently told 132 Head Start programs across the country that they have been identified as deficient, including the nation's largest programs in Los Angeles County and New York City.



Andrew Spear for The Wall Street Journal

The Obama administration has targeted 132 Head Start programs, including the one above in Trotwood, Ohio, that it says are underperforming.

The targeted programs, which serve low-income three- and four-year-olds, won't lose current funding. But instead of having their grants renewed automatically, as has been the practice, the programs now have to prove they are effective in preparing children for kindergarten before they will be given future funding.

The move is part of the administration's broader goal to infuse competition and accountability into public education from preschool through college.

Head Start, created in 1964, provides federal funds to public school districts, city agencies and community organizations to operate roughly 1,600 programs serving about a million children.

Long championed by Democrats, Head Start has come under growing attack by Republican lawmakers and other critics who say it is costly and ineffective, and that local providers have a virtual monopoly on the money no matter how poorly they perform.

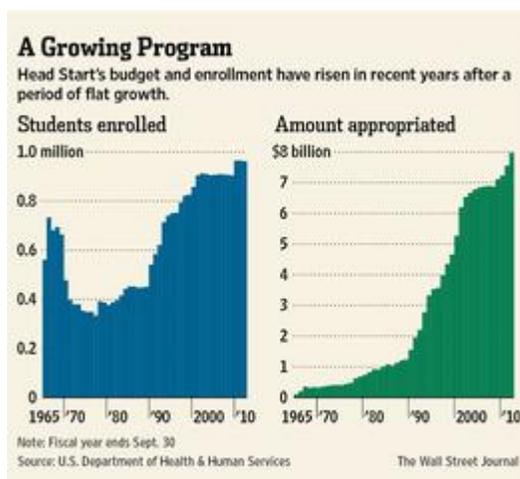
"This is about holding all programs accountable," said Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, who oversees Head Start for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, which announced the funding change last week. "We want to open this up to competition and see if there are other organizations out there that are innovative and creative."

Some Head Start programs immediately resisted the move. Centers in 10 states filed a federal lawsuit against the Obama administration last week over the funding decision, arguing in part that the new regulations are unfair because they penalize programs retroactively for deficiencies dating to June 2009. The lawsuit also accuses the administration of tinkering with the rules to ensure at least 25% are labeled deficient.

Ms. Sanchez Fuentes of HHS declined to comment on the programs' lawsuit.

The new guidelines spell out seven criteria for renewal of grants to the programs, including meeting basic health and safety requirements, establishing kindergarten readiness standards and posting scores above a specified level on a new teacher-effectiveness metric.

According to an analysis completed for the HHS, nearly 44% of the 1,600 Head Start providers could run afoul of the new requirements, although it is unclear if that many will end up being sanctioned.



So far, federal officials have evaluated only about one-third of all Head Start programs, as the grants are currently on a three-year cycle. The remaining programs will be evaluated in the next few years.

"Competition is a good thing, but having a wholesale auction of Head Start just for the sake of competition is not a good thing," said Barbara Haxton, executive director of Ohio Head Start Association, an advocacy and teacher training organization, and a plaintiff in the lawsuit.

But Joy Trehol, who oversees the Head Start program at the Campagna Center in Virginia, supports the new requirements. "They might seem really tough," she said. "But these are standards that we should be living up to now and standards that every child deserves."

Rep. John Kline of Minnesota, the Republican chairman of the House Committee on Education and the Workforce, said at a budget hearing Thursday for the HHS that he was "pleased the administration finally took steps" to "protect taxpayer dollars by requiring the lowest-performing programs to re-compete."

Mr. Kline pointed to a 2010 report by the Government Accountability Office that found fraud and abuse in Head Start, and he said that efforts to fix the program began in 2007.

Head Start was created as part of President Lyndon Johnson's war on poverty, to provide children and families with health, dental and social services, which is why it is overseen by HHS instead of the Department of Education.

In recent years—amid mounting evidence that quality preschool can boost academic achievement and job-earning potential—there has been a push for Head Start programs to improve and to focus more on academics.

Decades of studies on Head Start found mixed results, with some suggesting its students are more likely to finish high school and stay out of the criminal-justice system. But the most robust study, conducted for the U.S. government and released in 2010, showed Head Start students had small learning gains that faded by the end of first grade.

"It's not a cheap program, and other programs have shown they can accomplish much more," said Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University in New Jersey.

The HHS move infuriated many in the Head Start community, who say that some of the flaws found at the 132 programs are minor.

Mary Burns, chief executive of Miami Valley Child Development Centers, a nonprofit in Dayton, Ohio, said her group landed on the list for a few "isolated instances of human error." In 2010, a teacher let a student's grandmother pick up another child, a violation of Head Start rules. Ten weeks later, a three-year-old was left alone on a school bus and wandered through a parking lot.

Ms. Burns said the problems weren't systemic, and that her agency responded immediately, firing one employee and disciplining another. She said a loss of some of the federal money could result in layoffs or possible closure of a center. "It could devastate our communities," she said.

Keesha Woods, director of the Head Start program at the Los Angeles County Office of Education, which serves 24,000 children, said losing grant money could force families to scramble for other programs and would cause "huge disruption in their lives." HHS put her center on the list for poor record-keeping.

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