



Head Start – A Blueprint for Action for the First Year of the New Administration

INTRODUCTION

On December 12, 2007, President Bush signed the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007* (Public Law 110-134). The goal of the 2007 Reauthorization was to build on Head Start's history as a premier early education program and ensure that a new generation of disadvantaged children continues to receive Head Start comprehensive developmental and early learning services.

The need for Head Start services has never been more urgent. Today one in five children under the age of 6, nearly five million children, lives in a poor family.¹ Between 2000 and 2007, the number of poor children under the age of 6 increased by 24%.² The current economic downturn is likely to cause significant increases in these numbers and underscores the need to restore funding for discretionary appropriated programs that has significantly eroded over the last eight years.

As the incoming Administration prepares to take office, members of the Head Start community have created this blueprint for action which identifies three critical priorities for Head Start and Early Head Start³ within the first days of the new administration and makes additional recommendations regarding a long-term policy agenda to ensure Head Start's continued success in the 21st century.

REGULATIONS

THE OFFICE OF HEAD START SHOULD ESTABLISH A PROCESS OF SUBSTANTIVE DISCUSSIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS WITH THE HEAD START COMMUNITY PRIOR TO ISSUING MODIFICATIONS TO THE PERFORMANCE STANDARDS AS REQUIRED BY THE HEAD START ACT.

In a September 2008 survey⁴, members of the Head Start community were asked to identify the most important priorities for the Office of Head Start (OHS) in a new administration. The number one priority identified by 70% of the Head Start community was to ensure an effective process for crafting changes in policy and regulation in response to reauthorization.

Head Start's rigorous and research-based performance standards define the high quality experiences that Head Start programs provide to prenatal mothers and low-income children from birth to five and their families. "For these children, improved learning and cognitive development require extremely high-quality services that follow the comprehensive model laid

¹ Chau, M. & Douglas-Hall, A. (2008). *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children Birth to Age 6*. New York, NY: National Center for Children in Poverty, Columbia University, Mailman School of Public Health. Retrieved on 10/31/08, from <http://www.nccp.org/>

² Chau & Douglas-Hall. (2008). *Basic Facts about Low-Income Children Birth to Age 6*.

³ Herein the term Head Start is used to refer to Head Start and Early Head Start programs

⁴ A survey conducted by state and regional Head Start Associations in September 2008



out in the Head Start performance standards.”⁵ As noted in the report from the May 22, 2007 National Summit on America’s Children, experts have long recognized that “Child care and early education programs that do not meet performance measures like those incorporated in Head Start, Early Head Start or the NAEYC accreditation standards have been shown to have limited if any impact on children.”⁶

The Head Start community urges the Administration to appoint an Assistant Secretary for Children and Families within the Federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) who will implement a transparent and inclusive process in developing revisions to the current standards to meet the new legislative mandates in the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007*.

In 1996 Helen Taylor, the Associate Commissioner of the Head Start Bureau, oversaw the first comprehensive revision to the performance standards in twenty years. In addition to incorporating recommendations from two national Advisory Committees, the Bureau solicited feedback from approximately 2,000 individuals representing a cross-section of staff, experts, parents, educators, and representatives of federal agencies. It also reviewed nearly 15,000 comments after the revised Program Performance Standards were published as a Notice of Proposed Rulemaking and made numerous modifications to the standards on the basis of the feedback that was received. As OHS prepares to issue new revisions to the program standards, it should replicate the successful process that was implemented by Ms. Taylor over a decade ago.

The incoming administration should ensure that it installs individuals in leadership positions within the Administration for Children and Families and the Office of Head Start who will ensure that Head Start’s contribution to children’s school readiness will be a centerpiece of the administration’s early education agenda.

In 2005 testimony to the Subcommittee on Children and Families of the Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions, one expert commented that “it is just as important to a successful federal oversight strategy to make sure strong programs continue to succeed as it is to make sure failing programs are replaced.”⁷ The Head Start community expects the Director of OHS to “provide the clear, strong leadership Head Start needs to rise to the challenges” created by reauthorization, new advances in the science of early learning, and eight years of stagnant funding. Sixty-one percent of respondents to the Head Start survey cited the need for OHS to exercise a leadership role that will lead to “rebuilding pride in the Head Start program.” Respondents indicated a need for improved communication and a level of “reasonableness” and responsiveness in dealings between OHS and the field that would permit the use of “advisors to

⁵ Golden, Olivia. **Testimony on Head Start: Ensuring Dollars Benefit the Children.** Testimony before the Subcommittee on Children and Families. Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. April 5, 2005.

⁶ U.S. House. National Summit on America’s Children. *Pathways from Brain Research to Policy: Highlights from the National Summit on America’s Children.* May 22, 2007. March 1, 2008. Page 11.

⁷ Golden, Olivia. **Testimony on Head Start: Ensuring Dollars Benefit the Children.** Testimony before the Sub-Committee on Children and Families, Senate Committee on Health, Education, Labor and Pensions. April 5, 2005.



the policy makers that have worked in the field and understand the impact that decisions make at the grantee level.”

The following comment highlights the importance of allowing OHS to develop policies that are genuinely focused on the needs of low-income children and their families: “OHS should do a systematic review of the results of the needs assessments conducted by the Collaboration Offices and should use this data to develop new initiatives; over the last 8 years it seems that new initiatives are influenced more by ideology than the needs of Head Start children and families or the challenges that programs face in trying to meet federal mandates with limited resources.”

Additional Recommendations

Central vs. Regional Decision-Making: In 2005 and 2008 the United States Government Accountability Office (GAO) issued two reports at the request of Congress that were undertaken to assess the ability of the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Federal Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), to provide effective oversight of Head Start agencies. Among their findings was the need for ACF to develop a more comprehensive and strategic risk assessment process to identify programs that do not meet Head Start Performance Standards and to implement a system to ensure that programs successfully remediate issues in a timely manner once they have been identified. Additionally ACF was charged with ensuring the professionalism of its monitoring system, and holding programs across the country to a consistent interpretation of Head Start standards across regions. In an effort to accomplish these objectives, OHS implemented a new risk assessment process, began to utilize federal staff from regional offices throughout the country on triennial reviews, and centralized communication and decision-making in Washington. While the GAO concluded that ACF has made progress since its initial report, it should be noted that federal staff in regional offices has fewer opportunities to visit local programs and acquire first-hand knowledge of issues in the field; communication tends to flow too much from the top down; and issues that could be addressed in a timely manner by regional Head Start offices are often mired in excessive delay waiting for a response from central office. Accordingly, the issues of decision-making and improved communication should be addressed once a new OHS Director is appointed.

Training & Technical Assistance (T&TA): Over the last five years there has been considerable variability in the field’s satisfaction with T & TA services. Concerns have included a lack of appropriate content expertise and limited knowledge of Head Start operations. While OHS is the client purchasing T&TA services for Head Start agencies, the consumer – Head Start agency staff – should be given an opportunity to evaluate the quality of the services that are being delivered so that OHS is assured that its dollars are well spent and the field receives consistently high quality T&TA. OHS should implement a formal evaluation of T&TA services on an annual basis before making a decision to extend existing contracts, and if the majority of agencies in a state or consortium express dissatisfaction with the quality of T&TA services being delivered, OHS should explore other service delivery options that include replacing the vendor.

OHS should strengthen its focus on professional development through the creation of a professional development division dedicated to identifying promising practices within the field. In addition it should reestablish Head Start’s role as a national laboratory for services to young children and families through an increased emphasis on promoting evidence-based research that



investigates and documents the impact of Head Start's early learning, comprehensive and family support services on improved child and family outcomes.

FUNDING

PROVIDE \$3.3B IN FY 2010 FUNDING TO ENABLE HEAD START PROGRAMS TO IMPLEMENT THE GOALS OF THE REAUTHORIZATION LEGISLATION INCLUDING ENHANCED DEGREE REQUIREMENTS FOR THE HEAD START WORKFORCE.

The Head Start community applauds the Obama–Biden plan to provide an increase in Head Start funding, quadruple funding for Early Head Start, and provide new investments for quality improvements in both programs.

Numerous studies have documented that poorly-focused, modestly funded programs do not significantly enhance the well-being and school readiness of young at-risk children.⁸ Head Start's early learning and comprehensive services combined with a two-generational, family support approach is a proven but costly model due to the intensity and high quality of the services provided; however, it has been well documented that investments in Head Start result in considerable savings for society that underscore the cost effectiveness of Head Start services and its early identification, prevention and promotion efforts.⁹

The *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007* called for increases in the authorized funding level for Head Start of \$7.3 billion in fiscal year 2008, \$7.6 billion in fiscal year 2009, and \$7.9 billion in fiscal year 2010, reflecting broad bipartisan support to provide greater resources for Head Start to implement the many quality improvements contained within the Act. Instead, the actual funding appropriated for Head Start in the *2008 Omnibus Appropriation Bill* resulted in a cut of \$10.6 million.

According to the National Head Start Association, Head Start and Early Head Start programs have experienced a 13 percent real cut in federal funding (inflation-adjusted) between Fiscal Years 2002 and 2008.¹⁰ Insufficient federal support has occurred at the same time that there has been an explosion in real costs to programs from increases in food, fuel, transportation, health insurance, and other operating expenses. Head Start programs have had no choice other than to reduce their services, which undermines Head Start's commitment to quality and the goals of the reauthorization legislation which must be implemented even if funding is not available. Programs are not able to provide adequate compensation to recruit and retain credentialed early educators despite the new mandates to increase the number of degreed staff working in Head Start programs. In 2008 the average Head Start teacher with a Bachelor's degree earned less than \$29,000 a year¹¹, almost half of what some educators are able to earn in a public school

⁸ Shonkoff, J. & Phillips, D. (Eds). (2000). *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development*. National Academy Press Burr, J. & Grunewald, R. (2006). *Lessons Learned: A Review of Early Childhood Development Studies*.

⁹ National Head Start Association. *Benefits of Head Start (HS) and Early Head Start (EHS) Programs*. Retrieved on 8/2/08, from <http://www.nhsa.org/download/research/REDFactSheets1.pdf>

¹⁰ National Head Start Association. B. Allen. *Chart TO CLOSE 13 Percent Real Cut in Funding Fys 2002-2008 BLS Bureau of Labor Statistics October 2008*, accessed on 10/20/08.

¹¹ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. *Head Start Program Information Report for the 2007-2008 Program Year National Level Summary*. November 3, 2008.



setting. Respondents to the September survey as well as an earlier survey conducted in 2008 by the National Head Start Association have repeatedly documented that programs have had to make reductions in staff and cut a variety of services including transportation. Enrollment is also now being effected due to the funding shortfall of the last eight years.

As it begins to implement its *Plan for Lifelong Success through Education* the Obama-Biden Administration should prioritize funding for Head Start by providing:

- ✓ **New Head Start funding of \$1.3B in an Economic Stimulus bill enacted within the first 100 days of the new Administration;**
- ✓ **A FY 2009 increase of \$832 million for Head Start over FY 2008 Head Start funding; and**
- ✓ **An investment of \$3.3B for Head Start in FY 2010, followed by subsequent appropriation targets that ensure that annual funding for Head Start triggers the quality improvements and expansion opportunities in the Act.**

Funds in the Economic Stimulus bill will be used to assist teachers to complete degree requirements, and allow programs to implement new facility projects including conversion of physical plants to serve infants and toddlers as well as address neglected facility needs, including deferred maintenance and upgrades to older inefficient buildings.

ALIGNMENT

REQUIRE STATES TO ENGAGE AND FULLY UTILIZE HEAD START IN ORDER TO ACCESS NEW FEDERAL FUNDS AS PART OF ANY NEW FEDERAL EARLY LEARNING INITIATIVES.

The Obama-Biden “Zero to Five Plan” calls for the creation of Early Learning Challenge Grants to promote state Zero to Five efforts and help states move toward voluntary, universal pre-school.¹² Additional new federal early childhood initiatives have been proposed. Federal legislation such as the *Providing Resources Early for Kids Act of 2008* (“PRE-K Act”) and the *Education Begins at Home Act of 2008* have been introduced and if enacted, would also result in grants to states for these initiatives.

What is missing from our national dialogue about how to assist young children to become successful lifelong learners is a formal discussion for how to accomplish the goal of coordinating with and fully leveraging Head Start within the newly proposed federal early learning initiatives. Including a provision that requires “no-supplant” language is a beginning, but is not a substitute for a real policy agenda that delineates a strategy to build upon lessons learned from Head Start and fully leverage its expertise. Absent such discussion, a patchwork response that varies from state to state and promotes competition for limited resources will prevail. This is especially troubling since Head Start has a proven track record, as well as national standards that have been recognized for their exceptional quality which should and often do serve as a model for proposed new federal early childhood funds.

¹² www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/PreK-12EducationFactSheet.pdf, page 2, accessed on 2/10/2008.



The Head Start community supports President-Elect Obama's Plan for Lifelong Success through Education that calls for the creation of a Presidential Early Learning Council¹³ to increase collaboration and program coordination across federal, state, and local levels. In order to ensure that these efforts are inclusive of Head Start, representative(s) from the Head Start community must be included on the Council. The Council should initiate a national discourse on the policies needed to ensure that states fully engage and leverage Head Start in order to access new federal funds.

Additional Recommendations

In the revised Act, Congress created new requirements for Head Start programs to align with provisions in the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965* and the *McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act*. The legislation also requires programs to establish Memorandums of Understanding with Local Education Agencies (LEAs) to promote alignment with the K-12 education system. Although the Secretary at HHS is directed to consult with the Secretary of Education at the Federal Department of Education (DOE) in implementing the new provisions of the Act, there is no corresponding mandate requiring the Secretary of Education to instruct State Education Agencies (SEAs) to promote partnerships between LEAs and local Head Start programs. The new Administration should work with members of Congress to strengthen and enforce provisions in No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB) that require coordination and MOUs between the Office of Elementary and Secondary Education at DOE and the Office of Head Start within the Administration for Children and Families at HHS.

OHS should create a State Relations division to work with the NGA's Office of Federal Relations and other stakeholders to strengthen collaboration between Head Start and state-based early childhood education and care programs and family support initiatives.

In 1993 HHS issued *Creating a 21st Century Head Start: the Final Report of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion*. The report recommended that "Head Start must not be isolated from other providers; it must take its place as a partner in the community and state."¹⁴ Among the many benefits that are derived from these partnerships when they have been successfully implemented include opportunities to blend and braid Head Start funding with other early education and care subsidies which maximizes Head Start resources and addresses the criticism leveled at Head Start for employing a targeted rather than a universal approach. On a national level however this vision has yet to be realized, and is even more critical given the proliferation of early childhood initiatives at the state level. During the 2008 legislative session, at least 32 states and the District of Columbia introduced more than 150 pieces of preschool legislation. In its 2008 Policy Statement, the Education, Early Childhood and Workforce Committee of the National Governors Association (NGA) recognizes "Head Start as an important federal funding priority... (and) the essential role that Head Start plays in providing comprehensive school readiness services to children and families."¹⁵ We are pleased that the

¹³ www.barackobama.com/pdf/issues/PreK-12EducationFactSheet.pdf, page 2, accessed on 2/10/2008.

¹⁴ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. (1993). *Creating a 21st Century Head Start: the Final Report of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Quality and Expansion*. Page 7. Washington, DC.

¹⁵ National Governors Association. (2008). *Education, Early Childhood and Workforce Committee Home, ECW-04 Policy Position*, Adopted Winter Meeting 1994, reaffirmed Winter Meeting 2008 (formerly Policy HR-8). Retrieved on 7/9/08, from <http://www.nga.org/>



NGA recognizes Head Start's critical role in achieving school readiness, and support the NGA's call "for federal, state, and local officials to work together to create a common vision across all early childhood programs to achieve school readiness for all children"¹⁶. The Head Start Act includes a new provision to accomplish this goal through the creation of a State Advisory Council (SAC) to coordinate early childhood systems at the state level. The Head Start State Collaboration Director is explicitly named as a participant on the SAC in order to make sure that each state has input from all early childhood systems including Head Start to ensure the success of its state-level system building efforts. OHS should actively partner with the NGA to ensure that Head Start Collaboration Directors are included on the SAC.

Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS)

Efforts are currently underway in the majority of states to develop QRIS to ensure accountability and promote the quality of early education and care programs and services. Data compiled by the National Child Care Information Center in January 2008 indicate that forty-five states and communities are currently operating, piloting, exploring or designing QRIS. Head Start State Collaboration Directors should work with other stakeholders within their respective states to create alignment between Head Start standards and the Accreditation standards of the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) in QRIS across the nation.

CONCLUSION

The new Administration should promote Head Start's continued prominence as a premier national early childhood program by:

- Installing leadership at ACF and OHS that will partner with Head Start agencies and Associations to promulgate revisions to the Head Start standards;
- Appropriating the fiscal resources for Head Start to realize the quality improvements in the Act; and
- Requiring states to engage and fully utilize Head Start in order to access new federal funds as part of any new federal early learning initiatives and initiating a national dialogue to align Head Start with other early education and care programs.

¹⁶ National Governors Association. (2008). *Education, Early Childhood and Workforce Committee Home, ECW-04 Policy Position*