



**National
Puerto
Rican
Coalition,
Inc. ®**

October 5, 2006

The Honorable Arlen Specter, Chairman
The Honorable Tom Harkin, Ranking Minority Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and
Related Agencies
United States Senate
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Ralph Regula, Chairman
The Honorable David Obey, Ranking Minority Member
Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and
Related Agencies
United States House of Representatives
Washington, D.C. 20515

Dear Chairman Specter, Ranking Member Harkin, Chairman Regula and Ranking
Member Obey:

On behalf of the National Puerto Rican Coalition (NPRC), representing the interest of eight million Puerto Rican U.S. citizens living in the U.S. and in Puerto Rico, I write to urge your support for Head Start and Even Start in the FY 2007 Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies (Labor-HHS) Appropriations bill, and to oppose cuts that threaten to undermine the success of these vital programs.

NPRC is concerned that cuts in early childhood programs would result in the loss of services essential to the educational success of young Puerto Rican/Hispanic children. The latest brain research shows that children's emotional and social cognitive development begins at birth and during the first few years of life when the foundation for learning is built. Unfortunately, many poor Hispanic families have limited information about this critical time period in their children's development. Thus, comprehensive child development programs are needed to increase the school readiness of young children in low-income families.

The importance of educating the younger generation of Puerto Ricans goes beyond the critical issues of early and adequate brain development. It addresses the root of poverty and its perpetuation- the lack of education. Puerto Rican children rank among the poorest of the nation, with 33 percent of our kids living in poverty as compared with 28 percent of Latinos and 9.5 percent of non-Latino white children. By educating our children we give them the tools to overcome poverty.

Even Start is a family literacy program that acts as an invaluable resource for some of the poorest families in the nation. Over half of the households associated with the program have an annual income of under \$6,000 dollars. Even Start helps illiterate parents improve their reading skills empowering them to help their children become successful students. Parental involvement is critical during each phase in a child's educational development and was recognized as the cornerstone of the No Child Left Behind Act. Without basic literacy skills many Hispanic parents would not be able to play this important role. Research shows that Even Start programs provide positive results for needy families. Unfortunately, Hispanics have already been affected by the 20 percent drop in funding to Even Start programs from FY 2001 to FY 2006. Rather than cutting this vital program further, we would urge you to restore cuts and raise funding to \$225 million, including a set-aside for migrant families, to meet the needs of this most vulnerable population.

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Equally important in ensuring school readiness is Head Start. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts the program is funded at \$57 million less than the FY 2005 levels. This is the equivalent of losing 32,123 Head Start and Early Head Start slots in 2006 alone. These programs are barely able to meet the costs of providing quality education and health services to children, transportation, teacher salaries, books and heating. Flat funding the Head Start and Early Head Start programs could result in a loss of about 19,000 children served by the program in FY 2007. Head Start has taken a considerable hit in the last four years and it is time to reverse this course to ensure that our nation's most vulnerable children receive quality education; we ask that you provide \$234 million in additional funding for Head Start in FY 2007.

In both, Even Start and Head Start Programs, there are still a considerable number of eligible children who are not receiving services due to the lack of available slots. Two out of five preschool children and 97 percent of infants and toddlers who qualify for Early Head Start cannot participate in the program due to the lack of resources. At these inadequate funding levels, there is no room for improvement in the quality of Head Start programs through investment on education and training of Head Start teachers or to enable more eligible children to participate.

Early education programs like Even Start and Head Start have the potential to provide a basis for these children and their families to break the cycle of poverty. The programs empower parents by educating them and their children. We ask that you make children a priority by increasing the funding of Head Start and Even Start. This will be an investment into a future generation of Americans that can encompass a competitive and educated workforce, helping our nation confront its many global challenges.

Sincerely,

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read 'Manuel Mirabal', written in a cursive style.

Manuel Mirabal
President & CEO