

Getting A h e a d with Head Start

In 1965, Head Start began as an 8-week summer program designed to help break the cycle of poverty by providing disadvantaged children with a program to meet their emotional, social, health, nutritional, and psychological needs. The idea was that with a little help Head Start children from even the most disadvantaged families could begin elementary school at the same level of school-readiness as their more advantaged peers.

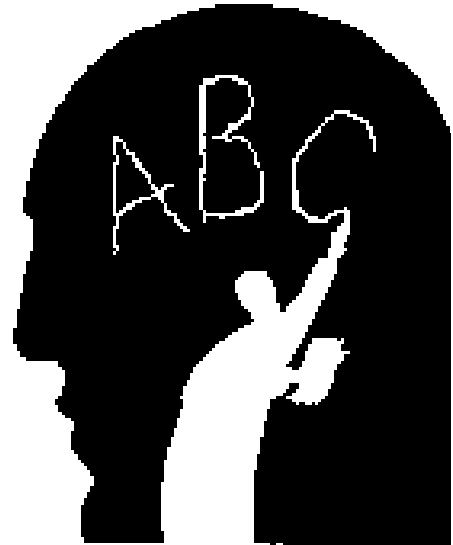
Today, Head Start maintains its commitment to children, families, and communities. Virginia's Head Start programs received \$96,213,748 in funds in 2003 and served approximately 13,768 children. There are fifty-seven (57) Head Start and Early Head Start programs receiving grants in the state. Most Head Start programs are part day, but many provide before- and after-school day care services to meet the growing need of working families. Unlike most other Federal assistance programs for low-income families, state governments do not manage Head Start. Rather, Head Start is a direct Federal-to-local program administered by about 1,500 locally based public and private non-profit organizations.

As with many programs designed for a specific population, Head Start does have entry requirements: the child must be between 3 and 5 years of age by September 30 of the year he or she will be enrolling, and applicant families must meet federal poverty guidelines. However, 10 percent of the children enrolled

in a Head Start program can be from families that are above the income qualifications, and 10 percent of the children in Head Start programs must have special needs. In fact, during the 2002-03 Head Start school year, 12.5 percent of the Head Start enrollment consisted of children with disabilities that included mental retardation, health impairments, visual handicaps, hearing impairments, emotional disturbance, speech and language impairments, orthopedic handicaps and learning disabilities.

What can parents of a child with special needs expect from a Head Start program? Belinda Willis, chief of children's services in York County, states that one of the roles of Head Start is to act as an advocate for parents who are navigating the special education system. "If a parent is preparing to go to an IEP meeting," she says, "a staff member from Head Start will go over the literature, the language that will be used in the meeting, and what [parents] can expect to happen [at the meeting]." Staff members will even attend the meeting with the parents. "We consider it part of our job," Ms. Willis states.

In addition, all the Head Start teachers in York County get training that will prepare them to help children who may have special needs. "We work hand-in-hand with the school system," Ms. Willis states. "Head Start teachers take training seminars and read literature to be prepared to work with children with special needs." If necessary, the school system



will place a special education teacher in the classroom to ensure that a child with an I.E.P. will get the appropriate educational assistance.

In short, Head Start provides low-income children, families, communities — and children with special needs — with high quality early childhood education, nutrition, health, dental, mental health, and social services. Since it began in 1965, the Head Start program has enrolled more than 22 million children. Could your child be eligible? Contact your local Head Start office to find out more about the application process and qualifications.

The programs listed on the following page are the main program offices; please contact the one nearest your community to find out if there is a Head Start center in your area.

Visit the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Head Start website at www.acf.dhhs.gov/programs/hsb.