

Bush tells plan to improve preschools and day care

By Amy Goldstein
WASHINGTON POST

MEDIA, Pa. — President Bush called for “another essential step” in education reform yesterday, proposing that the federal government and states prod parents, day care centers and preschools to teach more skills to young children before kindergarten.

Bush sketched out an early childhood initiative that would provide training for all 50,000 teachers in Head Start and would, for the first time, evaluate how well federally financed child-development centers teach the low-income preschoolers they enroll.

Under the initiative, states no longer could receive federal welfare or child care subsidies unless they develop plans to upgrade the quality of preschools and day care. The White House also is mounting a campaign to draw public attention to the importance of educating children early.

Bush announced the administration's plans, part of which require congressional approval, on the same day that a bipartisan group of senators disclosed their own early childhood proposals. The two sets of ideas contain overlapping themes, but the Senate proposal includes \$5 billion in

new grants for this purpose and would not place any new restrictions on federal welfare and child care funds.

“Without new resources, this important initiative is a hollow gesture,” said Sen. Edward Kennedy, D-Mass., chairman of the Senate Health, Education, Labor and Pensions Committee, who is leading the legislation along with Sen. George Voinovich, R-Ohio.

Late last year, Congress enacted far-reaching changes espoused by Bush for public education from kindergarten through the 12th grade, which will expand testing of students, steer more money to schools with poor and minority children and give parents options to inferior schools. Bush often called that legislation the top domestic policy goal of his first year in office.

Yesterday, Bush portrayed his early childhood initiative as a sequel to that education law. “If we expect achievement from every child, all our children need to begin school with an equal chance at achievement,” the president told educators and students at a suburban Philadelphia branch of Pennsylvania State University. “Every child must have an equal place at the starting line.”

Specifically, the early child-

hood initiative dips back into a controversy over the purposes of Head Start, the federally financed program dating back more than three decades that now helps more than 900,000 low-income children get ready for school. The administration, echoing many conservatives, contends that the program should expand its focus beyond largely nurturing children's social and emotional development to emphasize “early literacy” — an idea that many liberals reject.

Yesterday, Bush's chief domestic policy adviser, Margaret Spellings, said the senators designing an early childhood bill are incorrect in thinking that the improvements require additional money. Noting that Head Start and Child Care Development Fund grants increased substantially during the Clinton administration, Spellings said: “It isn't a matter of resources. It is the kind of things that are going on (in the preschool programs).”

The administration does want to spend \$45 million to allow the National Institutes of Health and the Education Department to sponsor research into effective teaching techniques with young children. Those funds and the idea of requiring states to write

President's education plan

Bush's early education initiative would:

■ **Evaluations:** Require all Head Start children ages 3 to 5 to be evaluated three times a year.

■ **Early learning:** Promote early learning and language development, such as knowing the alphabet and counting

■ **Teacher training:** Develop a training project to help teachers improve their techniques in teaching prereading and language skills

■ **Financing link:** Explicitly tie federal financing to the curriculum, teacher skills and performance of preschoolers

■ **Media campaign:** Raise public awareness of the learning capabilities of preschool children

Chronicle news services

early education plans would need permission from Congress

The administration can move forward on its own with aspects of the initiative, such as the public awareness campaign that will be initiated at the White House today.

In addition, the Health and Human Services Department will begin this summer to give four days of training through regional workshops to 2,500 Head Start teachers and child care providers. Those people will, in turn, be asked to train people with whom they work. The lessons will focus on how to promote literacy among young children.