

June 26, 1993

The Honorable Edward M. Kennedy, Chairperson
Committee on Labor and Human Resources
428 Dirksen Senate Office Building
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Senator Kennedy:

This letter refers to correspondence about the undersigned sent to you on June 16, 1993 by Senator Barbara Boxer. It addresses S.670, the "Head Start Quality Improvement Act." This letter presents my concerns about Head Start and offers solutions based on three decades of observations, participation, and research in the field.

I have worked in various capacities with the Head Start program. For example, in 1969 I was responsible for writing the national Head Start Performance Standards that relate to parents. I created and directed a Parent and Child Center program format that became a national model. For many years I was a consultant to the national Head Start Office and provided training and consultation to administrators and staff around the country. I directed the Head Start training program for Federal Region IX. I have learned a great deal from my participation with the Head Start program.

The requirements pertaining to parent involvement stated in S.670 were published in greater detail over twenty years ago in a Head Start Policy Manual I-30, *The Parents*. Unfortunately the program mandates clearly delineated in that manual were, for the most part, never implemented. Several reasons account for this serious failure. From the national Head Start office down to the local program level, Head Start administrators and staff have regarded the program as a children's program. No concerted effort was made to alter that thinking. As a result, the provisions of the I-30 Policy Manual that require a variety of parent involvement activities were ignored by Head Start programs.

Another reason for the failure to implement I-30 is that, from the national office on down, no systematic and appropriate administrative and staff parent involvement training program and supervision system were ever established. For these reasons the Head Start Policy Manual I-30, *The Parents* has never received the important, broad based, and continuous support that it should have gotten.

I am very glad that Head Start is being examined. Its premises are good. And there is an opportunity to strengthen and improve it. However let us learn from the past. If the I-30 and S.670 are to be implemented effectively, their provisions must receive continuous advocacy from the national and regional Head Start offices, down through the grantees and to the local programs. That advocacy must include, as an important feature, an effective program of training and supervision.

The remainder of this letter will present approaches that experience and research have found effective in attracting and sustaining parent involvement, presenting parent education, and achieving the other goals for parents listed in the I-30 and S.670. Because of their demonstrated effectiveness, these ideas can become the core both of Head Start parent involvement/educational program efforts and the national training and technical assistance program.

Most Head Start programs make a serious mistake by the *way* they seek to involve parents. They frequently focus their initial programmatic efforts on educating parents in groups about child development and child rearing. The result of most of these efforts, no matter how well intentioned and well planned, is disappointing to the program staff, administrators, and parents. Experience has demonstrated that it is important to meet the interests and needs of parents *as adults* before and while addressing their role as parents.

The parents of Head Start children are, first and foremost, adults living in poverty. These adults are leading difficult lives. They are plagued by many severe problems and needs that affect them, other adult members of their family, their Head Start age child, other children in their family, and their neighborhood. These adults also have a wide variety of interests, abilities, and talents that either lie dormant or have never been discovered, acknowledged, and given avenues for expression. To successfully attract and sustain the involvement of parents in Head Start it is important to assess accurately the needs and interests of the parents, *as adults*.

After assessing individual and group needs and interests, programs must work *with* parents to meet them. The development of project activities should be done with the adult parents. Research has demonstrated that when the intended recipients of educational or social service programs participate in deciding upon and shaping project activities during the beginning stages, that participation attracts and sustains involvement in the project. The research also repeatedly shows that parents will want to participate in programs when they believe that their involvement will benefit themselves as adults, will aid people they want to help or further a cause in which they believe. Their participation is sustained when they judge that the program has, in fact, had a positive impact on the people or cause. The most enthusiastic parents are those who receive or achieve personal rewards for themselves, as adults, or for their family.

Both the social science research literature and my experience with Head Start show how important for the children it is that their parents be given decision-making roles in all aspects of the program. Program ownership, derived from on going multiple opportunities in participatory decision making, is like a magnet for Head Start Parents. Is it at all difficult to understand why? How frequently have people living in poverty felt a legitimate sense of personal control or influence over their own lives? How often have they had a chance to participate in making decisions about something so personal and important to them as their own children and family? Is it any wonder that low-income parents build an allegiance to a program that demonstrates its willingness to work with them to meet their needs and develop their interests?

From the time of the Puritans and Pilgrims until today the importance of the community to family life and child rearing has been amply demonstrated. The absence of a cohesive, effective community life and the relative isolation of parents contribute to parental helplessness and

hopelessness. These feelings are often inflicted on the vulnerable child. In its work with parents, Head Start should have a goal of helping parents build community. When a group of Head Start parents at the center decide together that they want to learn how to cook nutritious meals for their family, they take a step toward building community. When a group of Head Start parents decide together that they would like to use the center for adult recreation like cards or a dance, they take a significant step toward building community. The Cleveland Parent Child Center made a conscious effort to create opportunities for parents to develop a sense of community. One of the pay offs came when a number of those parents became dissatisfied with the way the local elementary school PTA was functioning. Many had older children enrolled at that school. At the next PTA election, Parent Child Center parents, with pride and determination, turned out and voted themselves into office. It is impossible to calculate the positive impact these steps by parents had on their young children. But can anyone doubt that the Head Start child benefited?

The hiring of indigenous adult leadership has also been shown significantly to contribute both to parent involvement and to building a sense of community. These are people who live in the low-income Head Start neighborhood. They are popular in the community. They are the people to whom other adults living in the same area turn for help in times of need. These are the informal leaders. Local Head Start projects should identify and hire these leaders to fill appropriate project staff positions. These indigenous leader-staff members can perform several important functions. First, they can best communicate the goals of the Head Start project to members of their community and communicate any problems or concerns of the community to the Head Start administration and staff. Secondly, with a minimum of training, they can conduct the adult need/interest assessment. Third, they can work with the Head Start parents and staff to design and carry out project activities that meet parent needs/interests and the Head Start Performance Standards. And fourth, they will act as positive role models for other Head Start parents.

Sec. 8. Outcome measures. (B) d.5.670 (iv) of S.670 states that Head Start programs shall “provide an opportunity to participate in a parenting skills program, or other assistance designed to improve parenting skills, to not less than 90 percent of such families who have identified needs related to parenting skills.”

Most parents need help in learning about young children and how to raise them. *How Section Eight is implemented will be critical.* Let us not submit parents to didactic classes in parent education. For the most part these parents look with extreme disfavor on anything like school. We will waste an important opportunity if Head Start programs require mandatory parent education classes. From three decades of work either observing parent education efforts or as a parent educator, I have learned that the presentation of general theory or data about child development and child rearing is not effective. Parents, for the most part, are only interested in child-rearing information that pertains to their children and to solving the child-rearing problems they face day in and day out. Furthermore, for parents to be able to translate didactically presented, child development information into appropriate child-rearing strategies for their particular child is an area of skill and knowledge unto itself.

Parent education is best accomplished using an *indirect*, informal approach. Parent education is most effective when it originates from the intrinsic questions and interests of parents themselves. This should be done with small groups of parents who are working with children or observing

them in the classroom. Parent education is also effective when individual parents have an opportunity to ask the teacher child-rearing questions about their own child. Teachers should be trained to help one or two parents at a time in the classroom notice characteristic childhood behavior and development. In addition to helping parents observe typical childhood behavior patterns, teachers should be trained to help them anticipate, diagnose, and solve problem behavior. Child-development and child-rearing information will be absorbed best if it is presented when several parents are present and can watch and interact with the children.

I would like to work with your committee so that appropriate directions and guidelines for national Head Start Training and Technical Assistance effort and program supervision are created. Then, parent involvement strategies that have demonstrated success, instead of being present only in a few Head Start programs, will be characteristic of Head Start programs throughout the United States.

I look forward to hearing from you.

Sincerely,

Peter Ernest Haiman, Ph.D.