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## **Empowerment and Education: Civil Rights, Expert-Advocates, and Parent Politics in Head Start, 1664-1980**

By Josh Kagan, New York University School of Law

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**Education Consumers Foundation**

1655 North Fort Myer Drive, Suite 700 • Arlington, VA 22209  
[www.education-consumers.org](http://www.education-consumers.org)

# Empowerment and Education: Civil Rights, Expert-Advocates, and Parent Politics in Head Start, 1964-1980

*Josh Kagan*

The Johnson Administration was on the right track in 1964 when as part of its War on Poverty it designed a program that targeted low-income, disadvantaged three-to-five-year-old children. Head Start was conceived to level the playing field for a demographic group, then largely black, that started school without the literacy foundations that more advantaged children acquired at home and honed in private pre-school programs.

Head Start's foundational concept was that poverty abetted by racism caused families, and ultimately children, to fail educationally. Head Start would "compensate" for their poverty-induced disadvantages.

The program began with diffuse aims and over the years evolved into more a provider of social services than a means of boosting literacy. Now the Bush administration is pushing Head Start to reemphasize its cognitive development mission -- a plan actively resisted by Head Start parents and program personnel.

Kagan's essay, published in Columbia University's Teachers College Record, explains why Head Start – despite scant evidence of academic effectiveness - has survived nearly four decades. It also sheds light on Head Start's cultural and political resistance to accountability for educational skills and knowledge.

Kagan shows that the coalition of academic experts and civil rights activists who created Head Start each brought a different set of assumptions and goals to the table. The academics saw poor children as the victims of poor parenting and other aspects of social disorganization associated with poverty. Correcting these conditions would benefit the children. Research indicated that poverty itself was not the problem, but rectifying the behavioral correlates of poverty – family illiteracy and addiction, for example – could improve school readiness.

In contrast to the academics' perspective, civil rights activists argued that poverty and social disorganization stemmed from economic exploitation and racial discrimination. In theory, family deficiencies could be reversed by correcting those conditions. Following the War on Poverty's community action strategy, activists sought to lessen the influence of established political and economic interests by creating self-help movements in local communities.

What resulted, however, was less a resurgence of families and communities than the creation of a political lobby for Head Start—a lobby that continues to be dominated by national education and civil rights groups.

## **The Head Start Lobby**

In retrospect, the emergence of a Head Start lobby isn't surprising. Head Start has become a \$7 billion program serving about 1 million children. Some 200,000 paid staff – most drawn from the ranks of Head Start parents – plus 1.4 million parent volunteers, staff more than 18,000 Head Start Centers. In many cases, Head Start provides childcare, paychecks and, in some cases, purpose to parents' lives. Feel-good programs that produce fuzzy effects may be educationally ineffective but they still appeal to parents whose resources are limited.

While it is unlikely that any program would be able to compensate fully for deficits that emerge during the crucial early years, interventions that emphasize literacy and pre-literacy skills have been shown to better prepare children for school than ones taking the broader approach popular with Head Start programs. The national Head Start coalition, however, has taken the view that a greater academic emphasis threatens parent involvement and community self-determination.

In particular, the coalition—led by well-known figures such as Marian Wright Edelman of the Children's Defense Fund—opposes putting Head Start under the control of local education boards where black voices have been ignored.

But their resistance goes deeper than opposition to a change in public oversight. Civil rights activists have historically argued against what they view as patronizing forms of government assistance, i.e., assistance premised on the notion that parenting, family arrangements, lifestyles, etc. are the problem. They have, instead, favored the “democratization of power,” “self-determination” and “maximum feasible participation” for recipients. Initiatives that “blame the victim” are said to be condescending and harmful to the self-esteem of both mothers and children. Worse, they may be racist.

In essence, reform has been stalemated by a continuing disagreement over who and what must change. The Bush administration wants programs that are demonstrably linked to school readiness and that hold parents and teachers responsible for results. By contrast, most Head Start programs target broad social and developmental outcomes and blame racism and a lack of funding for their lack of effectiveness. Instead of targeting school readiness, typical programs seek to validate racial and cultural differences and improve self-esteem.

Kagan believes that Head Start has been successful in implementing a “two-generational approach to lifting families out of poverty,” and he suggests that Head Start should cooperate with the schools in boosting literacy outcomes. However, he also suggests that schools should become more like Head Start and move beyond child literacy to the enhancement of families.

So long as Head Start provides many advantages and few burdens for its adult stakeholders, continued stalemate is the most likely outcome. As matters stand, Head Start provides attractive services for children, jobs for parents, and a degree of self-determination for local programs. Rigorous accountability for improved preschool literacy outcomes could disrupt all three. In effect, Head Start's constituents are being rewarded for addressing the problem of school preparedness but not for solving it.

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