



A
NEW
START **FOR**
HEAD
START

In his State of the Union message, President Bush asked for "record expenditures for the program that helps children born into want move into excellence." What will it take to move the program itself to excellence?

By Douglas J. Besharov

ILLUSTRATIONS BY LIZ CLARK

HEAD START, the federal government's early childhood development program for low-income children, is one of the nation's most popular antipoverty programs. In 1980, President Carter praised it as "a program that works"; President Reagan included Head Start in the "safety net"; and President Bush has almost doubled its funding.

Politicians of both parties are now calling for further increases in the number of children served. Last year, under the leadership of Senator Edward Kennedy, the Senate Committee on Labor and Human Resources voted to make Head Start an "entitlement" for all poor children, and President Bush recently proposed a \$600 million increase that would give almost all eligible children at least one year of Head Start. In a January 31 debate among candidates for the Democratic presidential nomination, several of the contenders indicated that they would go farther than the president had in his January budget message. "He offered \$500 [sic] million [to fund Head Start]," Governor Bill Clinton said. "I'd offer \$5 billion in the first year." Clinton also said he would design incentives for states to put additional funds into preschool programs. Senator Harkin indicated that he would expand the program beyond Bush's proposal and include three-year-olds at a cost of another "\$2 to \$3 billion." Senator Bob Kerrey added that he thought all of the Democratic candidates "support fully funding Head Start," a clear criticism of the president's more limited approach.

Ironically, this latest support for further expansions comes just as a growing number of experts are concluding that to be effective against deep-seated patterns of intergenerational family poverty, the array of Head Start services needs to be

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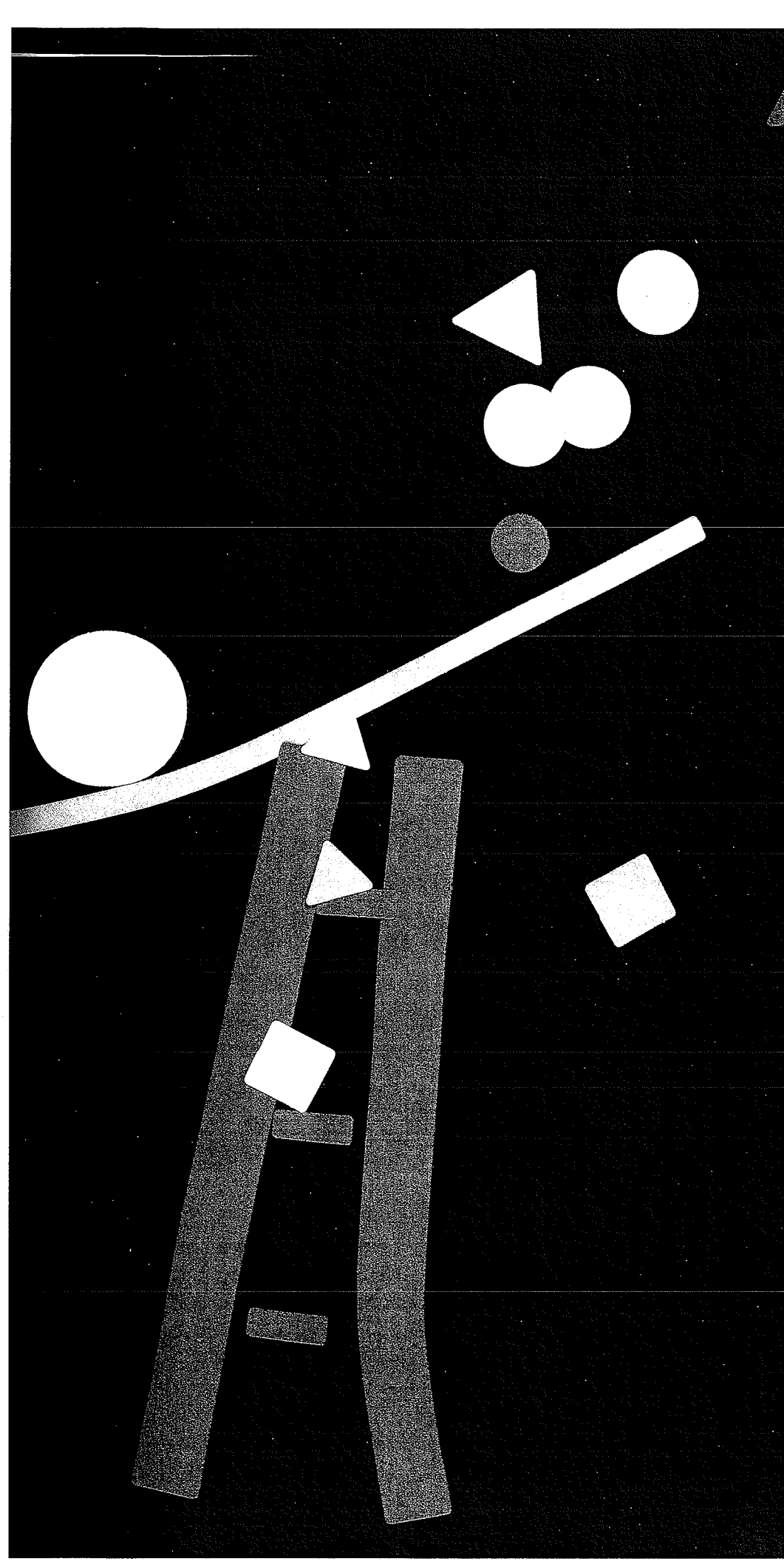
enriched before the number of children it serves is increased. The experts have a clear agenda for reform: to reach disadvantaged children much earlier with more-intensive developmental and health services; to help low-income parents nurture and teach their own children; and to encourage unemployed parents to work or continue their education. Small-scale demonstration projects have been started to test these ideas, but they do not go far enough. Unfortunately, given the costs of a new approach involving parents and children, it may be easier for politicians to continue to expand the number of children served by existing Head Start programs and to support limited demonstration projects than to change Head Start's fundamental character. The critical point, however, is that involving parents as well as children in a new approach will do more to improve children's futures because it will also give their parents a chance for a new start in life.

Mixed Research Findings

The public believes that Head Start "works," but the professional view of the program is decidedly more mixed. Among knowledgeable observers, there is a growing consensus that the program is not nearly as effective as it could be.

Head Start began in 1965 as a six-week experiment in using child development services to help fight the original War on Poverty. It quickly became a year-round, though not full-year, program. It now serves about 600,000 children, most of whom are four years old, at an annual cost of almost \$2 billion.

Head Start's impact on the immediate well-being of disadvantaged children is unambiguously impressive. "Children's health is improved through the program; immunization rates are better; participants have a better diet, better dental health, better access to health and social services; their self-esteem and cognitive abilities are improved; parents are educated and become involved as both volunteers and employees," according to Milton Kotelchuck and Julius B. Rich-



mond, writing in the journal of the American Academy of Pediatrics.

These are important gains, but Head Start's popularity is based on the widespread impression that it permanently lifts poor children out of poverty by improving their learning ability and school performance. Unfortunately, the evidence on this score is disappointing.

Claims that Head Start works stem largely from widely publicized research conducted at the Perry Preschool Project of Ypsilanti, Michigan. In the early 1960s, researchers began tracking 123 three- and four-year-old children enrolled in this program for two and a half hours a day, five days a week (for either one or two years). The program was reinforced by teacher visits to the home.

Following the children through their teen years, the Ypsilanti researchers found that children who had this preschool experience fared much better than those in a control group of children who had not. On a test of functional competency in adult education courses, those who had gone through the program were over 50 percent more likely to score at or above the national average than those in the control group. What is more important, compared to the control group, employment and postsecondary education rates were almost double, the high school graduation rate was almost one-third higher, teenage pregnancy rates were almost half, and arrest rates were 40 percent lower. A small number of other research projects have also been conducted. They report similar, though not as spectacular, success.

Lost in the publicity surrounding this research, however, is the fact that it is based almost entirely on non-Head Start programs. Neither the Perry Preschool nor most of the other carefully evaluated preschool programs were part of Head Start. The evaluated preschools were invariably better funded and (unlike Head Start) had more professionals on the staff. Head Start is a distinctly low-budget operation, spending, for example, about 60 percent less per child than did the Perry Preschool. And even

though Head Start programs have a commitment to parent involvement, the Perry Preschool and many other research-oriented programs tended to spend much more time working with parents. Indeed, the final report of the Cornell Consortium for Longitudinal Studies, one of the other major research projects on the subject, specifically warned that "caution must be exercised in making generalizations [about its findings] to Head Start."

When researchers study actual Head Start programs, the findings are less impressive. The most complete review of past Head Start research was conducted for the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) in 1985. After reviewing the results of 210 Head Start research projects, the study found that the educational and social gains registered by Head Start children disappeared within two years. The study reported that "one year after Head Start, the differences between Head Start and non-Head Start children on achievement and school readiness tests continued to be in the educationally meaningful range, but the two groups scored at about the same level on intelligence tests. By the end of the second year, there were no educationally meaningful differences."

The report did find a tendency for Head Start graduates to be "less likely to fail a grade in school or to be assigned to special education classes than children who did not attend. However, this finding is based on very few studies."

This conclusion reinforces the results of a 1969 Westinghouse study that found few long-term gains from Head Start participation. That study was widely criticized on methodological grounds, and its weaknesses allowed Head Start's supporters to overlook its critical findings. Initially, some Head Start advocates also tried to discredit the 1985 HHS study by criticizing its methodology, but the inability of research studies to detect long-term gains among Head Start students undercuts this argument. Moreover, in private even its staunchest advocates acknowledge that Head Start has serious shortcomings that

often prevent it from making a lasting impact on disadvantaged children.

These mixed findings from a handful of studies—there has been surprisingly little research—do not mean that Head Start funding should be cut. With the poverty rate for children continuing at unacceptably high levels, Head Start's short-term benefits alone justify its continuation. These ambiguous research findings, however, do signal a need to modify the program to reflect what has been learned in the past quarter-century.


Unreasonable Expectations

Social and academic advances do not come automatically with a child's enrollment in a preschool program, no matter how good the program is. Even the much-touted Perry Preschool had what can only be described as mixed success in breaking deep-seated patterns of poverty and welfare dependency. The high school graduation rate of enrollees was almost one-third higher, but 33 percent of the program group still failed to graduate. Teenage pregnancy rates were almost half, but there were still 64 pregnancies per 100 girls. And AFDC rates were more than one-third lower, but 18 percent of the 19-year-olds were already on welfare.

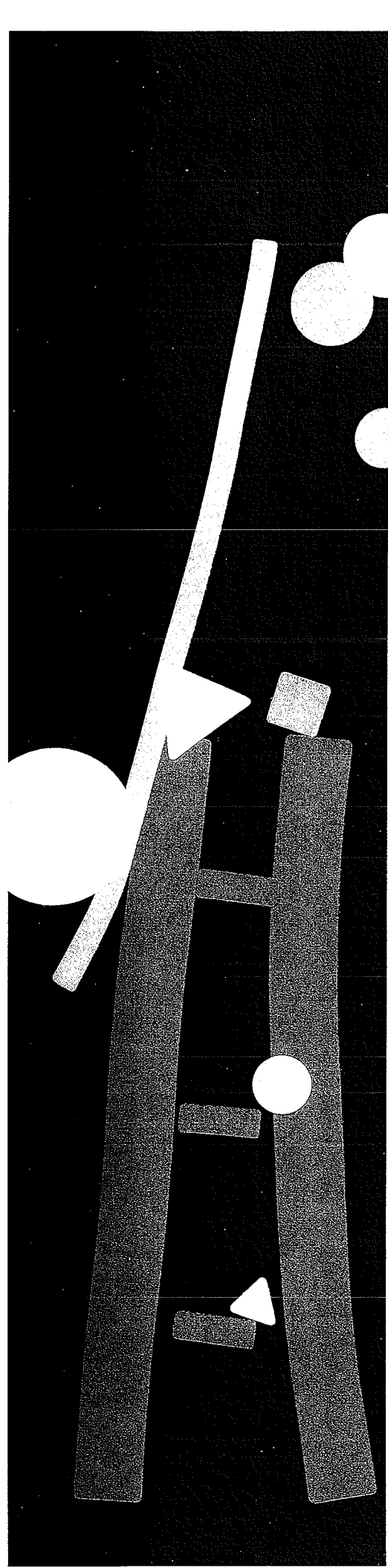
Head Start, like all preschool programs, can do only so much to help children caught in a web of social and familial dysfunction. It is unrealistic to expect the Head Start experience—about four hours a day for about eight months of one year—to overcome such powerful negative experiences as inadequate nutrition, parental drug abuse, domestic or neighborhood violence, and a host of other psychological or physical degradations. As the blue-ribbon Advisory Panel for the Head Start Evaluation Design Project warned: "Policymakers and the general public should not be oversold that early education and intervention programs such as Head Start, even when implemented in a high-quality fashion, are some kind of panacea that succeed [sic] even in the absence of appropriate ongoing child and family support."

Moreover, Head Start is serving an increasingly troubled part of the poverty population. Twenty-six years ago when Head Start was established, there were not as many working mothers, so it tended to serve the full spectrum of poor families. But over the years, as more mothers with preschoolers have entered the labor force and therefore need full-time child care, Head Start's part-time nature has made it an unrealistic option for relatively well-functioning parents. In 1972, one-third of all Head Start programs operated full-day; today the proportion is 15 percent. Many Head Start programs have, in effect, become child-care ghettos for poor mothers who collect AFDC rather than work. About 68 percent of all Head Start children are now on AFDC, a figure that has climbed steadily over the years.

Parental substance abuse has become a particularly serious problem for Head Start programs. "One out of every five preschool children is affected in some way by substance abuse," according to a Head Start Bureau handbook for grantees. The Central Vermont Head

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Start/Family Foundations program reported that one-third to two-thirds of its families had substance abuse problems in the home, 40 percent of its mothers had their first child when they were teenagers, and 32 percent of the parents



had no high school diploma or General Equivalency Diploma.

These social problems undercut Head Start's effectiveness. A recent Congressional Research Service report described the "concern of Head Start administrators and program directors that the number of families with serious problems has increased in recent years and that these problems limit families in fully participating in Head Start." (Some programs reported that drug trafficking activities in some areas prevent teachers

from making home visits.) The CRS survey of Head Start programs found that substance abuse was the most serious problem facing families.

Child abuse was second.

The powerful social and individual forces that combine to keep families in persistent poverty require broader, more intense intervention.

Two-Generation Programs

Even though the intergenerational transmission of poverty has long been understood, most early childhood education programs have operated with the assumption that they could break deep-seated patterns of family poverty by working with the child alone, to give that child a "head start" in life. Now, many of those who work with disadvantaged children have concluded that to counteract these intergenerational forces, they must focus on the child and the parent.

"In the old days, we used to say, 'Give us children for a few hours a day, and we will save them.' Now we know that we have to work within the entire family context," says Wade Horn, the Commissioner of HHS's Administration for Children, Youth and Families. Anne Mitchell, of the Bank Street College of Education, put it this way: "Perhaps the most complete intervention we could design for at-risk young children and their families would be a comprehensive package that combines full-day, year-round

early childhood programs (that are in the best senses both custodial and educational) with parent education/family support programs that have a strong employment training component."

The revised approach is called "two-generation programs," and it has three interrelated elements. The first is reaching disadvantaged children much earlier with more-intensive developmental services. Head Start and other early childhood education programs tend to focus on three- and four-year-olds, but by then, damage may already have been done.

From its earliest days, Head Start has attempted to reach younger children. In 1967, for example, the first Parent and Child Centers were established to provide instruction in the home on infant care and child development to parents of children under three and to refer parents to other forms of assistance. (In 1990, funding for these centers was doubled, and there are now 100 centers.)

Innovators are now experimenting with ways to involve two- and even one-year-olds in a richer and more diverse set of developmental activities, combined with counseling and education services for parents. One of the best known of these efforts is the independently funded Beethoven Project, located in Chicago's Robert Taylor Homes, which began serving families with children from birth through five years in 1986. The project, whose official title is the Center for Successful Child Development, provides counseling and education services for parents as well as developmental child care for infants and toddlers.

In 1988, Congress established the Comprehensive Child Development Program (CCDP), a five-year demonstration project loosely modeled on the Beethoven Project. Pregnant women and mothers with a child under the age of one were accepted into the program for up to five years. There are now 24 demonstration projects at various universities, health agencies, public schools, social service agencies, private agencies, and Head Start centers that, over the course of the demonstration, will serve a total of about 2,500 families.

The second element of two-generation programs is helping low-income parents to nurture and teach their own children. There is only so much that a child development program can do in the few hours that it has with a child. Early childhood educators are increasingly recognizing that they can leverage far more change in the lives of children if they can help parents become more effective nurturers and teachers. This is the concept underlying the project Even Start Family Literacy Programs, the Department of Education's literacy program for parents with children ages one through seven. Funded in 1989, there are now 119 Even Start centers, with at least one in every state. As Even Start parents become literate, they are encouraged to support their children's learning.

Many local Head Start programs now provide instruction for parents in infant and child care, health care, and nutrition. Some also provide a range of more general support services for disadvantaged young parents who must deal with substance abuse, family health, mental health, domestic violence, housing, transportation, and legal problems. To assist these efforts, in 1991 the Head Start Bureau funded 32 substance abuse projects in local centers and 11 Family Support Projects for such problems as teenage pregnancy, homelessness, and family violence. The president's recent proposal contains funds for adult literacy programs for all Head Start centers.

Third, two-generation programs encourage unemployed parents to work or continue their education. Being a good parent requires a healthy degree of self-respect; without it, apprehension or depression can be so paralyzing that parents cannot care for themselves, let alone their children. And these days, with so many middle-class mothers working, self-respect—especially for single mothers—means being economically self-sufficient, or at least partially so.

To help single mothers who have poor job-related skills and little work experience, Head Start programs are providing, or arranging for, various self-sufficiency services, including literacy

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classes, employment counseling, job readiness services, and job training. Some Head Start programs are encouraging mothers to obtain work and job training under the Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program by providing full-day care. (Roughly half of all Head Start parents are eligible for this.)

Demonstration projects testing various approaches are also under way. Project New Chance, a 16-city research and demonstration project, seeks to increase the self-sufficiency of young mothers. Managed by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation and funded by private foundations and the Department of Labor, it provides young mothers (ages 16 to 22) with education, employment, and parenting skills programs, family planning and health services (including pediatric care), as well as on-site developmental child care. (The average age of the children in the 2,200 families being served is 18 months.)

The Head Start Bureau has also funded a number of demonstrations aimed at increasing the self-sufficiency of parents. The Comprehensive Child De-

velopment Programs assist parents and family members with prenatal care and referrals for education, vocational training, employment counseling, housing, and income support. Education is given in infant and child development, nutrition, health care, and parenting.

As part of a group of grants aimed at broadening the scope of services offered by Head Start, the Head Start Bureau created Family Service Centers, three-year projects that focus on the problems of substance abuse, unemployment, and illiteracy. In addition to providing literacy classes and referrals and support for substance-abuse treatment, many Centers provide actual job training to parents of Head Start children. Such training is often coordinated with the Job Training Partnership Act (JTPA) or Job Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) training programs. Other centers provide only classes in job-searching skills or employment referral services.

A Project New Start?

The impetus for two-generation programming comes from local service providers, child advocacy groups, and federal administrators who see first-hand the inability of current Head Start services to break patterns of deep-seated poverty. No one knows, however, whether these kinds of parent-oriented services will work any more effectively than the basic Head Start model. To find out, we will need a long-term effort to develop and test alternative program designs—a nationwide demonstration whose scope and status would be equal to the original Head Start project—a "Project New Start," if you will.

Such a demonstration would be expensive and difficult to mount, but ignoring Head Start's problems—and failing to pursue the promise of two-generation programs—would be unfair to the disadvantaged children and families Head Start is meant to serve. They deserve the best program we can deliver.

