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TESTIMONY OF

ALBERT SHANKER, PRESIDENT

AMERICAN FEDERATION OF TEACHERS

BEFORE THE SENATE LABOR COMMITTEE

ON S.2270, SMART START

May 11, 1988

My name is Albert Shanker, and I am President of the American Federation of Teachers, an organization of more than 650,000 members who are vitally concerned with childcare and with providing federal support for early childhood education programs. The shortage of safe, high quality childcare in the United States is simultaneously an education, an economic and a family issue. We know that our economy has changed rapidly over the last decade and that students must now be educated to levels never before attempted for all. The jobs that used to be available to relatively unskilled workers have disappeared. At the same time, the demographics of our work force have changed dramatically over the last few years as women with children entered the job market in huge numbers. These two facts have led our nation to the realization that daycare and early childhood education are important issues for our country's economic future as well as for our children's future.

S.2270, the Smart Start bill, represents an important step toward meeting the needs of America's families. The notion expressed in this bill, that it is important to provide equal educational opportunities and start children on the road to success early, is one that the AFT shares and strongly endorses. We believe, as do the sponsors of this bill, that there is a federal role in providing leadership and support to families in need of the type of services that S.2270 would provide. The AFT also shares with the sponsors of this bill a desire to get the federal government into the role it performs best, that of protecting and advancing the interests of our nation's disadvantaged. Smart Start will clearly focus on providing the bulk of its support to the disadvantaged. We endorse that emphasis because in a time of budgetary pressure those who need services but are unable to afford them must be served first. Ideally, however, a Smart Start program should include any child whose parents wish to avail themselves of this opportunity. We note that a sliding scale fee structure will allow the participation of children who do not come from poor families. The AFT believes that providing a childcare setting that includes children from all economic, racial and social backgrounds is an important goal and consistent with our common school ideal.

The AFT is concerned about how the Smart Start bill would operate in conjunction with Headstart, which attempts to meet many of the same needs as S.2270. We note that Smart Start would supplement Headstart and allow for the operation of full day programs. This is a positive development. However, with the requirement for matching funds, which Headstart does not have, it seems that the relationship between these two programs will have to be more clearly spelled out.

As you know, the states have been leading the effort to increase the availability of pre-kindergarten programs. In most cases these efforts have been under the auspices of state education authorities. The AFT believes that education agencies should be the prime sponsor of new early childhood education programs. The Smart Start bill leaves this important matter unresolved. The bill makes the Department of Education the federal agency responsible for the administration of Smart Start. This is an appropriate decision, yet, other federal childcare efforts, Headstart and Title XX are currently under HHS jurisdiction. We believe, however, that the Education community at all levels has the major role to play in a new program such as Smart Start. When the AFT opposed separation of the education function from the Department of HEW, we expressed doubts over how an early childhood education program could be managed if education were in a separate department and other childcare programs stayed in the old HEW structure. Now that

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this fear has been realized, we believe that the education department should administer Smart Start, yet, some kind of national coordination between Smart Start and existing programs should be contemplated.

We are also concerned with the mechanism for choosing an administrative agency at the state level. The "Lead State Agency" called for in S.2270 would play a very important role in determining the content and scope of Smart Start programs. Because of the critical nature of these choices, the AFT would like to see more preference given to state education departments in the role of Lead Agency. It is important to note that Smart Start will seek to build and coordinate with programs that are already in place. Most of the non-federal programs are part of the education effort of state and local governments. Moreover, the new funding that Smart Start will leverage will almost certainly be credited to the education budgets of the various states. Given this likelihood and given the fact that one major goal of Smart Start is increasing the school success of at-risk children, a larger role for education seems warranted.

Likewise, we believe that at the local level the mechanism for choosing the administering agency should emphasize the local education agency more than the bill requires. It is important to note that in most jurisdictions the school district is independent and the local social services and child development agencies are part of the general unit of local government. This

poses a dilemma for the operation of Smart Start: where will the local funds come from and who will be responsible for their use? We believe that local school districts should have the first opportunity to become the local administering agency.

Although we support a major role for education agencies, we do not support some developing practices being initiated by such agencies. The AFT does not endorse standardized testing of pre-school students to determine readiness to enter or exit from kindergarten. Retention at this level is foolishness of the highest order and is virtually guaranteed to cause a child problems later in his or her school career. What is needed in early childhood and in kindergarten programs is an individual and developmental approach, and flexibility for serving the needs of young children. The AFT believes that any program that seeks to serve young children in the name of appropriate early childhood education must not be modeled after a grade-school setting. The AFT strongly supports the requirement that curricula be flexible and standardized tests not be used to track children. The school setting should fit the needs of the child rather than having children be made to fit into some predetermined and uniform conception of schooling.

The minimum standards contained in S.2270 are adequate. (Another good reason for using the local education agency is the fact that meeting these kinds of standards is something that schools do all the time.) However, training requirements for

non-certified personnel seems to be inadequate. More than two days training will be required to make sure that the needs of young children are met especially in light of the aim of high quality programs. We welcome the requirement for 15 hours per year of in-service training, and hope that even more training will be available.

In conclusion, the AFT welcomes S.2270. It is a welcome initiative in the vital field of early childhood education. We have some doubts about administrative mechanisms used to deliver Smart Start programs, and we are concerned about the relationship between Smart Start and Headstart. Nevertheless, we believe that the time for this legislation has arrived. We congratulate the sponsors of this bill, especially Senator Kennedy, for taking the leadership on a vital issue for the children and families of our country. Smart Start, together with Headstart and the ABC childcare bill, will form the core of an initiative on behalf of young children that is long overdue.

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