

[As prepared for delivery]

Remarks for Secretary Kathleen Sebelius
Office of Head Start First National Birth to Five Leadership Institute
Washington, DC
October 3, 2011

Thank you, Yvette, for that introduction. And thank you for your terrific leadership at the Office of Head Start. When I became Secretary, Head Start hadn't had a permanent Director in two years. And we couldn't have found a better person to fill the position than Yvette – someone who has devoted her entire career to this program and the children and families it serves.

I also want to thank all the program and parent leaders who are here today. There's not a lot of outside recognition in early childhood education. This is the wrong profession if you want to make a lot of money. But as we just saw in the video, there's no one who makes a bigger difference in the lives of the children you serve than you do. So thank you for all of your hard work.

I've been a passionate believer in Head Start and early childhood education for as long as I've been in public service. That's partly because the idea behind Head Start – that every child, no matter where they're born or what their parents do, should get the opportunity to reach their full potential – is the same idea that's at the heart of the American dream.

But there's an urgent economic case for Head Start too. Over the last 50 years, the world economy has undergone a major shift. Today, many businesses can set up shop anywhere they have an internet connection. That means the jobs follow the talent. Software companies don't move to Silicon Valley for the weather. Biotech companies don't move to Boston for the historical sites. They go there because that's where the best people are.

But other countries have caught on too. They're investing in their own education systems, with the hopes of attracting the jobs of the future. That's why President Obama has said we won't be able to out-compete the rest of the world unless we out-educate them. And we can't out-educate the rest of the world unless our children get a healthy start in life.

As you know better than anyone, the early years are critical. They're when the most rapid development happens in our children's brains. And they're also when our children pick up social, emotional, and academic skills that they'll carry with them for the rest of their lives.

The children who get the support they need during these early years are the most prepared for kindergarten, which means they're the most likely to succeed in the early grades, and so on. Early learning programs like Head Start can set off a chain reaction of success that follows children through every stage of their lives.

That's the power of the work that you do. And that's why the Obama Administration has made a historic commitment to early childhood education, starting with Head Start.

Through investments in the Recovery Act, we doubled the size of Early Head Start, and made Head Start available to 61,000 more children. And even in difficult budgetary times, when we're being forced to make so many cuts we don't want to make, we've fought to preserve the funding for these additional children.

Just as families don't immediately raid their kids' college savings when money gets tight, President Obama has argued that we need to protect this critical investment in our future. And we're heartened that the budget proposed by the Senate would maintain most of the Head Start expansion.

This Administration also firmly believes that for children to reach their full potential, they need more than their ABCs. They also need to be critical thinkers. They need to understand the book, not just be able to recognize letters.

They need to be physically healthy. They need to have the social and emotional skills to listen and work with others. And, they need families that are actively engaged in their development and education.

This is a comprehensive approach that Head Start helped pioneer. From the beginning, Head Start programs have understood that it's great to have a good curriculum. But that curriculum doesn't matter if the children are too hungry or sick to pay attention. It's great to teach kids a new skill. But that lesson will be far more powerful if it's also reinforced at home.

The truth is that to get our children ready for school, we need to provide all of these things, and that's a principle we've applied in all our early education policies.

For example, one of the biggest lessons Head Start has taught us is how important it is to involve family members. Every year, hundreds of thousands of parents volunteer through Head Start, playing a role in their child's development that goes much deeper than just showing up for a PTA meeting.

We want to promote this same kind of engagement across the country, which is why we fought to make sure last year's health care law contained funds for to support innovative home visiting programs.

In these programs, trained professionals visit expecting parents to provide information and help them prepare for the birth of their child. Then they continue to visit during the child's early years to answer questions, share parenting tips, and identify potential health and development problems.

For a small initial investment, these programs can improve maternal and child health, reduce child maltreatment, and help parents develop skills that will benefit their children for years to come.

Like many early childhood programs, home visiting has a huge payoff. In fact, studies show that supporting our children's healthy development in their early years is one of the best investments we can make as a society. That's why the Obama Administration is so committed to supporting these programs. And that's also why we're committed to making sure these programs are of the highest quality possible.

Today, around the country, there are early childhood programs that have developed innovative and successful ways to do everything from teach kids how to count, to get parents to read to their children, to keeping students safe and healthy. These programs have figured out how to use their limited funds more effectively to make an even bigger impact in the lives of the children they serve. What we want to do is help these best practices spread.

I know you share that commitment. That's why you came here to this conference to discuss new approaches that you can bring back to your communities. It's why many of the best practices we're hoping you will adopt were first developed in Early Head Start and Head Start classrooms.

But in the past, the federal government hasn't been as good a partner as it could have been. I know this because I experienced it firsthand when I was working to improve the quality of our early childhood programs as Governor of Kansas. The federal government may have talked a lot about quality, but when it came time to do it, we were on our own.

Today, my message to you is that you are not on your own. This Administration is going to do everything we can to help you improve your programs so you can make an even bigger difference in our children's lives.

Earlier this year, Secretary Duncan and I launched the Race to the Top Early Learning Challenge, an innovative new program that will reward states across the country that are working to raise quality across their early learning programs. And we believe that Head Start needs to be part of any serious state proposal.

But Head Start has always been a leader, not a follower, and there's no reason efforts to improve quality should be any different. That's why, last January we launched the Head Start Roadmap to Excellence. This is a comprehensive plan to provide you with the resources and support you need to do the incredible work that you do even better.

For example, we've revamped our training and technical assistance system. Anyone who's ever spent a day with one four-year-old, much less a whole classroom of them, knows how challenging your jobs are and how much skill is required. That's why we've launched six national centers that will help provide you with best practices that can help you make an even bigger difference in your children's lives.

We're also working with Head Start programs around the country to collect data on the quality. There's no single number that can capture all the ways that kids benefit from your programs. But using our CLASS tool, we can gather valuable information on the quality of

instruction, the emotional support students receive, and the classroom environment – information that can help you identify areas to improve.

Finally, as you know, we've proposed new rules that would require low-performing Head Start programs to compete for continued funding. I know that some of you are not looking forward to these rules. Some of you may be worried that the performance indicators will be ambiguous or arbitrary.

Those are understandable concerns. But I can tell you this morning that we are fully committed to having a final regulation that is clear, fair, transparent, and that reflects our best knowledge about what kinds of programs work best for our children. We have already read and considered more than 16,000 comments on these rules that have been very helpful as we move forward.

And we need to keep moving forward. We're here today because we believe there's nothing more important than our children's development in their early years. That's why we all believe it's so important for them to get the comprehensive services provided by Head Start programs instead of just being left in a room in front of a television.

But it's also why we need to make sure they have the highest-quality Head Start program possible. We need to give every child, in every Head Start classroom, the best shot at reaching their potential. And as part of a broader approach to improving quality, requiring the lowest-performing programs to compete for continued funding is an important part of doing that.

The stakes resting on our efforts are high. It is not only our children's future in the balance, but our country's. In a world where the jobs follow the best trained workers, America has no chance of leading the world if our children have already fallen behind by their fifth birthdays.

But I believe the incredible turnout here today is a sign that we can meet this challenge. You already do incredible work every day to help America's neediest children reach for their dreams. If you can focus that same determination and energy on asking how we can make Head Start work even better, I believe what our children will be able to accomplish is limitless.

Thank you.