CAUSE FOR ENCOURAGEMENT

Head Start Program In City Helps Aid Depressed Young

In the Head Start program this summer in Lafayette is a six-year-old boy with a mentally little better than that of a four-year-old. Yet this seemingly unimpressive youngster is a candidate for encouragement and pride on the part of workers in the program.

When the child was enrolled a year ago, he had the mentality of an 18-month-old baby. Record show that he was nearly blind and psychotically disturbed. We had no intelligible speech. His teachers found that his manner of expressing himself was to assume an animal-like posture and grunt.

The child came from a home where conditions were described by investigators as "terrible." He had little to eat and no clean clothes to wear. Other children in the family were known to be busy and hungry, not to be asked about. Through Head Start, this youngster has been given an excellent chance of leading a normal life. Authorities feel that, after another year of careful attention, he will be able to attend regular classes and succeed in the regular curriculum and compete with other children from more normal backgrounds.

"I'm continually amazed at how alert they are, how quick to learn," she says.

This is one of the more severe cases. Most of the children enrolled do not suffer from such physical problems, although the family's economic and psychological involvement. Yet each is economically and culturally deprived to the point that, without Head Start, he would not be able to compete with other youngsters.

George Dupin, president of the Lafayette Parish School Board, through which the program is operated, says this not only compounds the child's problems, but adds to the need of coming "to keep pace with the other children in the development in the progress of the entire class." A number of these children, he says, "come from homes where they never hear a story read, never see parents read a newspaper. Some are not even familiar with their sanitary facilities which most of us take for granted." If they were to enter the same grade with these first-graders, they would not be familiar with many objects the class would consider. Most first-graders would be learning to spell "path tub." But some of these youngsters would have to learn to write in time.

John Mouton, director of the program and formerly a teacher of in the Lafayette School System, points out that one child in Head Start is from a family of six, a yearly income of $300.

Another, Mouton says, is from a family of 16, with an $1,500 annual income.

"Naturally these children are subject to learning problems and adjustments difficulties," Mouton says. "Our experience has been limited, and this leaves them with a limited ability to communicate. Their knowledge of the world around them has been limited to what they have seen from well-to-do parents. Most of those from the extremely depressed families have had virtually no opportunity to learn and enjoy art, music, and reading. Often, the family, as strange and remote is, is not even known to the family.

Mouton points out that the economically deprived child is subject to serious risks to health. In the pre-school years, health services are usually inadequate, immunizations are seldom completed, and physical problems not uncommon. A step is being taken to aid the child mentioned above. The program was to arrange for the purchase of eye glasses to correct a severe sight problem.

The goals of the preschool Head Start program, Mouton says, are as follows:

1. To give these children a healthy start in the development of intellectual, emotional, and social abilities.
2. To improve and expand the experience of the child and his family, through the classroom experience.

To give children frequent chances to succeed. To improve a child's ability to get along with others in the family and help him to better understand them.

To develop in the child and his family a more responsible attitude toward society and to foster feelings of belonging to the community.

To offer the child a chance to meet his teachers, policemen, health and welfare officers and other figures of authority in a non-fearful situation. To bring him into these areas.

To help the child and his family to improve their self-confidence, self-respect and dignity.

"This summer," Mouton says, "we are working with 226 children in attempting to achieve these goals. Enrollment will increase in the fall, with the children being brought to Alice Bouchat, N.D. Moss, J.W. James, W.A. Leos of, Vernon, Scott and Milton schools. Six buildings are being under construction to house the program. They are being built with federal funds available for the Elementary and Secondary Education Act.

After a recent tour of Head Start centers, a school board member commented that "It is heart-warming to bear children which the heart and the community can be proud." The rewards of the program are great, according to Mouton. Our teachers and teacher aides are far from being the highest paid people around. They receive, however, recognition that is very special in the world to the public, expressing admiration, magnifying glasses, calendars and many other items of interest to the children for granted.

There are science lessons, geography lessons, arts and crafts instruction, and other activities designed to permit the children to adapt easily to their first year of school.

Also, there are the "fun sessions" where the major goal is to teach them to adapt to others and to function easily in social situations.

Along with this, there are regular medical checkups to see that the children are in top physical shape and matter what the family's financial limitations.

Mouton says involvement of parents is one of the most important elements of the program. He says that with the children's help, we can do more than we are doing now. "At times," he says, "the effectiveness of Head Start is drastically reduced if it is not carried over into the home.

The cooperation of the parents and the head start teachers is excellent cooperation. Funds for operation of Head Start are secured through the Lafayette Community Action Council, which works closely with the school board. The budget relationship between the two bodies, according to Mouton, is due in large measure to the "wonderful coordination by School Superintendent Charles Delahoussay."

"It has been instrumental in helping the two groups find common meeting grounds while maintaining their own separate identities and policies. As he has helped to bring together the best ideas of both to implement a program of heart-warming to bear children which the heart and the community can be proud."