

OPINIONS

OTHER POINTS OF VIEW

TV attack aside, Head Start does work in the real world

During the debate portrayed on a recent episode of "The West Wing," the fictitious nominees - Democrat Matt Santos and Republican Arnold Vinick - traded mostly predictable partisan arguments for and against the issues. No topic debated, however, is more salient to the future of America than Head Start, the comprehensive child development program for low- to moderate-income children and families.

The assertion that "Head Start doesn't work," as leveled by Vinick's character and by many real legislators on Capitol Hill, is an unfortunate demonstration of looking the other way in the face of decades of success as Head Start celebrates its 40th anniversary this year.

The program serves nearly a million children and families each that come from backgrounds of lesser means and they are better for it. Head Start providers, as does the Cincinnati-Hamilton County Community Action Agency, must or exceed the stringent state and national performance standards to maintain funding. In addition to a strong academic curriculum that focuses on school-readiness com-



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petency, the program provides nutritional, health, dental, mental health and social services to each child.

Now more than ever, the Head Start community faces politically driven challenges from members of Congress and the White House itself. The proposal to move Head Start from a program that provides federal grants directly to community organizations to a state-controlled program that has no quality performance standards jeopardizes the effectiveness of a program that provides nearly 1 million children a year a solid academic foundation. As Ohio is, many states are facing enormous budget deficits that are already forcing them to make drastic cuts to vital programs. States will be tempted to compromise the integrity of program as Head Start budgets are siphoned to fill gaps in other parts of the budget.

It's an unfortunate reality but Head Start is under attack. Enrollment is hindered by red tape and difficult application requirements. Its original mission and its values of diversity and tolerance are being debated and debased as an amendment has been added to the Head

Start reauthorization bill that would allow religious organizations who run Head Start programs to hire and fire staff based on their religious affiliations.

In the face of this attack, we must continue to serve. Those of us on the frontlines know what many chose to deny for so long - the stark realities and disparities of poverty. Hurricane Katrina exposed it. We not only deal with the ripple effects of poverty as Head Start providers, we deal with the full splash of poverty as significant portions of the children we serve come from some of the poorest neighborhoods. Thus, they must have continued access to this program and the wrap-around social services that provide for the proper health, mental and sociological development of children.

With this in mind, we must rise everyday and meet the needs of the children in our programs. I only hope the 9.6 million viewers who watched Sunday's "West Wing" debate also understand what is at stake.

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