

**Full Circle**  
**By**  
**William A. Palmer, Jr.**

In the summer of 1966 my wife-to-be, with a newly earned bachelor's degree, prepared for her first job in the classroom by teaching in an innovative program called Head Start. Now almost 44 years later I've launched out upon a second career, and it's my turn to work with Head Start. In between, my bride and I have done other things. I've been a minister, editor, and college instructor; she's been an elementary schoolteacher, human resources information systems administrator, and community information and referral coordinator. But in one sense, we seem to have come full circle.

Head Start was only a year old when Carolyn taught in Jarrettsville, Maryland, in 1966. Back then, eligible four-year-olds were being readied for kindergarten with an eight-week program during the summer. Head Start has grown and evolved in the more than four decades it's been part of the American educational landscape, but it remains committed to helping poor children achieve success in school. My employer, the Parent-Child Development Corporation (PCDC), is grantee for the Bridges Head Start program, which currently serves 216 children living in Mathews, Gloucester, Middlesex, King and Queen, King William, New Kent, and Charles City counties. In our twelve Head Start centers we now serve children throughout the school year, rather than for just eight weeks during the summer.

When I started my new job last October I had a lot to learn about Head Start. Like most people, I was aware that it was a federally funded program serving children from disadvantaged families. But not until I was personally involved did I appreciate the comprehensive nature of Head Start. Part of the Head Start philosophy involves teaching children in the context of the family; we do everything we can to engage parents and help them understand that they are a child's first and most important teachers. We also emphasize a holistic approach to a child's development. In Head Start we require appropriate immunizations, tests for lead and hemoglobin, and annual medical and dental checkups. We're on the lookout for the growing problem of childhood obesity, and seek to make healthy nutrition and active lifestyles a family affair. Bridges Head Start children attend a four-day-a-week program that develops socialization as well as cognitive skills. During the school day the children are served breakfast, lunch, and an afternoon snack. All this comes at no cost to the family.

Although the federal government pays the lion's share for Head Start, the program could not exist without the cooperation of local school divisions that provide transportation and classrooms for eleven of our twelve Head Start centers (the twelfth is housed at PCDC's Tri-Rivers Center in West Point). Another of the lessons I've learned is that virtually every grant program, whether from Washington or elsewhere, requires something called a "local match." Agencies like our own do not qualify for money to run programs such as Head Start without a substantial investment on the part of the communities they serve. For Head Start to continue its program in the seven counties where we work, we're dependent upon the generosity of our neighbors.

Census data tell us that more than 300 children in our service area are eligible, by age and family income, for Head Start. Currently, with 216 students, we are fully enrolled, and 66 children are on our waiting list. By reaching out to a substantial proportion of the eligible children in this area, we believe that we are making a difference in their lives and in the lives of their families. And we are grateful to our

volunteers, contributors, school divisions, and political leaders who help to make such transformation possible.

*In addition to Head Start, the Parent–Child Development Corporation offers Smart Start, a for-fee preschool program, and Safe Place, with before- and after-school components, for children six weeks through twelve years old, at its Tri-Rivers Center in West Point. For information about any of PCDC's programs, call 843-2289 or e-mail the author at [wpalmer@pcdcva.org](mailto:wpalmer@pcdcva.org).*