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## Give kids a better Head Start

By Nancy S. Grasmick  
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KINDERGARTEN ISN'T the beginning of learning. To be certain Maryland children excel, all must be provided with a good educational foundation before entering kindergarten.

The implementation of the No Child Left Behind Act and its focus on positive outcomes for all children provides the opportunity to make some critical improvements to Head Start, a federal program valuable to early success for many disadvantaged youngsters.

Congress is looking at the Head Start law, and it is imperative that lawmakers build on the strengths of the existing program while enhancing its efforts to improve its language, literacy and numeracy components.

Nobody knows where the debate on Head Start will end, but the recently introduced bill, the School Readiness Act of 2003, offers a good beginning. While important services such as health care and nutrition would remain part of Head Start, the proposal enhances educational components of the program by spotlighting the development of literacy and cognitive skills that children need to succeed in kindergarten and future grades.

The bill focuses on strengthening instruction by providing that at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers must have a bachelor's degree. It also strongly emphasizes continuing education for teachers. Under the proposal, a limited number of states would be offered the option to coordinate state and federal early childhood education programs. If states choose this option, they will be subject to new accountability requirements. Maryland intends to be one of those states.

When Head Start began in 1965, it was the only early childhood education program available for at-risk, low-income families. Today, more states have developed an array of early childhood programs, which focus on school readiness.

In Maryland, in addition to Head Start, there are pre-kindergarten programs, family and center child care and nursery school programs for young children. Substantial federal, state and private money is

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dedicated to these efforts. But we still find that more than 48 percent of children need additional help when they enter kindergarten.

In Maryland, state Education Department research has found that children from economically disadvantaged backgrounds are at an even greater risk of not having the necessary school readiness skills. Maryland is not alone.

All children, regardless of income and family circumstances, deserve the same high-quality educational programs. Consistent program standards, qualified teachers and a strong curriculum are critical elements of the new legislation. This in no way negates the importance of supporting a young child's social and emotional development, which remains a key element of the bill.

Head Start, which provides about \$75 million to Maryland, serves more than 10,000 children and their families statewide. We continue to work to align Head Start, child care and pre-kindergarten to ensure that all children are taught to the same standards.

Coordination and collaboration among these early childhood programs and with the public schools are essential in order for children to make a seamless transition into kindergarten. Joint staff development programs for teachers and other professionals working with young children are critical.

We have developed both early learning standards to ensure that children have the skills they need in kindergarten and program standards to make certain that children participate in quality programs. For accountability and planning, teachers evaluate children in kindergarten to see if they have the skills necessary to succeed in school. These elements are part of the recently proposed bill.

Research shows that high-quality early childhood programs produce long-term benefits. Children who are in quality programs are less likely to enter special education. They are more likely to avoid grade retention, graduate from high school and go on to college. Many features of the new Head Start bill match what we are doing in this state. The opportunity to continue would be a major step forward in promoting school readiness in Maryland.


We must ensure a quality education for all children. A renewed and revitalized Head Start program with a greater focus on school readiness is a major part of this strategy. We cannot afford to do less for Maryland's children.


Nancy S. Grasmick is state superintendent of schools.

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