

# EDITORIAL PAGE

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## Head Start agency | Regional asset Handle with care

The preschool program Head Start is caught up in a whirlwind national debate over reforms proposed by the Bush administration, but Southwest Ohio's largest provider of Head Start services has been producing solid results. Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency (CAA) serves 4,500 children in the county and also has proved to be a force for neighborhood revitalization. Just two of its buildings, one in the West End and the other in Bond Hill, represent a capital investment of \$22 million.

When Hamilton County Commissioner John Dowlin was appointed to CAA's board, he felt the agency was ineffective and resolved to either fix it or kill it. "Fortunately we were able to fix it," he said, and commended CAA president Gwen L. Robinson and the board for the transformation.

CAA officials believe their program could now serve as a national model, and warn that some proposed reforms could reduce Head Start to just another preschool program. Administration reformers are pushing for more focus on math, science and reading skills. Robinson and Head Start director Verline Dotson argue that academic experiences already are incorporated into Head Start curricula, and eliminating support services such as parent

counseling or mental health treatment for problem kids would be shortsighted.

"We spend too much public money on the back end of the system, when these kids end up in the courts," Dowlin said.

CAA's Head Start program tries to boost the entire family, and aims to develop parental involvement to the extent that visitors at Head Start sites can't tell the parents from the teachers.

Dotson says Head Start got a bad rap from outdated studies done decades ago before it became a year-round program. She says researchers made unfair judgments about Head Start's lasting effects from only 10 weeks' exposure while ignoring negative effects of five subsequent years in public schools. Public schools also expel disruptive kids. Head Start is mandated to keep and deal with them, and CAA officials wholeheartedly agree with that policy. "We do not kick children out," Dotson said.

CAA's Head Start is in a longitudinal study for the next five years, and the findings could help set the direction for preschool programs nationwide. Almost any program can benefit from reform, but Congress needs to proceed with care that it does not jeopardize successful programs such as those here.



Robinson