

The Needs and Challenges We Face

Our nation faces enormous challenges in education. In 2008, over 4 million children under the age of five are being raised in poverty.

Our urban centers and rural communities are facing unparalleled challenges and as financial inequality increases and the number of children in poverty grows, more and more families are unable to overcome the risk factors that perpetuate multi-generational poverty.

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In the midst of these financial and familial struggles, too often our schools are unable to meet the challenge of preparing children for success in a global economy. More and more children are arriving at school with severe emotional distress and already significantly behind many of their peers.

Head Start plays a vital role in working with the families whose children are behind by providing them the comprehensive services they must have in order to begin school on an equal footing with their middle and upper class peers. These comprehensive services are critical because it is impossible to produce long lasting positive outcomes for children in disadvantaged families by treating the child in isolation. Success is much more likely when the entire family is engaged and empowered to succeed.

The Head Start Ad Hoc Leadership Committee

The Head Start Ad Hoc Leadership Committee comprised of Head Start leaders from states and regions across the nation was convened to examine Head Start's position in the field of early childhood education. More than forty leaders from Head Start programs, the National Head Start Association, state Head Start Associations, Tribal Nations and Migrant and Seasonal programs joined together to engage in an in-depth dialogue about Head Start, Early Head Start and early childhood educational care. Over a span of five months, members of this group met to identify the collective purpose, need and vision for Head Start as a national network of critical and unique local organizations. This document is the result of the work of that group.



Head Start is a Federal Program

Head Start is a program of the United States Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, that promotes school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children and families.

Head Start



HEAD START IS OUR NATION'S PREMIER PROVIDER OF DEVELOPMENTAL AND EDUCATIONAL SERVICES TO PREGNANT MOMS, BABIES, TODDLERS, PRESCHOOLERS AND THEIR FAMILIES, WHO LIVE IN POVERTY AND STRUGGLE TO MEET THE BASIC NEEDS OF LIFE.



OUR VISION FOR THE FUTURE

Head Start will continue to play a key role in the transformation of education in America.

We will bring our long record of success in working with the most challenging young children and their families to our partnerships with those in education and family services.

Together we will deliver on our nation's promise that all of our young children have the opportunity to succeed.





Why is Head Start Vital to Our Future?

Head Start is vital because no other provider of early childhood services seeks out the neediest families and children in America with the depth, breadth and scope of services and level of passionate commitment equal to Head Start. We are committed to the success of these families. In this role we are a valuable partner to those in our communities serving other young children.

Head Start is vital because it is rooted in virtually every community in the country, and reflects the cultural and social fabric of each community. As the only national program for young children, there are Head Start programs and centers in every state, in U.S. territories and on American Indian reservations. Head Start services are also provided to children of migrant and seasonal workers across the nation, and in each of these diverse communities programs and services are tailored to meet the specific needs of the children and families living there. Head Start is distinguished from other preschool programs because of its comprehensive services and emphasis on parental involvement. In fact, the hallmarks of Head Start are its comprehensive services and its investment in parents, not only as partners in their child's education, but also as volunteers, paid staff and participants in the governance of local programs.

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Head Start Works with Families

Parents are their child's first and most influential teachers and their home is the primary learning center. Head Start's success is based upon the creation of compassionate partnerships between Head Start staff and parents on behalf of their children. Whether in center based settings, home based settings or a home visiting relationship, Head Start works with families to remove barriers to their success and to deepen their ability to support their children.

We believe that the continuing, meaningful involvement of parents in the education of their children as they leave Head Start will be an important part of the solution for improving public education. We are committed to partnering with the schools to make this happen.

Early childhood experiences determine how well a child performs in school and beyond. All young children deserve a quality early educational experience and Head Start recognizes and embraces our role as the major and most successful provider of educational services to the neediest of those children. We commit to continuing to ensure that Head Start contributes to making the American dream possible.

Head Start is our National Laboratory for Early Childhood Success

Nearly half a century ago, Head Start was created by the federal government as our nation's laboratory to foster best practices for child development and related services for young children and their families.

From the beginning we have focused on the well being of the whole child through the provision of in-depth nutrition, health, education and family development services for children. Recognizing that these are clear foundations for learning, we will continue to reach and serve families with this comprehensive approach.

Head Start performance standards define quality consistently across classrooms, programs and states to ensure the highest quality services for each child, and they also ensure that each child is served within the context of that child's individual needs. These standards represent the *highest expectations* for services to young children in our nation, and we are prepared to continue to meet and exceed them.

Head Start will continue to take a leading role in developing best practice models for early education and family services and achieving measurable outcomes for young children and families. Within its broad menu of services and supports, Head Start provides quality instruction and education, including early literacy and mathematics, to prepare children for school and assist their successful transition to kindergarten.

Head Start Engages in Meaningful Partnerships

Head Start engages in many partnerships throughout the communities we serve. We will continue to play a key role in each of our communities, connecting and partnering with local schools, local providers of child care, state and local preschool initiatives and other community service providers for families on behalf of those most in need. We will continue to work in concert and share community resources with our partners to ensure that all children receive the services they need on their road to success, and that all parents have opportunities to grow in support of their children. Because of these partnerships, Head Start will continue as the nexus of support for our families – those who have the least and need the most.

WE WILL CONTINUE TO PLAY A KEY ROLE IN EACH OF OUR COMMUNITIES, CONNECTING & PARTNERING WITH LOCAL SCHOOLS, LOCAL PROVIDERS OF CHILD CARE, STATE & LOCAL PRESCHOOL INITIATIVES

Head Start Practices Continuous Improvement

Head Start providers are constantly engaged in continuous quality improvement, constantly seeking more effective approaches to meeting the needs of the children and families we serve. Head Start's program performance standards provide a foundation for high quality and in-depth services for these families.

Using evidence based methods and field-driven research, we will continue to improve our standards and the quality of our programs to fit current needs and challenges and to achieve the outcomes needed for our children and families. Head Start will work continuously to meet the changing needs of America's poorest families, while always maintaining a focus on the core values that drive our services.

