

A Better Start For Head Start

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Research Note 14 July 2003

The U. S. Education Department (USED) . Office of Vocational and Adult Education (OVAE), Division of Adult Education and Literacy (DAEL) has recently posted the funding levels for states and territories for program year 2003-2004. Altogether the funds for the State Grants sum to around \$571,262,500.

In another recent report entitled " A Blueprint for Preparing America's Future: The Adult Basic and Literacy Education Act of 2003:Summary of Major Provisions," the USED states " The Federally funded system of adult basic and literacy education serves approximately 2.7 million adults each year." This means that the State Grant 03-04 program funds amount to around \$212 per adult student. By contrast, the Head Start program serves around 1,000,000 children at a cost of some \$6,500,000,000 or about \$6500 per child.

The obscenely low level of funding for the State Grants for adult education and literacy development is starkly illustrated by the USED's statement in the Blueprint report that "The findings of the most recent national survey of adult literacy were published in the early 1990s. That survey found 40 million American adults (ages 16 and older) functioning at the lowest level of literacy, and 90 million functioning at the two lowest levels. These individuals are not equipped with the skills they need to work effectively in the high-skill jobs that increasingly characterise our economy."

If the number of adults in the lowest level of adult literacy is correct, then the \$571, 262, 500 dollars for the State Grants for 03-04 comes to less than \$15 for each of the 40 million American adults in the lowest level of literacy. It is less than \$6.50 for each of the 90 million adults that the USED says "...are not equipped with the skills they need to work effectively in the high-skill jobs that increasingly characterise our economy."

For some reason, the federal government seems to think that it is wise and prudent to spend \$6500 per Head Start child to try to overcome their potential learning difficulties in school, but for the 20 or so years that the Head Start children are striving to overcome their pre-school and in-school learning difficulties, it is OK to let them return home each day to parents who are lacking in the literacy skills which, according to the same federal government, are needed to work effectively to support the children across the 20 years that the children are going to be in school. In a different approach to the problems of Head Start children, the federal government might try funding the State Grants at \$6500 per adult enrolee, which would come to around \$17.5 billion for 2.7 million adult students.

With this type of investment, adults could receive a high quality education in literacy and numeracy skills, and then, through the intergenerational transfer of attitudes and skills from parents to children, we could look for the adult's education to improve not just one child's educability, as happens in Head Start, but all the children in the adult's family.

From this point of view, an investment in adult education and literacy development would not be regarded as just an adult education program, rather, it would also be regarded as an early childhood program. It is important to realise that in many cases Head Start and even Early Head Start may come too late to help prevent harm to children's learning ability because many times this harm starts in the mother's womb before the children are born. Well designed and delivered adult education and literacy development for young adults, particularly women, may be a more comprehensive approach to the prevention of children's learning problems and school failure than approaches that wait until children are conceived, carried in pregnancy, and then born.

In this more comprehensive approach to early childhood education, it would be recognised that a major head start for children starts with the heads of the parents. It would also be recognised that \$212 per adult student is a shamefully poor commitment to increasing the education and literacy skills of adults, and it makes a mockery of the well known fact that parents are their children's first teachers. It is also a disservice to the millions of children who need a better start in life for both schooling and the pursuit of happiness in the complex world of the 21st century.

Well educated parents will make sure that their children are not left behind.