Operation Head Start Covers Lafayette Parish

Once again, amid reports elsewhere of graft, incompetency and political meddling, Operation Head Start has initiated its commendable program in Lafayette Parish.

As everyone knows by now, Head Start is designed to aid those youngsters preparing for school who lack even the barest knowledge of what to do and how to act in public. It's a pitiful commentary on our modern society that there still are children old enough to go to school who don't know the basic words necessary to understand the teacher, don't know how to hold a pencil, or what a crayon is, have never seen indoor sanitary facilities, are strangers to the little but important social amenities, are puzzled by a light switch and, beyond all this, may be unsound of sight and hearing.

Last year some 400 Lafayette children, ages four and five, from poverty-stricken homes were given the benefit of health examinations and preliminary instruction in the most basic necessities of how to get along in school. The Office of Economic Opportunity, through which the anti-poverty war is conducted, allotted $102,744 for this work. If the eight-week program did nothing else but save a few children from growing up into misfits and a burden to society, it must be presumed that the money was well-spent.

This year the OEO has earmarked $126,770 for the program, which will last 16 weeks—twice as long as last year's. Several beneficial changes have been made. Instead of Lafayette alone, some rural communities in the parish have also enrolled children in the three centers set up for the program. Also, the enrollees will be those who will enter the first grade in September and so be able to put immediately into practice what they have learned.

Just as last year, the program is not confined to just one ethnic group. In the neighboring parishes of St. Landry and St. Martin, similar programs are being administered by the school boards under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act. Lafayette's Head Start is sponsored by Southern Consumers, one of the first to organize under the OEO.

Unfavorable publicity has been tendered similar programs elsewhere. An investigation of the OEO operation in New York City has been called for, up in Rapides Parish there have been resignations galore over the handling of various phases of the poverty program, and even in near-by St. Mary Parish there has been controversy resulting in the governor's vetoing the partial Head Start program that had been planned there.

It's unfortunate that politics can not be kept out of such programs in which millions of dollars and thousands of children are involved, but those are the facts of political life. Dissension, petty jealousies and mismanagement are bound to occur. For a time it was believed that Lafayette Parish officials were involved in the St. Mary Parish rhapsody. But it turned out that it was strictly their own local affair. The OEO programs in Lafayette Parish have been operating without a hitch, and our leading public officials have maintained a discreet hands-off policy all along.

It would probably be more in keeping with the humane spirit that has always been a part of America if the governor should see fit to withdraw his veto and let St. Mary proceed with its Head Start program. Surely the sponsors of the program and the responsible officials of St. Mary can reason together and come to a consensus. Political and community stability would be the natural result. More important, there are children who do need training in things that we have all along taken for granted, and who should not be made victims of partisan quarrels.