

GAO

Report to the Chairman, Subcommittee
on Oversight of Government
Management, Restructuring, and the
District of Columbia, Committee on
Governmental Affairs, U.S. Senate

February 2000

EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS

Characteristics Affect the Availability of School Readiness Information



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Abbreviations

ACF	Administration for Children and Families
CCDF	Child Care and Development Fund
EC	Enterprise community
ECLS	Early Childhood Longitudinal Study
EZ	Empowerment zone
FACES	Family and Child Experiences Survey
HHS	Department of Health and Human Services
SSBG	Social Services Block Grant



United States General Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

Health, Education, and Human Services

B-283428

February 28, 2000

The Honorable George V. Voinovich
Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of
Government Management, Restructuring,
and the District of Columbia
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Dear Mr. Chairman:

At the federal level, about \$14 billion supported programs in 1997 that addressed early childhood education and care.¹ These programs have various goals and provide different services and support to children and their families. Given this large federal investment and the current attention to the importance of early childhood experiences, there is interest in the effectiveness of federal early childhood education and care programs, especially with respect to preparing children to enter school, known as school readiness. Therefore, our objectives for this report were to (1) develop a categorization of federal early childhood education and care programs for a better understanding of the federal involvement in achieving school readiness and (2) determine what is known about the effectiveness of selected programs in contributing to school readiness.

¹*Child Care: Federal Funding in Fiscal Year 1997* (GAO/HEHS-98-70R, Jan. 23, 1998).

To respond to the first objective, we consulted with agency officials and experts in the field, analyzed a variety of agency documents and studies, and reviewed our earlier reports and those of the Congressional Research Service. We considered early childhood programs identified in our reports in order to develop a categorization framework.² To address the second objective, we selected four programs to review—Head Start; title I, part A, of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act; the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF); and the Social Services Block Grant (SSBG).³ These programs represent varying levels of emphasis on school readiness and use varying proportions of their funds for preschool children. Together they accounted for the majority of the federal investment in early childhood education and care in 1997. The programs are housed in the Department of Education and the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), the two departments most involved in supporting the early childhood education and care efforts of the federal government. We conducted our work between August 1999 and January 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

Results in Brief

Federal early childhood education and care programs can be divided into three broad categories:

- those that fund early childhood education and care settings, such as day care centers, in-home care, or school-sponsored prekindergarten programs;
- those that fund support services to early childhood education and care settings, such as subsidizing meals served in day care centers; and
- those that support child care for working families through provisions in the tax code.

Programs in the first category could potentially have the greatest influence on children's readiness for school; this is the category we focus on in this

²See *Early Childhood Programs: Multiple Programs and Overlapping Target Groups* (GAO/HEHS-95-4FS, Oct. 31, 1994), in which we identified more than 90 federal early childhood programs, 34 with education or child care as key to their mission. See also *Child Care: Federal Funding in Fiscal Year 1997* (GAO/HEHS-98-70R, Jan. 23, 1998), in which we identified 22 key federal early childhood education and care programs.

³Title I, part A, which we refer to as title I, provides basic grants to school districts for the benefit of disadvantaged children. Other parts of title I target specific populations of disadvantaged children, such as migrant students.

report. Within this category, however, programs vary in their emphasis on school readiness. Some programs, such as Head Start, have a strong emphasis on early childhood education and teach children skills and behaviors that help them become ready to enter school. Other programs, including CCDF, may contribute to the education and care of young children while subsidizing the cost of child care for low-income parents but do not have school readiness as an explicit program goal. Still others—title I and SSBG, for example—provide funds for a variety of services that can include early childhood education and care.

The availability of information on the four programs' effects on school readiness was associated with whether their primary purpose or goal was related to school readiness and whether the majority of program funds were directed toward early childhood education and care. For example, outcome data on children's readiness for school were available for Head Start, which has program goals related to school readiness and devotes the majority of its budget to early childhood education and care. The data for Head Start show that participating children had mastered many of the skills and behaviors on which they were tested to assess their readiness for school. The three other programs we reviewed had weaker links to goals related to school readiness or directed most of their funds to purposes other than early childhood education and care. This may help explain why the agencies had not collected the kind of data needed to determine the programs' effect on school readiness.

Background

In earlier work, we identified many federal programs that could fund early childhood services. While there has been interest in the existence and effectiveness of multiple early childhood education and care programs, we also reported that the vast majority of federal funding for early childhood education and care rests in just a handful of programs, the largest of which—Head Start and CCDF—we selected to review. Both of these programs are focused either entirely or to a great extent on the education or care of young children. In contrast, title I and SSBG, the two other programs we reviewed, allow funds to be used for the education and care of preschool children but do so as part of program objectives that are broader than early childhood care or education. Table 1 describes the four programs.

Table 1: Selected Information on the Four Programs We Reviewed

Program	Agency	Fiscal year 1999 appropriation (\$ in billions)	Description
CCDF	HHS	\$3.2	CCDF is aimed at increasing the availability, affordability, and quality of child care services. States receiving CCDF funds subsidize child care by providing eligible families with a certificate or voucher to purchase care from a provider of their choice. Parents can choose from a variety of child care providers, including for-profit and nonprofit child care centers, family child care homes, and relatives. In addition, states may contract directly with child care providers to purchase slots for eligible families. Federal law limits eligibility to families whose income does not exceed 85 percent of the state median income and to children generally under age 13. In an average month in 1998, 1.5 million children received child care services as a result of CCDF.
Head Start ^a	HHS	\$4.6	Head Start's primary goal is to promote school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of low-income preschool children (generally aged 3 and 4) through the provision of health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services that are determined to be necessary. The services are delivered at the local level by public and private nonprofit agencies that receive funding directly from HHS. In fiscal year 1999, Head Start served more than 831,000 children.
SSBG ^b	HHS	\$1.9 ^c	SSBG's aim is to consolidate federal assistance to states for social services, increase state flexibility in using social service grants, and furnish services directed at the goals of achieving or maintaining economic self-support and self-sufficiency; prevent or remedy neglect, abuse, and exploitation of children and adults; and prevent or reduce inappropriate institutional care. It is a capped entitlement to states that may be used to fund a variety of social services, including day care for children. In 1997, 2.2 million children received day care services at least partially funded by SSBG. HHS does not ask states to report on the ages of the children served.
Title I	Education	\$7.8 ^d	Title I's primary purpose is to help local education agencies and schools improve the teaching and learning of children failing, or most at risk of failing, to meet challenging state academic standards. Local education agencies receive title I funds in a formula grant and have broad discretion in using the funds. For example, program funds may be used to pay for teachers' salaries, provide professional development, or purchase new equipment, such as computers. Education has encouraged state title I directors to use title I funds for early learning programs that would improve school readiness. Title I served about 264,000 preschool children in 1996-97 (about 2 percent of all children title I served that year).

^aOur discussion of Head Start in this report refers to the Head Start program targeted to preschool-age children. Early Head Start (\$349.4 million in fiscal year 1999), created by the Congress in 1994, serves pregnant women and low-income families with infants and toddlers.

^bA special SSBG grant for rural and urban empowerment zones (EZ) and enterprise communities (EC) was implemented in 1994. Administered by the Department of Agriculture and the Department of Housing and Urban Development, this program awards grantees funds totaling \$1 billion, which they

have 10 years to use for community development activities in support of three of SSBG's overall goals. Some of these funds are used to provide child care and development activities in both the rural and urban EZs and ECs.

^cHHS reported recently that about 11 percent of SSBG funds (\$252 million) were used for child day care services in 1997.

^dThe Department of Education did not have information on the proportion of title I funds used for preschool children.

Two developments have affected whether and how early childhood programs attempt to address and collect performance data about school readiness. They are the agreement on national education goals in 1990—which include school readiness—and the passage of the Government Performance and Results Act of 1993.⁴

After school readiness was established as the first national education goal, the National Education Goals Panel articulated that school readiness is composed of five dimensions: (1) physical well-being and motor development, (2) social and emotional development, (3) cognition and general knowledge, (4) approaches to learning, and (5) language developments.⁵ The school readiness goal has prompted considerable activity on behalf of young children and their families. For example, the federal government has increased investments in early childhood programs such as Head Start and Early Head Start to improve the chances that children will arrive at school ready to learn.

The Results Act shifted the focus of accountability for federal programs from inputs, such as staffing and activity levels, to outcomes. The act requires that each federal agency develop a multiyear strategic plan identifying the agency's mission and long-term goals and annual performance plans that set forth goals and performance measures for each program activity. To develop the plans, each agency must connect its long-term strategic goals and daily program activities. For example, Education's strategic plan for 1998 to 2002 highlighted early childhood programs as an area of concern. The plan set forth an overall goal of "building a solid foundation for learning for all children" and under this goal an objective that "all children enter school ready to learn." Following the strategic plan,

⁴The goals were enacted into law in 1994 (20 U.S.C. 5812).

⁵The National Education Goals Panel has been charged with chronicling the nation's progress toward meeting all the National Education Goals over the 10-year period 1990 to 2000. The panel is composed of governors, members of the administration, members of the Congress, and state legislators.

Education's 1999 performance plan identified programs contributing to the early childhood objective and set individual performance goals for each of its programs.

Programs Differ in How They Support Early Childhood Education and Care

Federal early childhood programs can be divided into three broad categories, depending on how they support early childhood education and care. Programs that provide funds for early childhood education and care settings are probably considered most often in discussions about school readiness. However, programs in this group vary in their emphasis on school readiness.

Three Broad Categories of Programs

We developed three broad categories to describe the variety of federal programs that relate to early childhood education and care: (1) those that provide funding for early childhood education and care settings; (2) those that provide funding for support services to early childhood education and care settings, such as meals in day care centers; and (3) those that support child care through provisions in the tax code.

Programs in the first category provide education and care for children in settings such as day care centers, preschools, home care situations, and public school prekindergartens. The activities in these settings may be provided for a full day or part of a day and can vary from custodial care to care that is oriented more toward education. Examples of programs in this category are CCDF and Head Start.

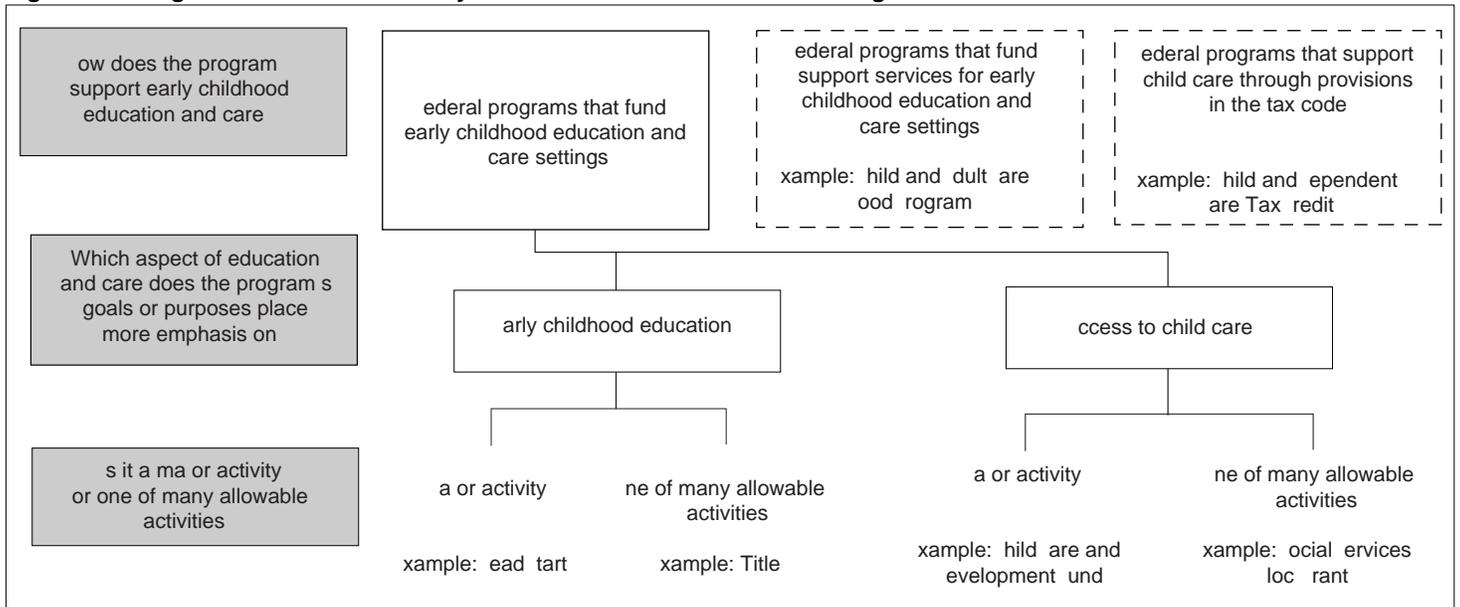
Programs in the second category provide specific support services to children in early childhood care and education settings. Such services could include speech and hearing assessments, nutrition, and mental health. An example of a program in this category is the Child and Adult Care Food Program, which funds meals served in eligible early childhood settings.

The third category includes all the federal tax provisions that support child care for working families. A program in this category is the Child and Dependent Care Tax Credit, which allows an income tax credit to qualifying taxpayers for eligible employment-related child care expenses for children younger than 13.

The first category contains programs that probably have the most opportunity to contribute to multiple dimensions of school readiness. For

this reason, we focused our review of school readiness on programs in this category, examining further the various kinds of programs included in this group and the likelihood that they collect information on school readiness-related outcomes. Figure 1 displays our three broad categories and outlines further the early childhood education and care settings category.

Figure 1: Categorization of Federal Early Childhood Education and Care Programs



Note: The figure depicts the federal level only. While federal, state, and local efforts and funds are often combined in complex ways to support early childhood education and care, the purpose of the figure is to highlight and categorize the federal portion of the effort for our discussion of school readiness.

Programs Vary in Their Emphasis on School Readiness

With regard to the first category, the federal government invests in various programs that place differing emphases on preparing children for school. These programs can be roughly divided into two groups: (1) those that place a greater emphasis on early childhood education and helping children reach their potential as learners and (2) those that provide parents with access to child care so they can work, go to school, or attend job training.⁶

⁶We based these distinctions on the programs' purposes as delineated in authorizing legislation or agency documents, not necessarily on the services that children can receive.

Early childhood education programs have been a key strategy in the federal government's effort to help disadvantaged children improve their performance in school. Head Start is the largest of these programs and provides a full range of services for children and their families, including child development, health, and nutrition services. Some other federal programs provide funds that can be used for early childhood education under broader program purposes. An example is the title I program, one of the Department of Education's largest aid programs serving educationally disadvantaged children. School districts may use title I funds for early childhood education services to prepare children for the transition to school, among many other allowable activities.

In contrast, federal programs that subsidize child care for low-income families are primarily focused on providing access to child care so that parents can work or obtain training or education for employment. For example, CCDF, the largest federal program subsidizing child care, was developed as a component of welfare reform to support the overall goal of promoting self-sufficiency through work. Similarly, most states use some SSBG funds for child day care, which is an allowed service in support of SSBG's overall goals of economic self-support and self-sufficiency. This does not mean that children receiving care funded by these programs are not benefiting from them in ways that help them prepare for school; it means simply that school readiness is not an explicit goal of these programs.

Goals and Support Levels Influence What Is Known About Programs' Contributions to School Readiness

When we reviewed four selected programs, all in the first category, we determined that what is known about the effectiveness of programs in contributing to school readiness was associated with whether their primary purposes or goals were related to school readiness and whether a majority of program funds were directed to early childhood education and care as opposed to other activities. Only Head Start has both of these characteristics and had collected outcome data on participating children's readiness for school. CCDF, SSBG, and title I either did not have a primary purpose or goal related to school readiness or directed most of their funds toward purposes other than early childhood education and care. Education and HHS were not collecting data for these three programs that could be used to determine their effect on school readiness. (See table 2.)

Table 2: Characteristics of Selected Programs Associated With the Availability of School Readiness Information

Program	School readiness is a primary goal or purpose for prekindergarten children	The majority of program funds are directed toward early childhood education and care	The program has federal-level information for assessing its effectiveness in readying children for school
Head Start	x	x	x
Title I	x		
CCDF		x	
SSBG			

Head Start Has School Readiness-Related Outcome Data and Is Taking Steps to Measure Effectiveness

Head Start, which has program goals that are related to the achievement of school readiness and devotes most of its budget to services for preschool children, has been the subject of several studies and data collection efforts. Through the years, Head Start has provided a comprehensive array of services and, as prompted in part by the Results Act, has in recent years substantially strengthened its emphasis on determining the results of those services. Recent data collected on program outcomes show that children participating in Head Start exhibit many of the skills thought to indicate a readiness to learn in school. HHS is now undertaking efforts to determine the extent to which such outcomes are directly attributable to children's participation in the program rather than to other factors.

Head Start has a complex system for measuring program outcomes, based on the program's overarching goal of improving the social competence of low-income children. Social competence is defined as children's everyday effectiveness in dealing with both their present environment and later responsibilities in school and life. The conceptual framework for this system is based on several objectives that support the goal of social competence; one of these objectives, to enhance children's healthy growth and development, is the most closely related to school readiness. The performance measures that support this objective include (1) emergent literacy, numeracy, and language skills; (2) general cognitive skills; (3) gross and fine motor skills; (4) positive attitudes toward learning; (5) social behavior and emotional well-being; and (6) physical health.

To collect the data needed to assess program outcomes, as captured by the Head Start performance measures, HHS' Head Start Bureau funded the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) in 1996. FACES collects performance measures data from a nationally representative sample of Head Start programs, children, and families using four data collection methods—parent interviews, child assessments, classroom observations, and teacher ratings.⁷ Specifically, FACES collects data on the cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of Head Start children; the characteristics, well-being, and accomplishments of Head Start families; the quality of Head Start classrooms; and the characteristics and opinions of Head Start teachers and other program staff. Data collection began in 1997 and has recently been extended to follow children into first grade.

According to the spring 1998 FACES data, “typical” 4-year-olds completing Head Start had mastered many of the skills and behaviors on which they were tested to assess their readiness for school, such as increasing their vocabulary, but they did not possess other skills and behaviors, such as identifying letters. With the FACES data, information on program outcomes is available, but definitive data on the program's impact are not. That is, it is not yet known whether observed outcomes are a result of the children's participation in Head Start or other factors, such as the emphasis on reading in their homes.⁸

⁷Data for the performance measures are also collected through the annual Program Information Report, which collects program-level data describing the children and families enrolled and the services provided, and the Head Start Monitoring Tracking System. For more information on Head Start's performance measures, see *Head Start Program Performance Measures: Second Progress Report* (Washington, D.C.: HHS, 1998).

⁸Although FACES does not directly assess the effect of Head Start, according to HHS officials, it does demonstrate a relationship between observed quality of classrooms and child school readiness outcomes.

In a previous report on Head Start, we concluded that although an extensive body of literature exists on Head Start, it is inadequate for drawing conclusions about the effects of the program.⁹ Consequently, we recommended that HHS include in its research plan an assessment of the effect of regular Head Start programs. In response to our recommendation and as a result of increased attention to outcomes and accountability for federal resources in general, the Congress included specifications for a national impact study of Head Start in the Head Start Amendments of 1998. The legislation requires that the study be a rigorous evaluation and that it determine whether the program is achieving its goal of increasing children's social competence and, in particular, whether it helps children attain school readiness. The Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, whose formation was required by the 1998 amendments, was asked to recommend a framework for the evaluation. Its October 1999 recommendations stipulate that the evaluation be based on a design that randomly assigns children and families to Head Start groups and non-Head Start groups (for example, groups in which the children do not participate in any program or participate in programs other than Head Start) to measure differences in outcomes between the two groups that can be attributed to Head Start.¹⁰ HHS plans to implement these recommendations through procurements awarded in 2000.

⁹ *Head Start: Research Provides Little Information on Impact of Current Program* (GAO/HEHS-97-59, Apr. 15, 1997).

¹⁰ Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, *A Recommended Framework for Studying the Impact of the Head Start Program* (Washington, D.C.: HHS, Oct. 1999).

Title I, CCDF, and SSBG Have No Information on Their Effectiveness Related to School Readiness

Education currently has no information that could be used to determine title I's effect on children's school readiness. Education, in its 1998-2002 strategic plan, cites school readiness as one of the agency's objectives and identifies title I as a program supporting this objective.¹¹ However, performance indicators for title I in Education's fiscal year 2000 annual performance plan do not address school readiness; rather, they address how the program supports other objectives more directed at school-age children, such as the use of challenging content standards by title I schools. Similarly, Education's national review of title I reported on the progress of school-age students but did not address the results of the program for preschool children.¹² According to agency officials, Education has recently decided to include indicators for title I preschool that address school readiness—specifically, title I's effect on emergent literacy and numeracy. Education officials also recently indicated that they are developing an evaluation plan for title I preschool that will provide data to measure progress in meeting the preschool objectives.

HHS did not have information that could be used to determine CCDF's effect on children's school readiness. Providing parents with access to child care so they can obtain and sustain employment and increasing the quality of child care are both purposes of CCDF. In HHS' Administration for Children and Families (ACF) fiscal year 2000 performance plan, one of the agency's objectives is to increase the quality of child care to promote childhood development. The agency's current performance indicators for this goal focus on ways of improving the quality of care but do not address outcomes for children. For example, the measures include the number of

¹¹In addition to title I, the Even Start Family Literacy Program supports the agency's school readiness objective. According to agency officials, Even Start is the agency's largest commitment to early childhood education. Our separate report on the Even Start program (GAO/HEHS-00-58R), discussing the program's effectiveness regarding school readiness, is forthcoming.

¹²See *Promising Results, Continuing Challenges: The Final Report of the National Assessment of Title I* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1999). An earlier Education study examined children's experiences in prekindergarten classrooms funded by chapter I (later changed to title I) as the program operated before the last reauthorization. Among the study's findings were that classrooms funded by chapter I were of acceptable to good quality, were less likely to operate full-day programs, and were not organized to offer children many nonteacher-led social interaction with peers. The study also tried to examine the relationship between classroom characteristics and outcomes for children but was not able to draw any strong conclusions. See *Observational Study of Early Childhood Programs*, vol. 2, *Chapter 1 Funded Early Childhood Programs* (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, 1993).

child care facilities that are accredited by a nationally recognized early childhood development professional organization and the number of states that provide health services linkages with child care.

In another effort, HHS is preparing a report for the Congress summarizing state data collected in response to CCDF's reporting requirements. The report is not expected to contain information on CCDF's effect on school readiness but will include such data as the number of children and families the program serves and the type of child care in which children are enrolled (for example, family child care, home care, or center-based child care). HHS expects to send the report to the Congress in July 2000, according to an agency official.

The data collected for SSBG generally focus on services the states provide with SSBG funds and do not address specific outcomes, such as school readiness. SSBG's goals are even broader than CCDF's and include assisting states in helping their vulnerable children (and adults) achieve self-sufficiency and evade abuse and neglect. According to ACF's performance plan, HHS has not specified individual performance measures for the program because of states' flexibility to invest the funds with limited reporting requirements.

Evaluating the effect of programs such as title I, SSBG, and CCDF on specific outcomes like school readiness presents some challenges. As we have reported, measuring program results at the national level requires conditions—such as uniform activities, objectives, and measures across grantees—not often present with many flexible grant programs.¹³ Moreover, funds from such programs are often commingled with other federal, state, local, or private funds to deliver services, making it difficult to isolate the effect of these programs alone. Outside of program evaluations, both Education and HHS have sponsored research, sometimes collaboratively, examining such topics as the relationship between early childhood experiences and outcomes for children, without a focus on specific funding sources. For example, the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study (ECLS)-Birth Cohort is being conducted by Education's National Center for Education Statistics in collaboration with several other federal agencies, including some agencies of HHS. The study will follow a national sample of children, born in 2000, from birth through first grade and will focus on a number of characteristics that influence children's first experiences with formal school, including interaction between the child and family, nonparental care, and health care. Among the issues addressed by the ECLS-Birth Cohort study are the effects of participation in different types of early care and education programs or arrangements on children's development.¹⁴ The first available data from the study are scheduled to be released in spring 2002.

Summary

A number of federal programs support early childhood care and education, and many of them provide services that may contribute to children's school readiness. The programs' primary goals or purposes and the level of support for preschool services help determine whether information is available on specific program outcomes such as school readiness. Programs that are not primarily focused on achieving school readiness, for example, are less likely to collect data to measure that outcome. Although services provided through these programs may contribute to school readiness, data collection efforts will likely center on outcomes more

¹³See *Grant Programs: Design Features Shape Flexibility, Accountability, and Performance Information* (GAO/GGD-98-137, June 22, 1998).

¹⁴The Head Start and Child Care bureaus are also funding an enhancement of ECLS-Birth Cohort that focuses on assessing parents' reasons for selecting the types of child care and observations of the quality of the child care settings. This is an addition to the original design of the study.

central to a program's major purposes. The level of support for specific services may also relate to what information is available. For example, if most funds or services are used for purposes other than early childhood education and care, program assessments are more likely to be conducted on the areas that receive greater support. Consequently, even though the federal funding in support of early childhood education and care is substantial, there are currently limited data upon which to determine the effect of individual federal programs on school readiness.

Agency Comments

HHS and Education reviewed a draft of this report. HHS's written comments are provided in appendix I. HHS generally concurred with the findings in our report. HHS provided additional information about CCDF and the school readiness-related benefits of quality child care as well as the role of the states in administering CCDF and the Child Care Bureau in providing technical assistance to them. Finally, HHS indicated that we represented Head Start performance measurement information fairly.

Education did not provide written comments. Both HHS and Education provided technical and editorial comments that we incorporated where appropriate.

We are sending copies of this report to the Honorable Richard W. Riley, Secretary of Education; the Honorable Donna Shalala, Secretary of Health and Human Services; and others who are interested. We will also make copies available to others on request.

Please contact me on (202) 512-7215 or Harriet Ganson, Assistant Director, on (202) 512-9045, if you or your staff have any questions about this report. Other major contributors were Linda Y. A. McIver, Susan A. Riedinger, and Pamela R. Vines.

Sincerely yours,

A handwritten signature in cursive script that reads "Marnie S. Shaul". The signature is written in black ink and is positioned below the text "Sincerely yours,".

Marnie S. Shaul
Associate Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues

Comments From the Department of Health and Human Services



DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH & HUMAN SERVICES

Office of Inspector General

Washington, D.C. 20201

FEB - 2 2000

Ms. Marnie S. Shaul
Associate Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues
United States General
Accounting Office
Washington, D.C. 20548

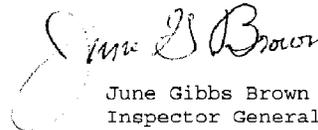
Dear Ms. Shaul:

Enclosed are the Department's comments on your draft report, "Early Childhood Programs: Characteristics Affect Availability of School Readiness Information." The comments represent the tentative position of the Department and are subject to reevaluation when the final version of this report is received.

The Department also provided some technical comments directly to your staff.

The Department appreciates the opportunity to comment on this draft report before its publication.

Sincerely,


June Gibbs Brown
Inspector General

Enclosure

The Office of Inspector General (OIG) is transmitting the Department's response to this draft report in our capacity as the Department's designated focal point and coordinator for General Accounting Office reports. The OIG has not conducted an independent assessment of these comments and therefore expresses no opinion on them.

Appendix I
Comments From the Department of Health
and Human Services

COMMENTS OF THE DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES ON THE
U.S. GENERAL ACCOUNTING OFFICE DRAFT REPORT, EARLY CHILDHOOD
PROGRAMS: CHARACTERISTICS AFFECT AVAILABILITY OF SCHOOL READINESS
INFORMATION (GAO/HEHS-00-38)

GENERAL COMMENTS

The Department appreciates the opportunity to review and comment on the above-captioned report. We find the General Accounting Office's (GAO) examination of this subject laudable. While the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) does support parents in accessing child care so they can work, it is important to emphasize the two-generational aspects of child care, that is, its importance to the long-range development and school readiness of children. In addition, we believe, greater attention needs to be given to: 1) the devolution of responsibility to States that characterizes the CCDF; 2) the relative newness of CCDF and the Administration's efforts to develop performance measures for CCDF; 3) the technical assistance activities that are being conducted by the Department's Child Care Bureau toward improved quality of care and outcomes for children; and 4) efforts that are occurring with the Administration and private sector support toward developing outcome measures at the State level.

The Administration has advocated passage of their proposed "Early Learning Fund," an amendment to CCDF that would provide incentives to States and local communities to enhance the quality of child care and develop performance measures that would improve outcomes for children and promote school readiness. The Department's Administration for Children and Families remains committed to achieving this goal.

We generally are in concurrence with the draft report. However, as indicated in the Child Care Bureau's Mission and the CCDF Purpose, "The purpose of the CCDF is to increase the availability, affordability, and quality of child care services." The program offers Federal funding to States, Territories, Indian tribes, and tribal organizations in order to help low-income families access quality child care, enhance the quality and supply of child care for all families, provide families with a range of child care options, strengthen the role of families, improve coordination among child care and early childhood development programs, and increase the availability of early childhood development and before- and after-school care services. Therefore, while supporting parents in accessing child care so they can work or obtain training or education for employment is an important purpose, it is not the only purpose.

While child care does enable parents to participate in work and educational activities, it clearly influences children's long-term development and, hence, school readiness, in positive or negative ways. "Cost, Quality and Outcomes" research and ongoing studies funded by Department's National Institute of Child Health and Human Development (NICHD) demonstrate that child outcomes are influenced by the quality of care. The "Cost, Quality and Outcomes" research has now followed children through second grade. This research finds that children who experience high quality child care have higher language, mathematics, and social skills than those who have been in poorer quality care. The NICHD studies found that children in child care centers that adhere to professional standards for quality fare better on tests of school readiness

**Appendix I
Comments From the Department of Health
and Human Services**

and language and have fewer behavioral problems than their peers in centers not meeting such standards. These and other studies demonstrate that low-income children benefit most from high quality child care.

The GAO report notes, but, we believe, does not emphasize strongly enough, that CCDF provides grants to States which have discretion in their administration of these funds. While this represents a challenge to developing a national picture about the relationship between child care and school readiness, it does not mean a total dearth of information or that States are not developing such connections. In addition to the studies already mentioned, a national study of child care for low-income families and research funded through the Child Care Bureau, noted in a recently released Federal Register announcement, are expected to provide a better understanding of the relationships among variations in child care and outcomes for children. Further, with support from the Department's Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation and a private foundation, many States are focusing on creating child care and school readiness indicators.

We also need to note that the Child Care Bureau provides significant technical assistance to States, tribes, and Territories to encourage grantees to improve the quality of child care services. This takes the form of conferences and leadership forums, on-site technical assistance, memoranda's (such as one that was sent out last spring dealing with quality improvement activities), and other printed materials. In combination with a CCDF 4-percent quality set-aside and earmarks for infant and toddler care, quality improvement, and school-age resource and referral services, these technical assistance activities are leading to significant quality improvement efforts on the part of grantees. Most States now have initiatives to improve the professional development of child care workers, incentives for providers of higher quality care, training initiatives, and grants or loans for improved quality care.

We believe that the authors of the report have looked carefully at the Head Start performance measurement information, including the Family and Child Experiences Survey, and represent them fairly.

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