

U.S. Congress approves Head Start bill

by UPI

WASHINGTON -- U.S. lawmakers approved a five-year Head Start bill that will boost teacher qualifications and expand access to the preschool program. After handily passing the U.S. House of Representatives and Senate, the proposal moved to the White House, where U.S. President George Bush was expected to sign it, The Washington Post reported Thursday. About 909,000 disadvantaged children are enrolled in the program designed to help prepare them for school academically and socially. The legislation would allow eligibility for the 42-year-old program to expand to families slightly above the federal poverty level. The proposal also set a goal that by 2013 all Head Start teachers will have at least a two-year associate's degree. "Head Start teachers and staff are the heart and future of the program," U.S. Sen. Ted Kennedy, D-Mass., said in a statement. "They help children learn to identify letters and arrange the pieces of a puzzle. They teach them to brush their teeth, wash their hands, make friends and follow rules." The bill, however, would jettison a controversial system for testing 4-year-olds' math and verbal skills and doesn't have a provision sought by the White House to allow to allow religious groups participating in Head Start to hire and fire staff members based on religious affiliation, the Post said.

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