

# Joint Committee on Head Start Reauthorization

March 26, 1998

## Oral Testimony by E. D. Hirsch, Jr.

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Chairman Coats, Chairman Riggs, members of the Joint Committee, thank you for offering me the privilege of testifying on Head Start.

This program is potentially one of the most benign and effective governmental instruments for helping the nation progress towards a fair society. The American public has long understood that Head Start offers disadvantaged children their best chance to attain equality of educational opportunity. That basic public perception is correct, despite the consistent failure of Head Start in its present form to achieve its equity aims. This Congress, together with an Administration committed to children, now have the opportunity to redeem the inadequacies of Head Start.

Two of the reasons for past failures are:

1. the lack of specific, clearly defined knowledge- and skill- goals that each child should achieve in Head Start.
2. the lack of clearly defined knowledge- and skill- goals for the grades following Head Start.

These two defects alone could suffice to explain the fade-out phenomenon which nullifies many of the program's initial benefits.

It is true that cognitive goals were not a large part of the original conception of Head Start. On the other hand, the achievement of social equity was part of its original aim, and in that larger social purpose Head Start has failed. Yet Americans do not want to give up on Head Start or the aim of equal educational opportunity. Instead, we need to improve Head Start, not by replacing its best features such as its medical, nurturing, and socializing aims, but by adding far more ambitious cognitive goals, which, as we now know, every child can attain by age four.

When Head Start was instituted, it was assumed that providing a rich and nurturing environment would compensate for social and economic deprivation, and permit children to develop naturally like the children of the middle class. But we now know that the children of the middle class do not naturally develop cognitive skills merely as a result of having loving parents, good nutrition, and mental stimulation. No well-informed psychologist believes any longer in the metaphor of natural, plant-like cognitive development in children, though something like that metaphor did preside at the hopeful beginnings of Head Start.

Children gain enabling pre-literacy and pre-arithmetic and other foundational learnings by having their minds deliberately formed through directed experiences in the home or in a preschool setting. In order to achieve equality of educational opportunity, the deliberate imparting of explicitly defined cognitive skills needs to be an essential new element of Head Start.

The basic message of my testimony is this. Congress will be able to insure that Head Start lives up to its name only if Congress mandates with some specificity the kinds of cognitive goals that every child must attain for in order for the local program to retain its funding.

I do not suggest that Congress should itself spell out these cognitive goals. But I do suggest that the legislation should include examples that illustrate the explicitness and breadth of the cognitive goals that every program must attain in order to be in compliance. Such specific goals for three and four year olds are mentioned on page 61 of the National Research Council report on early reading, from which I quote:

- Knows that alphabet letters are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named.
- Understands that different text forms are used for different functions.
- Uses new vocabulary and grammatical construction in own speech.
- Can identify ten alphabet letters, especially those from own name.

As an attachment to this testimony, I include similarly explicit cognitive goals in other areas besides pre-literacy, including movement and coordination, social autonomy, social skills, work habits, oral language, early mathematics, time orientation, spatial orientation, music and visual arts. These goals exhibit the same degree of specificity as the literacy guidelines of the National Research Council, and are similarly based on wide research and expert opinion, including research into the most effective practices for millions of preschool children throughout the world. Only specific goals like these can give operational meaning to the phrase "every child ready to learn." I hope the Congress will stipulate in its legislation that no goals less specific, less broad, or less well-grounded in observed practice can be in compliance.

I also recommend that Congress provide the Head Start program with reasonable time and an adequate resources to come into compliance, and to monitor the attainment of these cognitive goals, though with some sense of urgency, because each year of delay represents another waste of human potential on a grand scale.

Let me close by mentioning some data which proves that the ideal of equal educational opportunity can be accomplished by establishing specific cognitive goals along with accountability for achieving them. Consider the following contrast between the results of Head Start and the results of preschooling in France.

The effects of Head Start fade out over time, whereas the effects of French preschools show an exactly opposite pattern. The equity effects of French preschool increase cumulatively over time. Disadvantaged French children who attend preschool early rather than late increasingly close the equity gap as they progress through school. The comparative gains for these children are greater in fifth grade than they were in first grade — exactly the opposite pattern from fade out. What's the difference? A big one is that French preschools are accountable for explicit cognitive goals, and are followed by grade schools which are similarly accountable.

This French data is based on longitudinal analyses of some twenty-four thousand children. (I have included some of this material in my written testimony.) One of its most remarkable and encouraging findings was that disadvantaged children who start preschool very early actually close the academic gap with children of professionals by the end of grade 7. We certainly cannot accomplish such equity results overnight, but this very compelling evidence shows that we are right to keep trying, and to make Head Start as good as it can be.

Let me end with some wisdom by the dean of American research into educational equity, the late, great James Coleman, author of the Coleman Report, and other epochal writings. Shortly before his untimely death, Coleman wrote that the besetting sin of American educational programs was what he called a "gentleman's agreement" that we should concern ourselves primarily with educational inputs such as per-pupil expenditure, teacher's degrees, quality of buildings, certification procedures, and methods of instruction, and much less with the "outputs of education as a criterion for measuring the effectiveness of school inputs and school quality." Coleman was determined to challenge that gentleman's agreement, but had only limited success in doing so. This Congress and Administration, by concerning themselves vigorously with the specific outputs of Head Start, have a great opportunity to make Coleman's vision a reality.

Thank you.