

## **CQ TODAY – EDUCATION**

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### **Head Start Wins Smooth Bipartisan Approval in Senate Committee**

**By Libby George, CQ Staff**

A Senate panel easily approved a bill Wednesday that would reauthorize the Head Start early childhood development program for the first time in almost a decade.

The Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee approved the bill (S 556) by voice vote after adopting a manager's amendment that included language worked out by Chairman Edward M. Kennedy, D-Mass., and ranking Republican Michael B. Enzi of Wyoming. The two senators introduced the bill together Feb. 12.

The measure would authorize Head Start funding at \$7.3 billion in fiscal 2008, \$7.5 billion in fiscal 2009, \$7.9 billion in 2010 and "such sums as necessary" through fiscal 2012.

The early education program for children from low-income households would receive \$6.9 billion under the fiscal 2007 spending package (H J Res 20) now pending in the Senate.

The panel began work on a reauthorization bill in the 109th Congress, but it never reached the Senate floor. Kennedy said that work was a blueprint for the new bill, which he said should move quickly this session.

The measure would raise the family income level that determines eligibility, allowing an additional 56,000 children to participate in the program over five years, according to majority staff.

Under the bill, the income of families eligible for participation in Head Start would be increased from 100 percent of the federal poverty level — \$20,560 annually for a family of four — to 130 percent, or \$26,728 for a family of four.

The bill would double the size of Early Head Start, which serves children age 3 and younger.

Kennedy said the bill aims to create a "seamless web" between Head Start and other education programs by dedicating 1 percent of funding for programs that align Head Start with state early learning standards. It also would provide literacy training for Head Start teachers to develop children's reading skills.

Head Start "has been the only program to serve the poorest children in the United States," Enzi said. "This bill allows us to do even more."

Enzi predicted that collaborating with Kennedy on the bill will yield "quick action" in the Senate. The full Senate is likely to consider the bill this year, a Kennedy aide said.

Kennedy also is working closely with House Education and Labor Chairman George Miller, D-Calif., on the reauthorization that Miller's committee would likely consider in March, a Miller aide said.

The bill does not include changes proposed by the administration to allow states to assume control over the program, which is federally funded but locally operated.

The administration sought the change after a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report found that 76 percent of local Head Start operators surveyed in 2000 had some form of financial irregularity.

Head Start advocates said state control would eventually turn Head Start into a block grant program and erode its effectiveness.

Instead, the bill would create advisory councils in each state, require operators to submit annual audits of administrative expenses and force operators found to have program deficiencies to compete for grants.

It also would eliminate use of a standardized test to measure skills and progress of children ages 4 and 5 in the program. The GAO report said the Department of Health and Human Services has been unable to show that the test accurately measures progress.

The bill also would:

- Double the Early Head Start set-aside to 20 percent of the total program funding.
- Set aside 4 percent of funding for programs for American Indian children and 5 percent for children of seasonal and migrant workers.
- Boost oversight, adding unannounced site inspections and mandatory follow-up reviews of centers with deficiencies.

Head Start was last renewed, for five years, in 1998 (PL 105-285).

Appropriators have continued to fund the discretionary program as lawmakers struggle to rewrite the law.

The House passed a reauthorization measure in 2005, but the bill languished in the Senate because of opposition to a provision to allow faith-based organizations operating local programs to hire staff based on the group's religious beliefs.

So far, there is no House companion measure, but the Senate version is similar to the 2005 House bill, minus the controversial language regarding faith-based organizations.