

Letter to the Editor

By Yasmina Vinci
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Head Start: Partisan Free Zone
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Not only does Joe Klein's recent column ("Time to Axe Public Programs That Don't Yield Results," July 7) misconstrue the value of Head Start; it reinforces the distorted political prism through which funding decisions are made on behalf of our most vulnerable children.

In an effort to further fuel the mêlée between "liberal and conservative subsidies," Mr. Klein chose to present a dated and hackneyed account of Head Start success. He chose not to mention that children who enroll in local Head Start programs enter with heightened socio-economic factors that represent barriers to success. He chose not to acknowledge Head Start's comprehensive approach that addresses emotional growth, parental training, health and dental care along with academic learning. He chose not to point out that the lifelong academic success of any child is also dependent on the quality of primary and secondary schooling children receive after the age of five. Most importantly, he chose not to mention that Head Start results extend beyond the classroom and contribute to overall preparedness for life.

The bottom line is the cumulative, lifelong program benefits show that Head Start is a smart investment. Study after study has demonstrated that for every dollar spent on Head Start, society earns back at least \$7 through increased earnings, employment, and family stability; and decreased welfare dependency, crime costs, grade repetition, and special education. In fact, the value and efficacy of Head Start was further affirmed in a recent letter to Congress signed by nearly 300 early learning academics and researchers.

The Head Start community, of course, shares Mr. Klein's vision of "world class education programs" and remains fully committed to accountability, efficient service delivery and the highest quality standards. However, to position Head Start at the nexus of political theater is ridiculous. To imply conservatives or liberals are oblivious to efficiency or compassion is ridiculous. But most ridiculous of all is assigning shallow partisan stereotypes to claim Head Start does not place children and families squarely on a path to success.

Yasmina S. Vinci, executive director of the National Head Start Association (www.nhsa.org), is a seasoned leader in the early education and child advocacy community in the US and internationally. She served as the first executive director of the National Association of Child Care Resource & Referral Agencies (NACCRRA) and has held leadership positions on a number of governing Boards of national and local organizations. For nine years, Yasmina served as commissioner on the National Head Start Fellowship Commission and currently serves on the Board of the Council for Professional Recognition. She holds a Master's degree from the University of Michigan and a Master in Public Administration degree from Harvard's Kennedy School of Government

The National Head Start Association is a not-for-profit organization that believes that every child, regardless of circumstances at birth, has the ability to succeed in life if given the opportunity that Head Start offers children and their families. It represents more than 1 million children, 200,000 staff and 2,600 Head Start programs in the United States.