Getting a Head Start
Is preschool too early for academic instruction?

Welcome to the second issue of Education Matters' inaugural year. One of the Bush administration's first major educational initiatives makes this the perfect time to debate the purpose of Head Start and preschool generally.

Head Start was created in 1965 to help disadvantaged preschoolers catch up with their peers raised in more prosperous circumstances. Unbeknownst to outsiders, however, most Head Start programs focus on child development rather than on early literacy and numerical skills. Emblematic of its current orientation, Head Start rests comfortably within the Department of Health and Human Services rather than the Department of Education. Now the Bush administration has announced a shift to a more academic focus. Many fans of "developmental appropriateness" are objecting.

In the Forum, David Elkind and Grover Whitehurst debate the purpose of Head Start and other preschool programs. Perhaps the most striking fact to emerge is how much more we need to know. Head Start has been around for more than three decades, but research has yet to show that the program has had the desired effect. Nor has much been done to isolate the elements that might make it more effective.

Head Start isn't the only pressing federal policy issue addressed in these pages. As the congressional reauthorization of special education nears, Reid Lyon and Jack Fletcher's Feature article casts doubt on the ways in which reading disabilities are defined, identified, and addressed. Learning disabilities are usually not identified until the 3rd grade, when a so-called discrepancy between IQ and reading achievement can be discovered. New evidence, say Lyon and Fletcher, suggests that all children with reading difficulties, whether or not they exhibit an IQ/achievement discrepancy, can be helped by very early intervention.

In another Feature, Tom Loveless and Paul DiPerna show that the Department of Education's much-publicized Blue Ribbon schools, ostensible beacons of excellence, are selected without much regard to student achievement. What county-fair judge would give a blue ribbon to a so-so cherry pie? But that is exactly what the federal school pickers have done. Once adjustments are made for social class, students perform little better at Blue Ribbon schools than in garden-variety ones.

In Research, Ludger Woessmann asks why some nations do better than others in math and science. Examining a wide variety of possible explanations for country-to-country differences in 8th-grade performance on the Third International Mathematics and Science Study, Woessmann finds that the amount nations spend on their schools is only marginally related to how well their schools do. Two policy factors turn out to matter considerably more: a larger private-education sector (which presumably introduces more competition into the educational system) and the presence of a centralized examination system (which presumably holds students and schools accountable).

The Research section also includes two evaluations of school vouchers, both showing test-score gains, particularly among African-Americans. As editors of this journal were involved as authors, readers should know that in all such cases the affected editors recuse themselves from the peer-review process. As an additional aid to the reader, we include Dan Goldhaber's independent view of the quality and significance of this research.

There is more. In Check the Facts, Michael Podgursky questions the validity of two new studies on teacher effectiveness. Also in this issue, David Sikkink describes the diversity prevailing within one of the most rapidly growing sectors in American education—Christian schools. On the back page, the mayor of Oakland, Jerry Brown, explains why his city needs a publicly funded military academy.

If you, like Mayor Brown, have a personal story you wish to share, you are invited to tell us, briefly, how education matters to you. We will publish the most compelling of these tales. In the same vein, we welcome you to contribute to our Correspondence section, which begins with this, the second issue of Education Matters, available in print and at www.edmatters.org and (for some essays) in unabridged form at www.edmattersmore.org.

-THE EDITORS

MISSION STATEMENT In the stormy seas of school reform, this journal will steer a steady course, presenting the facts as best they can be determined, giving voice (without fear or favor) to worthy research, sound ideas, and responsible arguments. Bold change is needed in American K-12 education, but Education Matters partakes of no program, campaign, or ideology. It goes where the evidence points.