

President Lyndon B. Johnson Announces Project Head Start (1965)

[Music]

Announcer: Speaking from the White House on May 18, 1965, President Lyndon B. Johnson announced the first grant under Project Head Start.

President Lyndon B. Johnson: It was less than three months ago that we opened a new warfront on poverty. We set out to make certain that poverty's children would not be forevermore poverty's captives. We called our program Project Head Start. The program was conceived not so much as a federal effort, but really as a neighborhood effort. And the response we have received from the neighborhoods and the communities has been the most stirring and the most enthusiastic of any peacetime program that I can remember.

Today we are able to announce that we will have open, and we believe operating, this summer, coast to coast, some 2,000 child development centers serving as many as – possibly half a million children. This means that nearly half the preschool children of poverty will get a head start on their future. These children will receive preschool training to prepare them for regular school in September. They will get medical and dental attention that they badly need. And parents will receive counseling on improving the home environment.

This is a most remarkable accomplishment, and it's been done in a very short time. It would not be possible, except for the willing and the enthusiastic cooperation of Americans throughout the country. I believe this response reflects a realistic and a wholesome awakening in America. It shows that we are recognizing that poverty perpetuates itself. Five- and 6-year-old children are inheritors of poverty's curse, and not its creators. Unless we act, these children will pass it on to the next generation, like a family birthmark. I believe that this is one of the constructive, and one of the most sensible, and also one of the most exciting programs that this nation has ever undertaken. And I don't say that just because the most ardent and most active and most enthusiastic supporter of this program happens to be the honorary national chairman, Mrs. Johnson.

We've taken up the age-old challenge of poverty, and we don't intend to lose generations of our children to this enemy of the human race. This program, like so many others, will succeed in proportion, as it is supported by voluntary assistance and understanding from all of our people. So we're going to need a million good neighbors, volunteers, who will give their time for a few hours each week caring for these children, helping in 100 ways to grow out their potentials. We need housewives and co-eds. We need teachers and doctors. We need men and women of all walks and all interests to lend their talent and their warmth, and their hands and their hearts.

The bread that is cast upon these waters will surely return many thousand fold. And what a sense of achievement and what great pride, and how happy that will make all of us who love America, feel about this undertaking. Thank you.

[Applause]