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A tale of two preschool programs

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WASHINGTON -- Two programs, two departments, one goal: Give low-income children a head-start on their education by engaging the family in a subsidized preschool program.

In practice, both programs have produced similar, yet drastically different results. As the Even Start early childhood program lies on the chopping block, its close cousin, Head Start, is receiving billions in new stimulus funds.

The federal budget, which is still in committee, proposes cutting the \$66 million price tag for the Even Start program. Started in the late 1980s, the program was meant to be a sort of Head Start-plus, teaching illiterate parents how to read and improving their job training skills. Training parents in reading and parenting skills enabled them to move their children out of poverty, advocates said. Unlike the Head Start program, Even Start also provided strict procedures for measuring parent improvement.

Even Start, which is guided by the Department of Education, enjoyed large amounts of federal funding under President Bill Clinton, but was scaled back throughout the President George W. Bush administration, from about \$250 million in 2001 and 2002 to the \$66 million it received last year. President Obama is seeking to cut the program altogether, favoring the Head Start program and infusing it with \$2.1 billion in stimulus funds.

Even Start was launched in the late 1980s by former U.S. Rep. William Goodling, who was an educator for 22 years. Goodling said he developed the program because of the challenges in educating the illiterate in Pennsylvania, his home state. The solution, he believed, was to engage the parents in a way Head Start did not.

"All I had to do was look at the family," he said. "It really doesn't take you long to realize the impact they have on a child's education."

Both programs target low-income individuals and improving the parenting and education skills of parents. Children learn basic skills while their parents learn about health, nutrition and reading—anything to make them more effective parents, advocates said. The point is to involve parents in a child's education and provide them with the social and literacy skills their peers enjoy.

"Head Start was really a head start in their lives," said Yasmina Vinci, executive director of the National Head Start Association.

Both programs cover children from birth through age 5, and allow families to stay in the program until the children move on to school.

For pregnant teen mothers, Hispanic immigrants and rural families, both programs offer a second chance, advocates said.

According to data provided by Goodling, about half of Even Start families are Hispanics who want to learn English and help their children assimilate. The story is similar in Head Start, which is run by the Department of Health and Human Services. About one third of Head Start families are bilingual, and the median income is about \$13,200 a year, according to federal data. Advocates for both programs said their waiting lists include more people than can be served.

But for all their similarities, the execution of these two programs, monitored by two different departments, has been anything but similar.

Data and surveys on program participants show some improvement for both parents and students, though those effects seem to diminish over time.

Adam Schaeffer, a policy analyst for the Cato Institute, said the effects of the Head Start program were minimal, but most noticeable in the short term. Schaeffer said he was not aware of data or studies on the Even Start program.

In the official report calling for Even Start's demise, budget experts cite the most recent study of the program: a 2002 report published by an outside agency. Since then, experts have cited the seven-year-old study, justifying program cuts by showing only modest improvements from study to study.

Even though the law requires states to collect data on Even Start families, nobody in the Department of Education was assembling that data. The Department of Education did not respond to questions by publication time.

Goodling said it was probable that politics kept the department from releasing new reports on Even Start.

“They didn’t [release state data] because state reviews were glowing,” he said.

At the same time, officials at Head Start were regularly gathering data from 1997 until the most recent report in 2006. A spokesman for the department said a new study is in progress.

A subcommittee is expected to review education funding some time next week. Until then, Goodling said, it is possible a compromise between the House and the Senate could save Even Start, though that is not guaranteed.

“You’re losing the only federal family program,” he said. “The Hispanic community is losing the only true program.”

Which one of these is not like the other one?

Head Start	Even Start
*Health and Human Services	*Department of Education
*\$2.1 billion from stimulus	*Program cut, \$66 million budget in FY09
*Tri-annual FACES report	*Latest survey: 2002
*Multiple parent programs	*Parent reading program
*Low-income, mixed race	*Low-income, mixed race
*30% English-Language Learners	*50% English-Language Learners

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