

Parental engagement is a significant topic in educational policy circles because federal policymakers and stakeholders have proposed to strengthen parental engagement in bills to reauthorize the *Elementary and Secondary Education Act*, otherwise known as the No Child Left Behind Act. Head Start policymakers and practitioners can credibly contribute Head Start's extensive parental engagement knowledge to the ESEA reauthorization debate because Head Start programs have been effective and innovative practitioners of parental engagement.

In this *Dialog Brief*, Dr. Christopher Henrich examines parental engagement in Head Start programs. First, Henrich highlights substantial research demonstrating the educational benefits and high level of parental engagement in Head Start programs. Second, he describes the historical development of laws and regulations that embedded parental engagement in Head Start institutions, policies and practices. Third, he explores how Head Start's role as an innovator has spawned a number of creative ways to engage parents. Fourth, he presents a number of engagement barriers/challenges for Head Start programs. Finally, Henrich looks at recent efforts to enhance parental engagement in Head Start programs and makes recommendations for policymakers and practitioners to ensure that Head Start continues to be a national leader on parental engagement.

Head Start's Perennial Leadership on Parental Engagement

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Research on Parental Engagement in Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start programs have taken a two-generation approach to early childhood education, with a dual focus on children and their parents. Research on the effects of parents' involvement in their children's education on student achievement reflects the wisdom of this approach. Young children whose parents are more involved in their education and engaged in their learning enter school more ready to learn (Henrich & Blackman-Jones, 2006). For example, substantial research indicates that parental participation in Head Start is positively associated with children's cognitive

and social-emotional development (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008).

In fact, much of what is known about the effects of parent engagement in pre-school comes from studies of large and small Head Start samples because the program has long been at the vanguard of the two-generation approach to promoting school readiness. Data also show that Head Start parental participation is very high. According to the nationally-representative Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES; Zill et al., 2006), about three-quarters of Head Start parents reported attending parent-staff conferences and observing their child's class; more than two-thirds of parents received a home visitor and helped their child prepare for special events; more than half reported

continued on page 2

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volunteering in the classroom; more than 40% of parents helped with field trips, attended workshops, and attended social events; and more than one fifth of parents participated in Head Start Policy Councils. Head Start parents also reported engaging in a number of educational activities at home and in the community, such as reading to their children and taking them to the library. Of a possible 14 home and community activities asked of parents in FACES, parents reported engaging in over half of them (Zill et al., 2006).

National data from Head Start Program Information Reports also show that Head Start parents are highly engaged. During the 2009-2010 program year, 878,866 of the 1,332,821 total volunteers (66%) in Head Start and Early Head Start programs were current or former Head Start parents (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). Meanwhile, 73% of Head Start families accessed support services offered by the program. The top two most frequently accessed services were parenting education and health education, 46% and 45% of families respectively (Hoffman, 2010).

Analyses of smaller samples of Head Start parents from New York, North Carolina and Washington DC have found similarly high levels of parental engagement (Castro, Bryant, Peisner-Feinberg, & Skinner, 2004; Lamb-Parker et al., 1997). Head Start parents also tend to be more engaged than parents in other early childhood education programs for low-income children (Marcon, 1999). Furthermore, Pizzo and Tufankjian (2004) concluded from a review of several longitudinal studies that engagement in Head Start predicts parents' continued involvement in their children's education.

Prior Laws and Regulations Embedding Parental Engagement in Head Start Programs

Much of the educational benefits and high levels of parental engagement in Head Start programs are due to a number of federal laws and regulations implemented since the 1960s. These laws and regulations affected Head Start's development and embedded parental engagement in Head Start institutions, policies and practices, thereby setting Head Start apart from other early childhood programs and most state pre-school policies regarding parental engagement (Henrich & Blackman-Jones, 2006). As a result, Head Start parents are highly engaged in their children's education.

The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964 established Community Action Programs, which were to be administered with the "maximum feasible participation" of the residents served by these programs. Using his discretionary authority under the Act, Sargent Shriver, Director of the Office of Economic Opportunity, created Head Start, consequently local Head Start programs had to operate with the maximum feasible participation of the low-income families served (Harmon, 2004). In other words, parent participation had to be a key component of Head Start. In the early years of Head Start, the phrase "maximum feasible parent participation" was taken to mean a number of things by planners and program stakeholders. Interpretations of parent participation in Head Start ranged from teaching parenting styles at home, to parental participation in program governance, to empowerment of parents for community activism and social change (Valentine & Stark, 1997; Zigler & Muenchow, 1992).

By 1970, the Head Start Policy Manual broadly defined parent participation to take into account these varying perspectives (OCD, 1970). It delineated in verbatim four dimensions of parent participation, including:

1. Participation in the process of making decisions about the nature and operation of the program.
2. Participation in the classroom as paid employees, volunteers or observers.
3. Activities for the parents which they have helped to develop.
4. Working with their children in cooperation with the staff of the center. (Head Start Policy Manual 70.2, Section B2 – The Parents, p. 2)

Elements of these guidelines for engaging parents persist to this day. The current Head Start Program Performance Standards (45 CFR Section 1304.40) broadly define family partnerships as spanning:

- (a) Family goal setting, in which centers provide opportunities for interactions with parents, respect parents' backgrounds, and "engage in a process of collaborative partnership-building with parents to establish mutual trust and to identify family goals, strengths, and necessary services to other supports."
- (b) Assistance in accessing community services and resources, including providing opportunities for employment training and accessing community employment services;
- (c) Provision of services and information to pregnant women with children in the program;

- (d) Involvement of parents in the program by being open to parents to visit and observe, and by providing opportunities for volunteering and working at the program, as well as for participating in policy-making and operations;
- (e) Involvement of parents in child development and parenting education, which includes offering at least two parent-staff conferences per year;
- (f) Parental health, nutrition, and mental health education;
- (g) Parental involvement in community advocacy;
- (h) Assistance of parents with the transition to Head Start from other child care settings and as they transition from Head Start to elementary school; and
- (i) Offering at least two home visits per year in center-based programs at times that are mutually convenient for parents and staff.

The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 and the Head Start Program Performance Standards stipulate that parents must be involved in the governance of their Head Start and Early Head Start program (Section 1304.50). Parents contribute to program governance through their participation in Policy Councils and Policy Committees, the majority of members on each must be Head Start parents. Through their roles on Policy Councils and Policy Committees, Head Start parents have a strong voice in directing how their children's centers are run. They also play leadership roles in reaching out to and engaging other parents in the program. This level of parent involvement in governance is unparalleled among early childhood programs and reflects Head Start's commitment to empowering parents, who are recognized as being children's primary teachers (Zigler & Styfco, 2004)

Head Start's Four and a Half Decades of Innovating Parental Engagement

Edward Zigler has argued that Head Start is "not a program, but an evolving concept (Zigler, 1997, p. 367)." In other words, Head Start has served as a platform from which the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and its predecessor, Administration for Children Youth and Families (ACYF), and ACYF's predecessor, the Office for Child Development (OCD), has launched a number of experimental initiatives to better serve low-income children and their families. Many of these innovative initiatives have served to expand the program's outreach to and engagement of parents, and through its use as a "national laboratory" to explore how government can best serve low-income families, Head Start

has successfully kept pace with the changing needs of its families (Henrich, 2004; Valentine, 1997).

As early as 1968, OCD officials realized that offering services for low-income children and their families beginning at age three or four was often too late to prevent the development of problems, and they launched Parent and Child Centers, which were designed to serve families from birth to Head Start entry (Henrich, 2004). Several Parent and Child Centers – in Birmingham, Houston, and New Orleans – were designated Parent and Child Development Centers to examine more intensively the effects of actively engaging low-income parents of infants and toddlers (Bridgeman, Hilton, Blumenthal, & Andrews, 1977; Richmond, Stipek, & Zigler, 1997).

When Head Start was reauthorized by federal lawmakers in 1994, existing Parent Child Centers were folded into a new, expanded program focused on children from birth to age three: Early Head Start. Early Head Start programs began serving children in 1996 and parent education is one of its key components. Like Head Start, Early Head Start focuses on directly helping parents hone their parenting skills as well as providing family support services (Kamerman & Kahn, 2004). Early Head Start has expanded greatly since its inception and has been subjected to rigorous evaluation. Evaluation results show that engaging parents early works. The Early Head Start Impact Study found that parents in Early Head Start programs engage more in learning activities with their children, use less harsh discipline techniques, and participate in educational and job training opportunities which translate into favorable program effects on employment (Raikes, 2006).

Home visiting is a key component for Head Start and Early Head Start programs to form partnerships with families. For example, about 40% of Early Head Start programs are home based (Hamm & Ewen, 2005). The OCD and its successors have been committed to offering home-based services to low-income parents since the early 1970's. Home Start was a demonstration project begun in 1972 and was designed to deliver Head Start services in the home. Home Start was followed by another demonstration project in 1973, the Child and Family Resource Program, which as part of the Head Start Improvement and Innovation Effort, enrolled low-income families with children up to age eight (DHEW, 1978). Research on these programs demonstrated that Head Start services can successfully be tailored to meet the needs of individual families and be administered in

home settings (Henrich, 2004), leading to increased parent-child interaction in program families (Affholter, Connell, & Nauta, 1983). The Child and Family Resource Program no longer exists, but Head Start continues to offer home-based programs. Key components of home-based programs include weekly home visits with a focus on parent education about child development, group activities for parents and children, and family support to help connect parents with other community resources (Henrich, 2004)

Head Start's success at engaging parents can be attributed in part to its evolving role as an innovator over the years that has launched a number of demonstration projects to experiment in ways to engage parents. These innovative projects, including Early Head Start, have all yielded data on successful strategies to reach and engage low-income families with young children.

Barriers/Challenges to Engaging Parents in Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start programs face systemic, economic, and demographic barriers/challenges to engage parents. The system of federal and state programs serving low-income families has changed substantially since 1965. Due in large part to federal welfare reform through the enactment of the *Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996*, low-income parents today are much more likely to be employed and more likely to receive less government assistance than they were in the past. In 2009, 68% of Head Start families included at least one working parent, and only 15% of Head Start families received welfare in terms of cash assistance (Hoffman, 2010).

Nevertheless, welfare reform has been a double-edged sword. On one hand, it has encouraged low-income parents to be employed, but on the other hand, it has meant that Head Start parents have much less time to be engaged with their children in their Head Start program. Moreover, employment among Head Start parents does not mean that all Head Start families will rise out of poverty though because Head Start parents tend to make low wages (Raver, 2003).

Working Head Start parents at the same time face child care demands beyond what many Head Start programs can meet (Ceglowski & Bunton, 2001). Due to a lack of federal funding to pay for full-day, five days a week services, only about half of the children and their families currently served by Head Start and Early Head Start programs are enrolled in

full-day center-based programs five days a week (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2010). This fact means that working parents struggle to find child care arrangements for the hours when their children are not in Head Start. To compound this problem, few Head Start parents receive child care subsidies, and the majority of Head Start parents who need child care must rely on informal care arrangements (Hamm, 2006). Indeed, Head Start parents report work/school schedules and child-care arrangements to be the most substantial barriers to their involvement (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001; O'Brien, D'Elio, & Vaden-Kiernan, 2002).

Another change in the system of federal and state programs has been the devolution of federal funding to the states. Differences among federal funding streams can pose a challenge to fostering parental engagement in Head Start programs. In a time when many federal programs are block-granted to states, Head Start remains one of the few educational programs administrated directly by the federal government. Head Start programs receive 80% of their funding from the federal government and 20% from their local community. Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, which are described in the next section, have been effective, but partnerships between Head Start and job training programs such as the Jobs Opportunities and Basic Skills (JOBS) program (Horn, 1995) and family literacy programs like Even Start (GAO, 2002) have been criticized for coordination issues. These coordination issues, however, were addressed when Head Start was reauthorized by federal lawmakers in 2007.

The demographics of Head Start parents are also much different today than they were in 1965. In the 1960s, one-parent households and mental health problems were much less commonplace. Four decades later, the majority of Head Start parents are young, unmarried and working either part- or full-time, and the majority of fathers are non-residential (Zill et al., 2006). Head Start parents face a number of mental health challenges due to their stressful life circumstances (Razzino, New, Lewin, & Joseph, 2004). Head Start parents, not surprisingly, report their mental and physical health problems as barriers to their involvement (Lamb-Parker et al., 2001). The current demographic characteristics of Head Start families mean that they are demographically at-risk for low involvement and engagement.

That Head Start is so successful at overcoming these considerable parental engagement barriers/challenges is a

testament to the Head Start planners' foresight in interpreting maximum feasible participation as a call for a two-generational approach to break the cycle of poverty and the subsequent multi-dimensional definition of parent participation articulated in the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Not coincidentally, the federal guidelines for forming family partnerships, such as assistance in accessing community resources and provision of mental health education, aim to help break down the barriers to participation faced by many Head Start parents.

Recent Head Start Efforts to Engage Parents

As the challenges facing low-income families have evolved, so have the services provided by Head Start. To better meet the child care needs of Head Start parents, the Administration for Children and Families provides incentives for Head Start programs to partner with other child care providers. An evaluation of the Head Start – Child Care Partnerships indicates that partnering with Head Start leads child care centers to provide higher quality care and more comprehensive services (Schilder et al., 2005). Thus, such partnerships can help provide Head Start parents convenient, high quality care during times when their children are not enrolled in the program.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs offer job training and education to parents. For example, the Early Head Start Impact Study, an experimental evaluation of Early Head Start programs, found that Early Head Start programs had promising effects on parental education and employment (Raikes, 2006).

The federal government in recent years has emphasized the importance of fathers in their children's development (Rosenberg & Wilcox, 2006). In response to this federal fatherhood initiative, Head Start and Early Head Start have emerged as leaders in both providing services to fathers and conducting research on father involvement. One focus of the Early Head Start evaluation was on engaging fathers, and the study produced much new information about involving of low-income fathers with their young children (Cabera, 2004; Raikes et al., 2002; Raikes, Summers, & Roggman, 2005; Raikes & Bellotti, 2006). Both Head Start and Early Head Start programs are also making efforts to reach out to and engage fathers. In 2005, 85% of Head Start programs offered services and activities for fathers (Hamm, 2006), and in 2004, 84% of Early Head Start parents did (Hamm & Ewen, 2005). However, only about one in five

fathers participated in these activities (Hamm, 2006; Hamm & Ewen, 2005), indicating that more can be done to engage fathers in Head Start.

In January 2010, the Office of Head Start released its *Improving School Readiness & Promoting Long-Term Success: The Head Start Roadmap to Excellence*. In its roadmap, the Office of Head Start (OHS) indicated that it plans to use new research findings on parental engagement to inform its forthcoming revision of the Head Start Program Performance Standards, tentatively slated to be released by OHS for public comment by January 2011. The new Head Start and Early Head Start standards addressing parent involvement and family and community partnerships will be revised to reflect the best practices and most recent research regarding parental engagement (Office of Head Start, 2010).

Recommendations for Policymakers and Practitioners

Over the past 45 years, Head Start has successfully adapted to meet the changing needs of the families it serves and to help these families overcome barriers and maintain high levels of parental engagement. Parental engagement is crucial to ensure that children arrive at school ready to learn and continue to thrive academically throughout schooling. The following recommendations for policymakers and Head Start practitioners are provided to help ensure that Head Start continues to be a leader in terms of parental engagement:

- *Policymakers must provide financial resources to enable Head Start and Early Head Start programs to provide full-day, five days a week services to families who need them.* Head Start and Early Head Start practitioners cannot fully engage all of their Head Start parents unless policymakers provide the needed funding to provide the full-day, full week services that would allow programs to better accommodate parents' demanding schedules.
- *Practitioners must continue to meet the needs of working parents through flexible service delivery schedules for parents and partnerships with community organizations.* The majority of Head Start parents works, and employment is cited as a main barrier to their involvement. It is important that opportunities for program participation be flexible and sensitive to parents' demanding work schedules. Additionally, employment tends not to raise Head Start families out of poverty, and working parents struggle to find child care for the hours when their children are not in Head Start. Head

Head Start's Perennial Leadership on Parental Engagement

continued from page 5

Start programs must continue to build partnerships to provide effective job training and quality child care for Head Start families.

- *Practitioners must implement effective strategies for engaging fathers.* Head Start and Early Head Start have been leaders in engaging fathers. Still a number of fathers remain relatively unengaged. According to a review of the research (Henrich & Gadaire, 2008), effective strategies for engaging fathers should take into account the broader social context by providing opportunities for both parents, whole families or larger groups, as opposed to fathers-only activities and services.
- *Practitioners should partner with state-funded pre-k programs, whenever possible.* Head Start programs are increasingly partnering with state pre-k initiatives (Stebbins & Scott, 2007), most of which have less comprehensive regulations and guidelines for parental engagement (Henrich & Blackman-Jones, 2006; Zigler & Styfco, 2004). Through these partnerships, Head Start can provide leadership as a model for how early childhood programs can successfully engage parents and help families prepare their children to succeed in school.

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