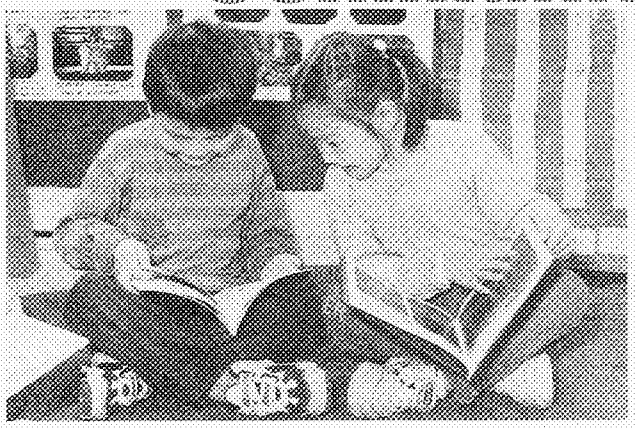
Helping Communities to Advocate for their Rights



Located in Chinatown, the Chinese Church Head Start is the only bilingual and bicultural Head Start program for Asian children in Boston. Most of the children enrolled in the program are immigrants or children of recent immigrants and all are from low-income families. When their Head Start was about to be relocated to another area of the city and merged with another mainstream Head Start program, the parents approached the Chinese Progressive Association who called GBLS for help. Resources allocated to expand Chinatown's program had been shifted to support another poorly enrolled Head Start program in the city and the parents felt frustrated and slighted by the responses they were receiving from the administrators in the Boston Head Start Program. The administration was not implementing a fundamental policy goal of the national Head Start Program in which parents are involved in making policy and educational decisions for their children, giving both children and parents a "head start" with their lives despite their economic disadvantage.

After reviewing the purpose and principles of the federal Head Start program and the federal regulations, AOP attorneys met with the parents to discuss their legal rights. Armed with this information, the parents gained access to and reviewed the financial, educational, policy and vocational training information of the program. The staff at the Chinese Progressive Association held numerous meetings with the parents and the teachers to set priorities and develop strategies, and undertook an aggressive press campaign in the community. When the parents began negotiations with the administrators at Head Start, AOP attorneys again met with them to explain the particulars of the laws relating to the Head Start Program and helped them to develop a negotiation strategy.

After eight months of negotiations and community pressure, the parents gained several important rights. First, to determine who would be hired as the new program director and who would fill other positions in the program. In addition, the parents implemented a new set of by-laws delineating their authority and establishing accountability to them from the administration of the local Head Start. Through this process of negotiations the Chinese Church Head Start parents asserted their strength and viability to the local Head Start officials, despite their status as immigrants and non-English speakers. The Asian Outreach Program played an advisory, yet crucial role throughout this process. By providing legal advice, the AOP helped the Head Start parents to fully exercise their rights as envisioned in the law and to gain an important sense of empowerment in their community.