



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

June 1, 2015

The Honorable John Kline  
Chairman  
U.S. House Committee on Education and the Workforce  
2181 Rayburn House Office Building  
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Kline,

Thank you for the chance to provide feedback on ways to strengthen the Head Start program. The National Head Start Association (NHSA) believes that every child, regardless of circumstances at birth, has the ability to succeed in life if given the opportunity that Head Start affords children and their families. NHSA is the national voice of the more than a million children, 200,000 staff, and 1,700 grantees in the Head Start and Early Head Start program annually. Head Start and Early Head Start represent the national commitment to provide early learning opportunities for the children who are most at-risk and who, it has been proven, benefit the most from early learning experiences. NHSA and the undersigned organizations appreciate the Committee's interest in responsible legislative solutions to the Committee's stated policy goals and are pleased to offer the following comments.

For fifty years the Head Start community has embraced the challenge of delivering on the core American value of opportunity and developing our nation's most vulnerable children, and strengthening their families. A strong and sustainable future for Head Start will mean the success of generations of children who may otherwise struggle throughout their lives. Their future success rests with the knowledge, commitment and collaboration of families, programs, researchers and policymakers.

Created by President Lyndon B. Johnson, Head Start continues to enjoy bipartisan support and proof of its effectiveness and impact is evidenced by the program's 32 million alumni - lives and families transformed by the Head Start program. These alumni, such as Darren Walker, President of the Ford Foundation; Sylvia Mathews Burwell, Secretary of the US Department of Health and Human Services; Shaquille O'Neal, NBA future Hall-of-Famer; Chuck Mills, military veteran and small business owner; Esperanza Spalding, Grammy-award winning musician; and countless others in all walks of life have used a strong foundation of learning, healthy habits, and determination acquired in Head Start to drive their academic and life successes. Continuing to strengthen Head Start is vital to our nation's future security and prosperity and to creating opportunity for future generations.

In 2007 Congress made significant and important changes to Head Start through the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act. These changes included a system of competition for low-performing grantees, higher degree requirements for Head Start teachers, requirements for scientifically valid curricula, mandatory collaboration with school partners, and an expansion of eligibility to include homeless children. An unintended consequence of the implementation of



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the 2007 Act is a shift in Head Start's practice - it has become more compliance-driven, fearful, and punitive. This shift has hindered grantees' ability to consistently and effectively adapt their programs to meet the ever-changing needs of their children, families, and communities. Dialogues such as this one, created by the Committee's interest in feedback, are important as they will provide Congress the chance to listen to and potentially act upon the Head Start community's recommendations for how to strengthen the Head Start program today, tomorrow, and for years to come.

Today, over 1,700 private and public nonprofit and for-profit agencies provide Head Start services to 927,275 children and families with an annual appropriation of \$8.598 billion, in Fiscal Year 2014. Programs are also expected to raise an additional 20 % of their funds through community match. The Head Start services provided to children and families include academic, physical health, mental health, dental health, nutrition, and family-strengthening services. Through these services, Head Start has been found to be extremely effective with extensive outcomes and significant returns to the public investment. Even the Head Start Impact Study, which is often misinterpreted as evidence that Head Start does not work, clearly showed that Head Start children were better prepared for kindergarten on all measures compared to children in the control group. That these gains did not persist, as children reached third grade, is reason for concern – but the concern should focus on those first years after Head Start and how Head Start and schools can better work together to mitigate these changes.

NHSA encourages Congress to not fix what is not broken but rather to attend to the needs of the children, their parents, their communities, and the programs that serve them. In other words, fix what needs to be fixed. In order to strengthen the program, Congress must hear both about the realities of Head Start in practice, as well as the latest research - to strike a balance between legislative directives designed to drive quality and necessary and appropriate community flexibility. Prioritizing the needs of children, and their parents, rather than simply seeking to ease service-delivery without considering the unintended consequences for families, will ensure a successful future for Head Start.

### **Vision for Reauthorization**

Over the past school year, Head Start has marked its 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary and the National Head Start Association has undertaken an intensive and far-reaching project to prepare for Head Start's next authorization. This project has focused on extensive outreach to and cultivation of the Early/Head Start field through state, regional and national Head Start association meetings, consultation with every type and variation of Head Start program, conversations with the NHSA board and other state and community leaders, and individual discussions with every state Head Start community (including DC, Puerto Rico, the territories, the Migrant Seasonal community, and the American Indian and Alaska Native communities.) Based on the findings of this work, NHSA would like to offer the following vision for Head Start and suggest that it be codified in the next authorization:



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**Head Start is a unique and exemplary prenatal through age 5, multi-generation intervention. Driven by local need and design, the program provides the nation's most at-risk children and their families with an opportunity for success in school and in life through health, development, and academic supports that are comprehensive, holistic, culturally and linguistically-appropriate, and evidence-based.**

This vision serves the following goals, that we know the Committee shares:

1. All children are ready to succeed in school, in their cognitive and social-emotional development, and overall well-being.
2. Families are stable, supportive and dedicated to their children's success in school and life.
3. Head Start programs have the support and tools necessary to be hubs for innovation, coordination, and development of their communities.
4. Communities are engaged in and committed to the success of all children.

### **Committee's Questions for Stakeholder Consideration**

1. *What role should the federal government play to promote the quality of learning within the Head Start program?*

Similar to its role in the world of K-12 education, the primary role of the federal government in early learning should be to ensure that the most vulnerable children and families, across the country, have access to high quality services. In order to do so, it must maintain and strengthen an early learning system for the children who are most at-risk - one with a dedicated funding stream, rigorous evidence-based standards, monitoring and accountability, and training and improvement. As demonstrated by Head Start, this is effectively done through a federal to local funding stream that maintains high quality services, community-driven decision-making, and intentional impact. The result is programs meeting two levels of critical accountability - first to their community, for effective and quality services, and second to the taxpayer, for return on investment. The federal role must also include supporting and strengthening American Indian and Alaska Native and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, which as national programs since 1965 and 1969 respectively, continue to successfully address the unique needs of farmworker families and American Indian families.

The federal government should also continue to promote the quality of early learning by focusing on sufficient support and resources for each component of the Head Start system, beginning with a new set of Program Performance Standards that are research-based, clear, and aligned with the current Head Start Act. Performance Standards should offer appropriate flexibility to allow grantees to meet them in accordance with their community's needs and program's model. Next it should include ongoing professional development opportunities and living wages for staff, in line with recent recommendations from the Institute of Medicine. Finally, it should include an accessible



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training and technical assistance system and a user-friendly monitoring system that monitors on a continuum of program quality including the identification of program strengths and not just a compliance-based, box-checking system. By focusing on and strengthening each component of the Head Start system, the federal government has the opportunity to deepen the effectiveness of Head Start and model, to states and communities, a commitment to high quality.

2. *What steps can agencies take to enhance coordination of existing early learning programs across the federal government?*

NHSA recommends that agencies take four steps in order to enhance the coordination of existing early learning programs across the federal government.

1. Create clear standards that offer a base level of quality and a trajectory for continuous improvement. The Administration for Children and Families is already in the process of setting health and safety guidelines across early learning programs, and these efforts are a base for future work. Leveraging funds to ensure continuous improvement in states is also important, as states vary widely in their adoption of voluntary federal guidelines and their creation and implementation of state child care and prekindergarten standards.
2. Provide common training and technical assistance (T/TA) in areas where programmatic goals overlap (e.g. health & safety and teacher qualifications.) The Office of Head Start and Office of Child Care have begun collaborating to fund T/TA centers in areas of overlapping priorities, and this infrastructure may be a good model for future efforts.
3. Clarify the unique role that each early learning program provides including the children/families served, potential models of service delivery, and the goals of the program. Children and families fall across a broad spectrum of needs; for some families, a part-day prekindergarten model may meet those needs, but a subset of the most vulnerable families will always be best served by Head Start's comprehensive approach of early childhood education as well as family goal setting and support to achieve stable housing, healthcare, food security, and education and employment opportunities.
4. Strengthen and expand collaboration between Head Start, Pre-K, child care, and other state-based early learning initiatives by strengthening and empowering the Head Start State Collaboration Office. This office sits in a unique position in each state, district, and territory (and nationally for both the Migrant/Seasonal and American Indian/Alaska Native community) to encourage partnership, alignment, and high quality service delivery across Head Start and other state-run programs.

3. *What innovative steps are states taking to improve the quality of early education for their unique populations?*



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Over the past 10 years, a majority of states have significantly enhanced and/or created early education systems. These advancements have led to innovative improvements and growth in quality that have benefited their states most vulnerable children and families. Some of the most important innovative steps include:

- Thirteen states support Head Start access and quality through additional funding for Head Start, including Alaska, Connecticut, Delaware, Idaho, Maryland, Massachusetts, Minnesota, North Dakota, Oklahoma, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, and Wisconsin. Many of these states also operate universal or targeted Pre-K programs, and complementary investments in Head Start represent a commitment to the importance of a spectrum of early learning opportunities for families with varied needs. These additional resources allow Head Start quality services to reach many additional children and their families.
- Numerous states allow local communities to make their own decisions about how to best create a continuity and variety of early learning options for families. Since 2002, West Virginia has been working toward universal access to Pre-K for all three and four-year-olds. The design for this universal model requires that at least 50% of classrooms be operated in collaboration with community partners including Head Start and during the 2012-2013 school year 74% of classrooms were operated through collaboration. Based on the state school aid formula, counties receive funds for each preschool age child, and administer them in different ways based on local needs and resources. In some counties the partnerships with Head Start might fund transportation or blended classrooms in schools or enable Head Start to provide comprehensive services to children funded by Pre-K dollars. Ultimately, this model dramatically expands access to early learning, and partnership sites work to meet the highest standards, whether those are the child care health service timelines, the Head Start requirements for meals, or the Pre-K requirements for teacher certification.
- Communities in some states, such as Michigan, have developed one-stop enrollment systems, where families apply once for preschool and are presented with the options for which their child is eligible or enrolled in the appropriate slot within a blended Head Start/Pre-K classroom.
- Several states that have become national leaders in quality and outcomes have based their early learning guidelines on the Head Start Program Performance Standards. The State of Washington's Early Childhood Education Assistance Program (ECEAP) is modeled on Head Start and targeted toward children and families below 110% of the poverty line. A recent evaluation found strong gains for ECEAP children through fifth grade. Similarly, Oregon mandated the use of the Head Start Program Performance Standards for its Pre-K program nearly thirty years ago, and local grantees integrate the two funding streams to ensure wider access to high quality early learning opportunities.
- States also have an opportunity to support Early Head Start and Child Care (EHS-CC) Partnerships by aligning child care eligibility, providing full year determination periods, and making grants directly to Head Start providers. With an estimated 32,000 families enrolling in EHS-CC partnerships this year, reforms to often unwieldy and



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outdated child care systems will be a necessary component to ensuring the partnerships' success.

4. *How can the federal government best support states' efforts to maximize parental involvement in early childhood education? How can Congress ensure parents remain the ultimate decision-maker in the life of their child?*

Parental involvement is not simply a component of success in early learning - it is the cornerstone from which all early learning programs should be based. Head Start continues to be a leader in parent involvement in early learning due to its two generation approach, system of shared governance, and culture of understanding and respect. Based on Head Start's experience, the federal government can best support states' efforts to maximize parental involvement in the following ways:

- The federal government should incentivize states to expand their Early Learning Advisory Councils with explicit roles for parent representatives and support for parents across the state to be aware of and engaged in decision making about early learning.
- The Head Start programs' success in addressing community needs is rooted in program governance by and with parents. Each grantee has a Policy Council, at least half of which is comprised of current parents, that contributes to decisions about everything from curricula to hours and location of operation. This affirmation of the value of the parents' role and beliefs is a transformative experience for many families and encouraging states to adopt major roles for families in decision making offers opportunities for more effective family engagement throughout the education system.
- Research shows parents' engagement with their children's education, their own education, and family stability contribute to children's outcomes, with much of the research done in the context of Head Start. Congress can ensure families are well-equipped to make decisions about their children over their lifetimes by providing adequate funding for the two-generation supports delivered through Head Start - especially in the areas of parental education and job skills; housing and food security; and asset building.

5. *What kind of information could the federal government provide to help parents understand the options available for their children's early care and education?*

Through Administration for Children and Families resources, and through Child Care Resource and Referral agencies at the local level, parents should be able to clearly and easily understand the spectrum of early learning opportunities they can access and the standards, accreditation, and accountability systems in place for each program. These resources should include different measures of program quality, types of services offered by each program, and how each program meets its community's needs. Further, as some states have piloted during the roll-out of their Maternal, Infant & Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) grants and/or reformed Medicaid systems, the federal government



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should work to make families aware of their eligibility for Head Start, child care subsidies, and other early learning opportunities as they apply for health care, housing, or nutrition assistance programs. Many Head Start programs work locally to accomplish this exact goal, but federal support for it would help parents better understand all of the options available for their children's early care and education.

In closing, the Head Start community supports the Committee's goal of strengthening Head Start and appreciates the chance to provide feedback. NHSA looks forward to working with the Committee in the weeks and months ahead to craft responsible legislative solutions that will realize our shared policy goal of improving the early environment of and educational opportunities for children in poverty.

Sincerely,

Yasmina S. Vinci  
Executive Director  
National Head Start Association

National Indian Head Start Directors Association  
National Migrant Seasonal Head Start Association  
Region I Head Start Association  
Region II Head Start Association  
Region III Head Start Association  
Region IV Head Start Association  
Region V Head Start Association  
Region VI Head Start Association  
Region VII Head Start Association  
Region VIII Head Start Association  
Region IX Head Start Association  
Region X Head Start Association  
Alabama Head Start Association  
Alaska Head Start Association  
Arizona Head Start Association  
Arkansas Head Start Association  
California Head Start Association

Colorado Head Start Association  
Connecticut Head Start Association  
Delaware Head Start Association  
Florida Head Start Association  
Georgia Head Start Association  
Hawaii & Pacific Islands Head Start Association  
Idaho Head Start Association  
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New York State Head Start Association  
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North Dakota Head Start Association  
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Oklahoma Head Start Association  
Oregon Head Start Association  
Pennsylvania Head Start Association  
Rhode Island Head Start Association  
South Carolina Head Start Association  
South Dakota Head Start Association  
Tennessee Head Start Association  
Texas Head Start Association  
Utah Head Start Association  
Vermont Head Start Association  
Virginia Head Start Association  
Washington State Head Start & ECEAP  
Association  
West Virginia Head Start Association  
Wisconsin Head Start Association  
Wyoming Head Start Association  
Virgin Islands Head Start Association  
Alger Marquette Community Action Board  
Brekingridge-Grayson Programs  
Central Nebraska Community Services  
Community Partnership for Child  
Development  
Family Forum, Inc.  
Head Start of Washington County, Inc.  
Head Start of Yamhill County  
MET, Inc.  
Mountainland Head Start, Inc.

North Coast Opportunities, Inc.  
Parent and Child Together for West Central,  
IL  
Pinal Gila Community Child Services, Inc.  
Rural Utah Child Development  
Salt Lake Community Action Program  
School Board of Broward County  
Southern Utah University Head Start