



## **Martine Singer**

President and CEO, Para Los Niños

### **What Head Start Can Teach Us About Quality Education**

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This fall we're welcoming more than 300 three- and four-year olds at Head Start sites in Los Angeles and Burbank. Head Start is the federal school readiness program that serves a million low-income children across the country. Head Start is also the brilliant and enduring product of Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty, which miraculously survived the politics and fashions of the last 50 years.

Our new students will start school with thorough health, developmental and behavioral screenings, and we're required to provide whatever the children and families need -- both inside and outside the classroom: health and dental care, proper nutrition, mental health, education, disability services and help with housing. We're hiring staff with the participation and consent of the Policy Council, a governing body that consists of current and former Head Start parents.

Governance that includes parents, supporting family needs -- these program elements are as crucial and relevant today as they were in 1965, when Project Head Start was piloted as an 8-week summer program. The federal government had the wisdom to design and fully fund a program of comprehensive supports in order to make learning possible. It was an enlightened but remarkably common sense approach, long before we could quantify the effects of toxic stress; before the catastrophe of large-scale foster care; before attachment theory and the focus on the first three years of life.

I don't think Americans in 1965 were any fonder of poor adults than they are today. Happily, the packaging of the initiative was left to Sargent Shriver, who, aware that more than half of the country's poor were comprised of children under 12, understood the urgency -- and political appeal -- of focusing on children.

Inspired by an experimental preschool program that raised the IQs of mildly retarded children, Shriver originally conceived Head Start as a way to make poor children smarter.

But his panel of experts very quickly broadened that mission, focusing instead on increasing motivation rather than test scores. More significantly, Johns Hopkins pediatric chief Dr. Robert Cooke (also the Shriver family's pediatrician) made good health and nutrition the primary goals of Head Start.

During a time when Bruno Bettelheim and others advocated separating poor kids from their families in order to immerse them in more stimulating learning environments, Head Start recognized that parents were children's most important teachers, and that their deep involvement was fundamental to Head Start's basic design. The founding fathers of Head Start knew it wasn't enough to place a child in a stimulating school environment if his family and community didn't also support his curiosity and learning.

What about Head Start's outcomes? Does it have lasting impact on children or is it another waste of taxpayer money? That's about as useful as asking whether or not High School works. Studies can support either point of view. What's most important is this: quality programs produce quality outcomes. And of course substandard programs produce poor outcomes.

Another consideration: Head Start has been the driving force in improving child outcomes, because every bump in the road has spurred improvements and innovation. While most school systems are struggling with huge numbers of English language learners, Head Start is a leader in the field. And what public school system requires failing schools to recompete when they don't deliver quality education to their students?

The lessons of Head Start are profound, not just for young children but for the entire education system. If you want children to learn, pay attention to the needs and level of engagement of the entire family. Fully fund services that enable learning. Demand cutting-edge, research based practices and pay teachers a fair and competitive salary. Evaluate your program regularly, and make needed changes. And if schools aren't doing right by kids, let someone else take over.

Even three-year olds know that.