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The start of Head Start

by Roger Neugebauer

The creation of the Head Start program occurred at break-neck speed with many dramatic turns and many colorful players. No one tells the story better than Edward Zigler in *Head Start: The Inside Story of America's Most Successful Educational Experiment* — a detailed and personal, behind the scenes look at the program's inception. From this resource and many other documents of the time, we have pulled together this short list of individuals who contributed to the creation of Head Start:

Lyndon Johnson

As a former teacher in a one-room schoolhouse in Texas, Lyndon Johnson believed strongly that education was the key to breaking the cycle of poverty. As President, when he took up the cause of building the 'Great Society' by declaring 'War on Poverty,' Head Start was one of his early campaigns in that war. In 1965, he announced the establishment of Head Start as an eight-week summer program, staffed by volunteers, for over 500,000 low-income children who would enter school in the fall of 1965 (acf.org).



Sargent Shriver

The actual architect of Head Start, was Sargent Shriver, brother-in-law of the late President Kennedy, who turned a problem into an opportunity. As head of the Office of Economic Opportunity under President Johnson, Shriver was faced with a budget surplus when a new community action program was not getting off to a fast start and decided to shift the funds to serve disadvantaged children. To create the program, in 1964 he named a committee of experts to draw up a program to help communities meet the needs of disadvantaged preschool children (Administration of Children Youth and Families).



Robert Cook

To lead the Head Start planning committee, Shriver selected his pediatrician and Kennedy School Science adviser, Dr. Robert Cook. According to Zigler (who was one of the panel members), Cook had a profound impact on the broad goals for Head Start. Shriver had envisioned this as primarily an educational initiative. However, Cook had grave concerns about the status of health care for poor children and guided the panel in looking beyond educational objectives (Zigler). In early 1965, the panel issued "Recommendations for a Head Start Program" as a way to enhance children's social competence through a comprehensive program that included health, nutri-

tion, education, social services, and parent involvement components. [Incidentally, other names for the program considered by the panel included "Baby Corps," "Kiddie Corps," and "Project Success."]

Julius Richmond

As the first director of the Head Start program, Sargent Shriver chose Julius Richmond, one of the few people in the country who had actual experience with operating early childhood programs for disadvantaged children. In the 1950s, Richmond had conducted research with Bettye Caldwell at Syracuse University, which found a striking pattern of developmental decline among disadvantaged infants toward the end of their first years. Caldwell and Richmond developed a home-based early intervention program to research how to reverse this decline. He used this valuable experience to shape the early development of Head Start (Zigler).



Jule Sugarman

As Richmond's associate director, Shriver appointed Jule Sugarman. Sugarman had served as the executive secretary of the Head Start planning committee and continued to play a key role in the direction of the program for five years. A story indicative of the haste with which Head Start was planned — President Johnson in developing the initial budget for Head

Start needed to know the cost per child. He asked Shriver, and Shriver asked Sugarman, and gave him an hour to come up with a figure. Sugarman relates, "So another fellow and I sat down over a ham sandwich and arrived at \$180 per child for an eight-week program." That hastily derived figure became the basis for developing a \$50 million request to Congress (Zigler).

Pancho Mansera

Mansera was the first of many Head Start success stories. In 1965, while a five year old in the Head Start program, Pancho Mansera had a previously undetected thyroid problem that was diagnosed and treated. This changed "a listless little boy to a smiling, lively youngster," who continued his education through community college (Hymes, Jr.).

Jimmy Carter

In 1965, while Jimmy Carter was head of a county planning board in Georgia, he helped set up 20 Head Start classrooms. As President, in 1980, Carter held a reception at the White House in honor of the 15th anniversary of Head Start to which he invited many original proponents of the project including Lady Bird Johnson, as well as Pancho Mansera (Hymes, Jr.).



Edward Zigler

Zigler was one of two early childhood educators appointed by Sargent Shriver to the Head Start Planning Committee (the other being Urie Bronfenbrenner). Since that time Zigler has maintained an ongoing, significant involvement with the program. In 1970, he took charge of Head Start when President Nixon appointed him director of the new Office of Child Development. Since leaving the Federal government and returning to Yale, Zigler has continued to write about, testify before Congress about, and in general serve as a strong advocate for improvements to Head Start. In 1992, he reflected, in terms that ring just as true today . . .

"High hopes made Head Start possible. Some of the hopes of the mid-1960s were naïve; some led to inflated promises that no social program could possibly deliver. But we need to recapture the hope, to believe once more that it is possible to set the next generation of American children and families on a course toward a better life" (Zigler).

References

Administration of Children, Youth and Families. "Head Start 101." www.acf.hhs.gov.

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