

DRAFT

A Statement from the Head Start Ad Hoc Leadership Committee

*Convened by Barbara Haxton, Ron Herndon, Vanessa Rich, and Gina Ruther
April 2nd and 3rd, 2008 – Chicago, IL*

THE HEAD START AD HOC LEADERSHIP COMMITTEE

The ad hoc leadership committee was convened in order to solidify Head Start's position in the ever-evolving field of early childhood education, defining those characteristics that make Head Start what it is today and envisioning a plan to best meet the changing needs of families and children. Representatives from Head Start regions throughout the country came together in Chicago to address these questions and release a statement of need and opportunity to the broader Head Start community. The Ad Hoc Leadership Committee meeting was a first step in a larger effort to clearly define the collective purpose, need, and vision for Head Start as a national network of local organizations.

IN ATTENDANCE

Ben Allen, *Region III* – Janet Anderson, *Region X* – Mary Basket, *Region VII* – Barbara Bowman, *Region V* – Mary Burns, *Region V*
Mary Ellen Caron, *Region V* – Karen Carradine, *Region V* – Bill Castellanos, *Region XI* – Trevaughn Cheek, *Region IV* Gayle Cunningham,
Region IV – George Davis, *Region V* Veronica Land-Davis, *Region III* – Lynda Dickinson, *Region I* – Alyce Dillon, *Region V* Laurie Morrison
Frichtl, *Region V* – Madeline Hanieh, *Region V* – Barbara Haxton, *Region V* – Ron Herndon, *Region X* – Eboni Howard, *Region V*
Blair Hyatt, *Region III* – Gayle Kelly, *Region V* – John Lovelace, *Region IV* – Sulura Mabry, *Region V* – Maureen Meehan, *Region V*
Tim Nolan, *Region V* – Cindy Schaefer-Padilla, *Region V* – Anthony Raden, *Region V* – Vanessa Rich, *Region V* Joel Ryan, *Region X*
Yvette Sanchez, *Region XII* – Janis Santos, *Region I* – Unita Sims, *Region V* – George Smith, *Region V* – Nancy Topping-Tailby, *Region I*
Wassy Tesfa, *Region IX* – Youlanda Upkins, *Region IV* – Viola Woods, *Region VIII* – Caroline Yellow Robe, *Region VIII*

THE CURRENT CONTEXT OF EARLY CHILDHOOD

For its first 30 years, Head Start was the primary publicly-funded early childhood program in the country. However, as more women entered the workforce and research on early brain development was distributed more broadly, a larger number of parents began to seek access to early education for their children. Recognizing an expanded need for early childhood programs, Georgia Governor Zell Miller instituted the first state-funded universal preschool program in the country in 1995.

Since that time, 38 states have adopted broad preschool programs for four-year-olds, spending more than \$3.7 billion in FY07, and reaching over 1,000,000 children. In contrast, Head Start and Early Head Start combined reached just over 900,000 children¹. While the momentum seems to be shifting from publicly-funded services for the most disadvantaged children to publicly-funded services for *all* children, the reality is that most Head Start programs, limited by funding, are able to enroll less than half of eligible children in their area. While the push towards extending early learning experiences to all children is vital and laudable, it is imperative that we do not lose sight of those children that, in addition to literacy and mathematics, need nutritional meals, home visitations, dental care, and the other social services Head Start is able to provide.

Throughout its 40 year history, Head Start has demonstrated an ability to adapt to the changing needs of children and families, strengthening, for example, the zero-to-three movement with the founding of Early Head Start in 1995. Head Start remains as adaptable today and aims to be a national leader in extending pre-kindergarten

¹ National Institute for Early Education Research. *The State of Preschool 2007*.

experiences to all of America's children, while ensuring that America's most needy children continue to receive an opportunity for an equal start.

A PROGRAM FOR AMERICA'S POOREST COMMUNITIES

Since it was launched in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start has served more than 24 million² of America's poorest children from birth to age five. As an early education program, Head Start has prepared children for success in their academic endeavors. As a social service, Head Start has helped children escape from the mire of poverty, empowering them for success in all of their endeavors.

FUNDAMENTAL CHARACTERISTICS OF HEAD START

At its core, Head Start is an early education and social service program for children age three to five in families living at or below the federal poverty line. Additionally, Early Head Start provides educational and social services to children and their parents from birth to age three. Throughout its many components, Head Start is relationship-focused and celebrates cultural diversity.

- (1) Head Start **responds to the needs of the individual community** within the context of that community's assets and challenges, providing individuals, families, and institutions within that community with the resources they need to thrive.
- (2) Head Start is a **wise social investment** with a potential rate of return of 12 cents for every dollar invested by helping to produce a more highly-skilled workforce, reducing incidence of future crime, improving the adverse environments in which many poor children are raised, and decreasing the learning gap at an early age.³
- (3) Head Start impacts multiple generations within a family, generating **meaningful parent involvement** that improves programmatic decisions, strengthens family relationships, and empowers parents to take ownership of their families' success.
- (4) Within its broad menu of services and supports for low-income families and children, Head Start provides **quality instruction and education**, including early literacy and mathematics, to prepare children for school and assist their transition to kindergarten.
- (5) Head Start supports the social, emotional, and developmental needs of children and families with **comprehensive programming and services** provided in the classroom, in the home, and in the community. These services, which families with more economic options may take for granted, include nutritional meals, parenting classes, mental health services, dental services, and literacy and English classes for parents.
- (6) Head Start is a passionate, **value-driven program** that aims to reduce the negative impact of poverty on children, families, and communities by nurturing children and the environments in which they live, bringing funding into low-income communities, and supporting locally-owned small businesses through service and vending contracts.
- (7) Head Start, as an organized network of families, communities, and early childhood practitioners, serves as an **agent for change** in the early childhood field and America's communities, advocating on behalf of the nation's poorest families and

² Office of Head Start. Head Start Program Fact Sheet for FY07.

³ Heckman, James and Masterov, Dimitry. "The Productivity Argument for Investing in Young Children." University of Chicago, 2005.

- instilling in those families the skills needed to successfully advocate for themselves.
- (8) Head Start **performance standards** define quality across classrooms, agencies and states, ensuring that, while the current national momentum is toward serving the *maximum number* of children, Head Start treats each child within their individual context, providing social services on an as-needed basis to generate *high quality outcomes* in communities throughout the nation.
 - (9) Head Start, as a community-based institution, reflects the cultural and social fabric of the communities in which programs are located by engaging a **culturally relevant, competent staff** dedicated to continuous professional development and lifelong learning.
 - (10) Head Start is founded on a **federal-to-local funding** stream that reduces the cost of administration, broadens its infrastructure, and demonstrates profound trust in the capacity of individual programs to provide instruction and social services that fit the needs of the communities in which they are located.

THE CHALLENGES FACED BY HEAD START

Like any social service, Head Start programs throughout the nation struggle to secure the funding needed to provide as many low-income children as possible with the extensive services they need to begin school on equal footing with their middle- and upper-class peers. Due to the disadvantaged population that Head Start programs serve, it is impossible to produce long-lasting positive outcomes by treating the child in isolation. As with any early education program, Head Start is not an inoculation, and success is more likely when the entire family is engaged and empowered to succeed. As a result of budget constraints and the high cost of social service components, many programs are unable to offer competitive salaries or benefits that facilitate low staff turnover. Despite these challenges, Head Start has closed the achievement gap for millions of our nation's poorest children and helped them and their families get a better start by remaining flexible, advocating for families, and building vital community relationships.

THE CHANGING LANDSCAPE OF AMERICAN POVERTY

Since 1965, the proportion of families living in poverty has not much changed, dropping by a mere 1 percentage point from 15.6% of families living in poverty in 1965 to 14.6% in 2006⁴. However, the seeming stability in the percentage of poor families betrays fluctuations throughout the last four decades in the types of families living in poverty and, thus, the types of families that are served by Head Start.

Whereas when Head Start was launched in 1965 many of the children in the program came from traditional, two-parent families, today Head Start engages a large proportion of single mothers. Nationally, the proportion of families with children that are headed by single mothers increased from about 6% in 1970 to nearly 11% in 2000⁵. In addition, the growth in Latino immigration over the last few decades has changed the cultural composition of many of our programs. Between 1980 and 2000, the Latino population grew by 20.7 million, to 12.5% of the total population.⁶

As the cost of living continues to rise with the gap between rich and poor, more families find themselves in need of greater assistance while fewer economically comfortable families are aware of their profound needs. Head Start recognizes that in order to overcome these hardships, we must continue to adapt to the modern context of poverty.

⁴ U.S. Census Bureau, Historical Poverty Tables – Families. www.census.gov/hhes/www/poverty/histpov/famindex.html.

⁵ U.S. Census Bureau. *Demographic Trends in the 21st Century*.

⁶ Ibid. Note: the Census Bureau did not include a separate question on Hispanic origin until 1980.

A VISION FOR SUCCESS OVER THE NEXT FIVE YEARS

- (1) Head Start will **evolve to meet the new struggles of America's neediest families** while maintaining a focus on Head Start's core values: focusing on parents as the primary educators and the home as the primary learning place; providing an opportunity for all children by nurturing them according to their individual needs; employing an ethical and principled staff possessing integrity, creativity, sound judgment, and respect for all; and providing families with opportunities for meaningful participation and self-determination.
- (2) While remaining child-focused, Head Start will **make available more services that modern poor families need** to thrive in today's economy, including more culturally relevant programming, more English-as-a-second language courses, increased engagement of fathers, more frequent home visits, asset-building instruction for parents, and environmentally conscious programming.
- (3) Head Start will **expand upon efforts to advocate for the needs of poor families and communities**. In order to reduce the stigma of poverty, Head Start will increase the public policy efforts of leadership and staff, as well as train parents and families to self-advocate for their needs.
- (4) Head Start will take **a larger role in developing best practice models for early education** and social services, enhancing the quality of outcomes for children and families. In the past, Head Start has served as a national laboratory for developing curricula and services for low-income children. In the future, Head Start will explore how to better support the transition into elementary school and identify better ways to impact *all* children in their homes and communities.
- (5) Head Start will **position programs as the premier centers for early childhood programming and education in their communities** by aligning more closely with schools and businesses, serving as key advocates for the needs of all families and children, and leveraging technology to better understand local needs.
- (6) Head Start will **stake a key role in extending preschool and relevant social services to all children** by braiding funds and adding tuition-based slots. By creating mixed economic environments within the classroom, Head Start will marshal new resources to become a vital resource for *all* families.
- (7) While having success in marketing the program to low-income families, Head Start will **better communicate the dynamic investment that is Head Start to the public at-large**. By generating better outcome data and enhancing that data with qualitative evidence from past families and children, Head Start will better speak to policymakers and families of all economic means.
- (8) Head Start will continue to **enhance the quality of our workforce** by improving compensation and benefits and providing more opportunities for skill-building and professional development.
- (9) Using evidence-based methods and field-driven research, Head Start will continue to **improve our quality assurance standards** in order to fit the current challenges and the real outcomes needed for our children and families.
- (10) Head Start will be **recognized as the leading national model for early education** not only for the poorest children, but for *all* children throughout the nation. Head Start staff will share their expertise and experiences with other preschool models and galvanize a national push towards more comprehensive service delivery based on children's and families' needs.