

## TESTIMONY OF THE NAVAJO NATION

### Senate Committee on Indian Affairs

September 25, 2003

Hearing on the 2003 Head Start Reauthorization Act

Presented by

Roy Laughter, Council Delegate of the Chilchinbeto/Kayenta Chapter  
Navajo Nation Council

### Introduction

Mr. Chairman and members of the Committee, the Head Start program is of critical importance to the health and welfare of Navajo children. Head Start enables the Navajo Nation to invest in its most valuable resource, the children of the Navajo Nation. On behalf of the Navajo people, I thank you for this opportunity to present our concerns and recommendations regarding proposals before Congress to change the Head Start program.

### Issues

The Navajo Nation have the following comments, concerns and recommendations:

#### **1. Supporting the reauthorization of the Head Start Act**

It is the Navajo Nation's position that the NNDOHS remain within the United States Department of Health and Human Services and not be transferred to the United States Department of Education. It is important that children continue to receive comprehensive services with strong parental involvement. It is the Navajo Nation's position that the benefits of keeping Head Start within the Department of Health and Human Services include the following:

- A. Head Start has been integrating language, early literacy, and mathematics into children's curriculum since its inception and has always strived for excellence. During the 1998 reauthorization of the Head Start Act, provisions were added to augment performance standards and outcome measures to focus on children's language, pre-reading and numeric skills, which are currently being implemented.
- B. The services that NNDOHS provides and its results are demonstrable and overwhelmingly positive. Children are indeed "ready to learn" when they enter kindergarten; 83% of Head Start graduates could identify most or all letters of the alphabet and were familiar with key book and print concepts, as well as phonemic awareness. Head Start teachers are well qualified with an average of 12 years of teaching experience and 79% have earned a Childhood Development Associates' Certificate or other early childhood credentials.

- C. NNDOHS success is attributable to the comprehensive services it provides to low-income children and families. The administration of the program through the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services ensures greater collaboration and integration of all components of education, health, family, and community support that contributes to a child's readiness, especially for low-income children and families. Transferring the program to the U.S. Department of Education holds no guarantee that these essential program components, such as comprehensive services, career development of community residents, and extended day services to meet the needs of working parents, will be sustained. Further, unlike U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the U.S. Department of Education has neither the record nor structure to administer a program as large and geographically spread out as the NNDOHS.
- D. NNDOHS has long been recognized for its strong parental involvement. The transfer of the program to the U.S. Department of Education may limit this parental involvement component. NNDOHS truly believes that a child's primary educator is his/her parent(s). NNDOHS parents are heavily involved in the governance of the program through their policy councils, and parents spend countless hours in the programs reading to children, assisting teachers, and planning educational events.

## **2. Recommendations**

- A. The Navajo Nation recommends a five (5) year reauthorization plan to effectively carry out the objectives of the NNDOHS programs. A period of four (4) years does not provide sufficient time to implement the program and allow for quality staff development.
- B. The Navajo Nation recommends that the government-to-government relationship between the tribe and the federal government, through the Department of Head Start, be maintained by continuing to provide direct funding to tribes. The Navajo Nation must be recognized as a sovereign entity, possessing the same duties, powers and authorities as a "State entity". The U.S. Department of Education has no record, history or experience working directly with Indian Tribes. Historically, the U.S. Department of Education has not recognized Tribes as a State entity eligible for direct funding. The proposed transfer of Head Start to the U.S. Department of Education would severely impact direct funding to tribes and sever the recognition of the tribe's government-to-government relationship with the federal government. Further, State governments are in a financial crisis today, as many are facing choices about slashing programs. States are facing combined budget gaps of approximately \$100 billion that must be closed over the next several months, including \$25 billion in deficits in the current fiscal year and between \$70 and \$85 billion for the fiscal year that begins in June. In fiscal year 2003, the states have to close a gap deficit of approximately \$50 billion and produce a balanced budget. At least 40 states, and perhaps as many as 49 of the 50 states, are facing serious budget shortfalls.

- C. The Navajo Nation strongly recommends that the Head Start Act incorporate the Native Language Preservation Act, Public Law 101-477, to protect Native American language and culture in conjunction with the current emphasis on promoting school readiness and children's language and literacy services. A child who acquires his/her native language and cultural understanding and have learned the English language as a secondary language, possess diverse skills, dual knowledge and enhancement of their communicative and cognitive abilities.
- D. Head Start Funding Level
1. The Navajo Nation supports the requests for additional funding of \$1 billion nationwide for Head Start and Early Head Start programs to address quality, expansion and staff salaries. Currently, nationwide, only 40% eligible children are able to enroll due to lack of funding. A \$1 billion increase in funding would mean that an additional 80,000 children would be able to participate in Head Start, nationally. Moreover, the 1998 Head Start Reauthorization Act sought to improve the quality of the program. It increases the percentage of funding set aside for improving the quality of Head Start. The quality funds are used to ensure that the programs have qualified staff that can promote language skills and the literacy growth of children. The Act also requires Head Start programs to implement specific performance measures to improve children's literacy and language skills and mandates that at least 50% of all Head Start teachers at center based programs have at least an associates degree or its equivalent by 2003.
  2. Head Start programs are required to match 20% of the funding for their program. The Secretary of Health and Human Services has the discretion to reduce the required match, however, the request often times is not a temporary situation. Dwindling community resources and services that have helped in the past to make the match, such as donation of facility space and parent volunteer time has decreased due to welfare reform. Tribes have difficulty raising enough revenue to meet the required non-federal share. The Navajo Nation recommends reducing the 20% match and supports establishing an automatic hardship waiver.
  3. The Navajo Nation recommends that priority be given for full-day, full-year services for currently enrolled children and families to serve as many children as possible while equally providing children with high quality programs. Even before the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunities Reconciliation Act of 1996, the Head Start program has had the need to transition part day, part-year classrooms to full day, full-year in order to address the critical needs of the families who are on welfare and must work to maintain eligibility.
  4. The Navajo Nation supports comprehensive high quality childcare and increased funding for childcare services. Affordable and adequate childcare remains out of reach for many working families. Childcare consumes about one-quarter of the income of low-income families who pay for care.

5. Transportation services expenses have increased due to the increasing cost of fuel and maintenance of buses. The Navajo Nation requests additional funding for the transportation of children in a safe and secure mode of transportation.
6. The Navajo Nation supports the reauthorization of the Welfare Reform Act. The Navajo Nation supports the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act to improve in a variety of areas so that it will better serve low-income children and families. NNDOHS believes that the welfare-to-work program should be held accountable for lifting people out of poverty, not eliminating people from the welfare roll. NNDOHS supports those families that are working towards self-sufficiency skills; therefore, education and training should be counted towards them meeting the welfare-to-work requirements. NNDOHS supports those families that need continued support benefits such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, Medicare, etc. after leaving the welfare-to-work program. Recipients moving from the welfare-to-work benefits should have some source of funding for outreach effort. NNDOHS supports removing time limits for those recipients that “*play by the rules*” but are unable to obtain employment. If a Welfare recipient is making a good-faith effort to find employment but is unable to find work due to a lack of job availability or other uncontrollable barriers to obtaining employment, then recipients should not be sanctioned or lose their benefits even if they exceeded the welfare-to-work time limitation. Head Start joins with other organizations to restore Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) and Food Stamp benefits to legal immigrants. The national Head Start Bureau has migrant programs across the country, sharing the same common purpose of providing comprehensive developmental services to low-income children and families. Head Start supports an amendment to the Food Stamp Act of 1977, so that the value of a vehicle not be included in determining food stamp eligibility for low-income families. The existing Food Stamp Act requires the count of the fair market value of a car as a resource to the extent the value exceeds \$4500. Low-income families should have reliable transportation to get to work without sacrificing what little resources they have to purchase food as well as meeting the realities of the working poor.
7. The Navajo Nation opposes the initiative to block grant Head Start. It is the tribe’s position that under a block grant, states are not obligated to use the funds in any particular manner and all guarantees of minimum standards of services would be lost.
8. The Navajo Nation opposes the privatization or vouchering of Head Start services by taking funds away from an under-funded program that has established a good track record and giving it to a private sector or corporation that may have an unimpressive track record.

E. Head Start Services

1. The Navajo Nation recommends that the income eligibility guidelines and over-income enrollment allowances be reevaluated and redefined. When the poverty criteria was first established in the 1960's, it was determined that families spend one third of their income on food. Measuring poverty and establishing the poverty line by the "food budget" method, is no longer accurate by today's standards where transportation, housing and other factors are of great concern and cost as well. Head Start income guidelines are more stringent than other federal programs for low-income families. By comparison, the Child Care Development Fund is 85% of the state-median, TANF presently ranges from 125 to 316% above poverty line, and Medicaid is 133% of the federal poverty line. Head Start continues to operate at 100% of the poverty line in determining income eligibility. The Navajo Nation recommends that the American Indian Alaska Native Program Branch of Head Start and the Tribal Guarantees are authorized to establish eligibility criteria based on local needs and "other" population residing within their jurisdictional boundaries.
2. The Head Start Program strives to enhance the qualifications of teachers. Quality teaching by qualified and innovative teachers generates academic excellence. The Navajo Nation recommends that the following specific provisions are included within the Head Start Act:
  - a. A provision for loan forgiveness and scholarship incentive programs.
  - b. A provision that maintains the quality set aside so that Head Start teachers can continue to receive education and training.
  - c. A provision allowing that by 2005, 75% of all teachers have at least a childhood development associates degree.
3. The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACE) includes children and families enrolled in the American Indian Alaska Native Program Branch with mandatory inclusions of the Navajo Nation Department of Head Start children and families.
4. The Navajo Nation recommends that Local Flexibility remains a hallmark of the program. No one program design, nor one assessment or curriculum tool, can meet the needs and build on the strengths of every child in every community. In this way, children and families with diverse needs are assured a place in their community's Head Start Program, similar to Native American Head Start Programs.

### **Conclusion**

On behalf of the Navajo people and NNDOHS we proudly present its program to the Senate Committee on Indian Affairs as, not only an educational institution, but as a quality holistic program uniquely designed to meet the individual needs of each child, family, expectant mother, and community. NNDOHS is committed to empowering each child, family, expectant mother, and community to become proactive and effective learners, leaders, and caretakers for the future generations of this great Navajo Nation.

Attached to the testimony are supporting resolutions from the Navajo Nation Intergovernmental Relations Committee and Education Committee.