

From the Walla Walla Union-Bulletin Online News.

---

Posted on Saturday, March 12, 2011

Head Start program critical to future of our children  
JIM McCARTHY  
Walla Walla Union-Bulletin

Over 200,000 of America's most vulnerable children may soon lose access to vital programs that increase their chances for success in school - and in life.

Head Start, one of America's best researched and most effective social programs is under attack. The House of Representatives recently passed a budget that cuts \$1 billion from Head Start nationwide. This means that 3,000 children in Washington state will be affected by the largest cut ever proposed to Head Start. The Senate will take up their budget proposal very soon.

Head Start is the nation's leading investment in early childhood education. Head Start provides a range of comprehensive education, health, nutrition, parent involvement, and family support services to at-risk children and their families in communities throughout the country. More than 12,000 children attend Head Start in Washington, with another 26,000 eligible for the program, but unable to attend because of a lack of funding.

Here in Walla Walla we have 136 Head Start and 90 Early Head Start slots. Access to these programs is vital to Walla Walla because they provide access to high quality child care for families who otherwise would go without.

Study after study has found children who have participated in Head Start are more likely to be ready for school, more likely to graduate from high school, and have a reduced need for costly special education and intervention services. Researchers evaluating a Head Start program in Montgomery County, Maryland actually found that children who received Head Start saved taxpayers \$10,000 per child per year as a result of reduced special education services in kindergarten. In other words the program not only pays for itself in one year, but actually makes money for taxpayers.

Economists have found that Head Start generates a Return on Investment (ROI) that could make even hedge fund managers envious. For every \$1 invested in Head Start, America reaps a ROI ranging from \$7-\$9.

James Heckman, a Nobel Laureate in economics at the University of Chicago, recommended to the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Reform: "Investment in birth to 5 early education for disadvantaged children helps prevent the achievement gap, reduce the need for special education, increase the likelihood of healthier lifestyles, lower the crime rate and reduce overall social costs. In fact, every dollar invested in early childhood education produces a 10 percent per annum return on investment."

This means our \$8,000 per year investment in Head Start will garner \$789,395 in benefits over the subsequent 65 years. Heckman went on to say that "Early Head Start and Head Start are programs on which to build and improve-not to cut."

Head Start programs in our state help get children ready for school. Educators work with children who have the most challenging learning delays; they ensure children are immunized and receive

nutritious meals; help to find emergency shelter for homeless families; help parents develop the skills necessary to become self-sufficient and employed; and make sure children who were neglected, abused, or who have little or no hope have an opportunity to live up their fullest potentials.

Mika Aguilar and his parents came to Children's Home Society in Walla Walla when Mika was a year and a half old.

Mika was born at 28 weeks gestation and had large motor delays. He was enrolled in Early Head Start for a year and a half and didn't receive any other therapy other than his weekly home visits from his home visitor, Suzy Baslee.

Today, Mika is 11 years old and has no developmental delays.

"Mika is an academic superstar who is reading at the eighth- grade level" says Baslee. "He has been academically advanced the whole time he has been in school. Early Head Start developed his literacy skills."

I understand the need to cut wasteful and unnecessary spending, but before we cut programs like Head Start, we need to convince Congress there truly is nothing more important than the future of our children. Giving them the tools to succeed at a young age is truly an investment in our future and our children's future.

We need more success stories like Mika.

Hopefully, when Congress puts together its final budget proposal it will expand Head Start, not cut it.

We need to do everything we can to get our littlest learners ready to succeed in school and in later life.

Please call our senators to tell them why Head Start is important to Walla Walla.

Jim McCarthy, a former member of the Walla Walla School Board, currently serves as a board member of the Early Learning Coalition and the Foundation for Early Learning.