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For Immediate Release

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Washington D.C. - Congressman John P. Murtha, Chairman of the House Appropriations Subcommittee on Defense, joined his Colleagues today in passing a bipartisan conference report that reauthorizes the important Head Start program.

"For the first time in nearly a decade, Congress has succeeded in reauthorizing the Head Start Program," noted Murtha.

For over 40 years, Head Start and Early Head Start have provided disadvantaged children with the resources and skills that they need to succeed in school as well as in life. Head Start provides our children with a strong educational curriculum that has been shown to narrow the achievement gap in reading and writing skills. Head Start also offers health and nutrition services to children, like free and reduced school meals, as well as education programs to parents.

"Ensuring that our children have access to quality early education is a priority," said Murtha. "This reauthorization improves classroom quality and strengthens the focus on preparing our children for the next step in their education."

The Head Start program works well, but the Democratic Congress wants it to work better. The House and Senate conference agreement:

- * Improves teacher qualifications by requiring more Head Start teachers have bachelor's degrees in early childhood development. It also provides new funding to improve teacher salaries, support professional development, and ensures that classroom staff members receive better training to meet the needs of children with disabilities.

- * Provides greater flexibility to server children whose family income is just above the federal poverty line, while ensuring that serving the neediest children remain the program's top priority.

- * Ensures that every Head Start center operates at the highest level by introducing a new system of identifying low-quality programs and requiring them to recompute for their grant.

- * Increases coordination with state pre-kindergarten programs so that resources and planning efforts are shared and efficiencies are gained to better serve families in the community.

- * Places greater emphasis on early identification of child and family mental health needs, and on directing families to

appropriate services.

The House passed the conference report 381-36. The Senate is expected to take up the conference report soon, after which it will be presented to the President for his signature.