

Yet in the long run, Head Start and other preschool programs turn out to pay off in better school performance, even if it can't be measured by grades or test scores. Researchers speculate that the programs work because they provide poor kids with a more positive introduction to learning than they usually get in kindergarten, where high class sizes and low expectations are the norm for most low-income children.

The Consortium for Longitudinal Studies speculated that because preschool graduates entered school with "positive attitudes toward classroom activities and were able to learn and do the school work...[their] positive attitudes toward school were reinforced, they felt competent. In all probability, their teachers treated them as such. Once set in motion, success tended to breed success." In other words, kids may not be smarter or get better grades as a result of preschool, but they learn to like school, to meet basic course assignments and to persevere to graduation.

Not surprisingly, the best preschool programs of the past and present employ well-trained teachers. They all have low child-to-staff ratios, ensuring that children get sufficient guidance and attention from adults. While curricula vary, successful programs feature activities that indulge children's own initiatives and creativity rather than academic exercises rigidly controlled by teachers. Perhaps most important, programs that work involve parents in a significant way.

Head Start is the model for a family-focused program. Even conservatives like it, because it seeks not to replace parents as primary educators of their children, but to help them better fill that role. Head Start had a mandate to involve parents at every level, as staff members and volunteers and in determining local program goals.

According to a 1985 report to the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), that mandate has been met. Fully a third of Head Start staff are the parents of present or past Head Start students, and "many Head Start parents attribute improved employment and educational status and elevated personal aspirations to Head Start involvement," the HHS study found.

**Cutting corners:** Predictably, although there is a consensus about the key elements of a quality preschool program, many early childhood education programs try to cut corners and stretch scarce program dollars by skimping on those quality standards.

"It is senseless to cite evidence from exemplary, high-quality programs and then to enact a program with low spending, low ratios, low salaries and inadequate teacher preparation," says University of California-Berkeley economist W. Norton Grubb. Yet that's exactly what many states and school districts are doing. Texas, which sponsors pre-kindergarten programs for poor and non-English-speaking four-year-olds, allows ratios of one teacher for 22 children—more than twice the ratio recommended by the National Association for the Education of Young Children, and far above the 1-to-6 ratio of the Perry Preschool program. New Jersey allows 25 four-year-olds per teacher, while Maine sets no limit.

Few programs require the intensive outreach to parents that Head Start and the model preschool experiments of the '60s did. Programs run by school districts come in for particular criticism, especially for blacks, for neglecting to involve parents. Minority children and parents, such critics note, are often poorly treated in existing public-school programs. School-based child development programs will become an "incubator for inequality," the National Black Child Development Institute warns, unless administrators are forced to involve parents in meaningful ways.

For children whose first language isn't English—a growing target of early childhood education efforts in California and Texas—there is real danger in programs that neglect parents, says bilingual education expert Lily Wong Fillmore. "There is a 'prestige differential' between the language kids use at home and English, which is taught in school. Learning English in preschool at age four can make kids reject their own language, and in doing so they reject, and feel rejected by, their families." Only a family-centered program that promotes parent leadership can help children handle the emotional complexities of preschool bilingualism, Fillmore contends.

In some families—those in which the long-term effects of poverty are manifested in parents' emotional problems, drug or alcohol addiction, child neglect or abuse—early childhood programs are useless unless they involve parents as fully as children. "There's no way that any program can substitute for parent-

ing," Stanford University child welfare expert Michael Wald told a forum on early childhood development in Oakland last April. "We have to work with parents to help them give their children what they need." Yet only a relative handful of programs across the country are providing troubled families with the array of parent support and child development services that make a difference.

Implementing effective preschool programs can also get tangled in disagreement about government's role in providing child care. Bowing to the right, Vice President George Bush has opposed direct public subsidies to child-care programs, because they are believed to "discriminate" against families with a stay-at-home mother. But Bush favors Head Start expansion, because the half-day preschool program isn't intended to provide child care for working parents.

Yet half-day programs such as Head Start, or New York City's landmark public school program for four-year-olds, may wind up serving a limited pool of poor children, because poor parents who work need full-day child-care services. Bank Street College researchers Fern Marx and Anne Mitchell, who surveyed the nation's early childhood education scene in a recent report, were alarmed by the lack of coordination between new preschool initiatives and efforts to expand child-care services, "especially given the current push to get welfare mothers to work," says Mitchell.

In other words, legislators are designing mandatory work programs for welfare mothers while implementing half-

day preschool programs for their kids, most of whom, once their mothers work, will need full-day child care. No wonder people don't like government.

**Damage control:** The politics of preschool is best worked out on a local, not national, level. In Oakland, Calif., an initiative to expand early childhood programs for poor families is being spearheaded by the Urban Strategies Council, a non-profit research and advocacy group established in 1987 to combat "persistent poverty." With a working group of local child development professionals and an advisory committee that includes elected officials, educators and community and business leaders, the group laid out a blueprint to expand and improve existing programs, using federal, state, city and private sector funds.

Its approach is frankly pluralistic, attempting to build on a wide range of programs, from Head Start and public school centers to family day-care homes and for-profit child-care centers. It recommends tailoring some programs to better serve the working poor, and others specially designed for those on welfare. The group's recommendations have spurred action by county welfare and school officials. Perhaps most important, the process has fostered collaboration among programs that share a mission to serve low-income families but, thanks to time constraints or turf battles, rarely coordinate their efforts.

Likewise in Minneapolis, city leaders troubled by rising poverty amid a service economy boom are developing a strategy

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## Expanding Head Start: a first step in education reform

While George Bush and Michael Dukakis clash on most domestic policy issues, both have pledged to substantially expand the Head Start program, which currently reaches only one in six eligible children. While he's at it, the next president could also modernize the venerable War on Poverty program to outfit it for the '90s.

Head Start is still the model for family-focused preschool education and parent support programs for the poor. Yet little effort has been made to formally link it to other anti-poverty programs. Federal initiatives to put welfare mothers to work and to expand child-care funding are moving forward in isolation from Head Start. So are most school reform efforts, even though national studies by the Carnegie Foundation and the Committee for Economic Development have called for Head Start expansion as a first step in education reform.

One way to update the program is to expand its traditional half-day program to provide full-day services. Working poor parents can benefit from Head Start's family support services as much as welfare parents, but few use it because their children need full-day care. Offering full-day services would also make Head Start more relevant to welfare reform efforts. Right now, children's needs are often lost in the frenzy to put welfare mothers to work, and most programs pay for only the cheapest possible child care—ignoring the fact that the

same children are eligible for enriched programs like Head Start.

A push to expand Head Start should also place greater emphasis on developing ties with school districts and other child-development programs. Federal researchers examining the relationship between Head Start and state and local preschool programs last year more than once heard the question, "Oh, is the Head Start pro-

gram still around?" Some programs compete with Head Start for children. Not surprisingly, the study found that coordination with local child-development programs and school districts improved Head Start's overall effectiveness.

Improved coordination might also improve Head Start outreach, a problem in some areas. Traditional outreach efforts, administrators say, aren't reaching a critical group of ever-younger single mothers, many of them teens. Outside social service networks, many mothers turn responsibility for their children over to their mothers or grandmothers, who aren't found through usual outreach channels.

Some of those problems might be solved by lowering the age at which children can enter Head Start, which is currently set at three. Parents are easiest to reach and most interested in child care and social services when their children are first born, research shows, but those who can't find help often fall through the safety net permanently.

Serving younger children would allow Head Start to reach teen mothers, who are essentially left out of the program today. Unable to find child care, many teen mothers leave school and wind up on welfare. Full-day Head Start that could serve infants would be an invaluable resource in efforts to help families headed by teens, who make up a growing proportion of the poor today. —J.W.



Hispanic day-care center in Washington, D.C.

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Louis Farrakhan's (center) Nation of Islam is re-emerging as an influential voice in black America.

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## Farrakhan rides the wave of black anger

The day after a New York State grand jury concluded that Tawana Brawley had concocted her story of abduction and rape, she and her controversial trio of advisers arrived in Chicago to attend the Nation of Islam's (NOI) annual "Saviors' Day" convention as honored guests of NOI leader Louis Farrakhan. The Brawley phenomenon and Farrakhan's popularity are both potent symbols of our troubled racial times, and it seems entirely appropriate that they should find common cause.

However, the media's narrow focus on the links between Brawley and the Black Muslims missed the larger and more disturbing significance of Saviors' Day 1988: the re-emergence of the NOI as an influential voice in black America.

Nearly 20,000 people attended the event throughout its three-day duration, and it was staged on the grounds of an elegant mosque the NOI recently—and with much fanfare—reclaimed from a rival group. In attendance were several black elected officials, top members of various rights organizations and a few major recording artists and other assorted celebrities. In short, it was an impressive display of support for a group thought to have fallen out of favor. Despite this, the Chicago convention attracted only local coverage, and most of that focused on the Brawley connection.

The media chill may have been intended to cut the Brawley advisers' easy access to publicity. But by ignoring the NOI's growing popularity, the mainstream media allows us to ignore the conditions that fertilize that growth. Thus insulated from the rough-and-tumble realities of inner-city life and their disquieting implications for society as a whole, the anesthetized American public finds nothing odious in the mindless platitudes of presidential candidate George Bush.

The grim-faced black men who form the core of the Fruit of Islam, the NOI's paramilitary security force, are the same social misfits Bush implicates in his demagogic anti-crime tirades. These men, buffeted by severe economic shocks and social dislocations, may easily be dismissed by one of Bush's new and improved one-liners, but the men do not go away. Their seething presence shadows our entire national life and makes a mockery of the Pledge of Allegiance, which the vice president embraces so hypocritically.

**Avoiding the issue:** And as America turns away in dismay, disgust and sometimes—as in the case of subway vigilante Bernhard Goetz and his legions of sympathizers—in anger from the welter of complex issues that have transformed many inner-city neighborhoods into incubators of crime and pathology, the Nation of Islam stands ready to offer a simple explanation: whites in this country never were serious about achieving racial justice. "Leave the white man alone," Farrakhan exhorted his followers during his keynote speech at the event. "There may be some good whites, but we

haven't met too many, and we don't have time to search for them."

The Brawley case fits perfectly into this conception. Farrakhan blasted the grand jury's conclusions on the teenager, and with great rhetorical flourish threatened to "kill and dismember" the people she said abducted and raped her. The crowd erupted into explosive applause at each reference to violent retaliation. Sitting among them on Chicago's south side, it was easy to discern a widespread and pervasive anger. It's an anger than can be found in inner cities across the country, and it grows as prospects for progress get dimmer.

Mostly this anger is manifested in the so-called black-on-black crime and violence that have transformed too many city neighborhoods into virtual battle zones. The NOI has successfully reclaimed some of that turf. In Washington, D.C., for example, the NOI recently initiated a patrol program that has halted drug sales in two of the city's housing projects and won the praise of tenants and city officials alike. "On a scale of 1 to 10, I give them a 50," one resident told *Sojourners* magazine. "The Muslim patrols are the best thing that ever happened."

The NOI's doctrine of racial pride and self-reliance is strongly tainted by elements of fascism and racist demonology, but because of its success in ameliorating the ravages of Reaganomics among African-Americans, black leaders find it difficult to criticize the group. Indeed, the harsh appraisals by people like Farrakhan are beginning to edge out more reasoned approaches in setting the black agenda (see story on page 8).

**Bush's pathetic pitches:** When Bush talks about victims of crime, members of the inordinately victimized black community are not his intended audience. Rather than proposing strategies designed to lessen the pressures grinding many black communities into the ground, he instead uses crime as an argument against such strategies. There is a barely disguised message of racism, or at least nativism, bubbling beneath the reedy Republican's pathetic pitches against the American Civil Liberties Union and prison furlough programs, or for the Pledge of Allegiance.

Because of his emphasis on jobs, education and training—in short, reinvesting in human capital—Michael Dukakis apparently has a deeper understanding of the crises confronting many African-Americans. But, like many of the black leaders with whom he seeks counsel, the governor of Massachusetts misunderstands the black community's deeper longings and fears. There are many blacks in Boston's Roxbury section who have remained steadfastly untouched by Dukakis' "Massachusetts Miracle."

The product of our neglect of inner cities cannot be swept under the rug, corralled in new jails or sloganized away. Luckily, this society still has the wherewithal to tackle the problems before they become unmanageable. Whether we wait until armies of bow-tied Farrakhan minions begin acting on their fascist tendencies or packs of crack-ravaged youths start bum-rushing suburban shopping malls is our choice.

There is another choice, and it's about time we started acting on it.

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(ISSN 0160-5992)

Published 41 times a year: weekly except the first week of January, first week of March, last week of November, last week of December; bi-weekly in June through the first week in September by Institute for Public Affairs, 1300 W. Belmont, Chicago, IL 60657, (312) 472-5700

Member: Alternative Press Syndicate

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This issue (Vol. 12, No. 40) published Oct. 19, 1988, for newsstand sales Oct. 19-25, 1988.

