

# IN MY OPINION

Caroline Porter

## What does Headstart really want?

I don't know who is serving on the local Headstart board or who is their attorney, so I enter this opinion with no personal prejudice. However, after reading and hearing news articles for two years about the demands of the Headstart organization of Knox county, with regard to the new county jail next door, I have one question of the Headstart board.

Are you nuts?

The demands have been so unreasonable and persistent that one wonders what they really want. A new building? Parking places? Of course I've been suspicious of our local Headstart organization ever since they fired Lyle Johnson, the Headstart coordinator for many years, and accused him of all sorts of egregious situations. At the same time, Johnson has been a member of the national board of Headstart for ten years and travels the country providing consultation and training for local Headstart organizations. Kind of makes you wonder.

One of my reactions to the threatening and ill-timed lawsuit just filed by Headstart, is that it might not be such a bad idea for young children to see prisoners transported in and out. Maybe one of the lessons of the day could be about what would happen if one broke the law. I can't imagine any child who would hope to ever sport an orange prison suit and handcuffs, in some cases, leg irons. It would be the same as those guilty of DUI's making public service speeches about how stupid and dangerous they have been. Nothing like visual aids, I say.

At the very least, the only thing the county should do is put up a wooden fence to shield the sight of prisoners from the children. And since children are small - the fence doesn't have to be too high. One person called the Headstart demands "extortion," and someone replied, "Yeah, but most extortions are directed at people with money." And that sure ain't Knox County.

Another feature of this protracted mess is that none of the discussions have been

in public. Knox County has always been in agreement with public discussions, but the Headstart board and director have not. Why not? Both entities are government bodies - Headstart is a federal program, described in the telephone book under "Human Services," as H.O.P.E. (Headstart), "provides a comprehensive, inter-disciplinary program to foster social, emotional, physical and intellectual development of children, ages 3-5, and their families."

One of the main issues of the conflict is that Headstart began to label itself a "school" because a law says that a jail can't be within 200 feet of a school. Headstart's own description of its function indicates it is far more comprehensive than "classes" and makes no mention of being a preschool. In fact, Headstart's former location at the old Harrington Home was across from our current jail, where occasionally prisoners would make charming remarks to passers by from the barred windows. The new jail has no such access to prisoners and has one way glass in the windows. There is no prison "yard" at the county jail, where inmates are wandering around outside. Sightings of the prisoners will be much less compared to past years when they have walked from the current jail over to the courthouse, sometimes in groups of four or five shackled together.

I do believe that Knox County has done everything possible to communicate in good faith with the director and board of Headstart. Frankly, for Headstart to sign a 20 year lease next door to county property as the issue of the new jail was being considered, doesn't indicate much foresight. As the jail is just being completed, at this point the community is rightfully beginning to question the motives of our local Headstart organization.

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