

First Five Years Fund

June 1, 2015

The Honorable John Kline
Chairman, House Committee on
Education and the Workforce

The Honorable Bobby Scott
Ranking Member, House Committee
on Education and the Workforce

Dear Committee Leaders,

I'm writing regarding reauthorization of the Head Start Act. The First Five Years Fund (FFYF) is committed to improving the lives of children living in poverty by spurring greater investment in high quality early childhood programs that improve their education, health, and economic outcomes and our nation. As your Committee begins the important work of reauthorizing the Head Start Act, we ask that you support Head Start as a continuous, comprehensive program for children from birth through age five that cultivates providers who maximize young children's growth and development and provides ongoing support to those providers. The suggestions mentioned below build on decades of research on early learning initiatives aimed at improving the development and success of children and their families. Given this wealth of research, we hope you will use it as a guide as you work through the legislative process. Our recommendations for reauthorization specifically address:

1. The federal government's role in increasing quality of Head Start programs,
2. Coordination across federal, state, and local agencies to eliminate regulatory burdens,
3. The encouragement of innovation by providers, states, and the federal government,
4. Parental engagement in Head Start, and
5. Parent-friendly information about early childhood education and care.

INCREASING QUALITY – THE FEDERAL GOVERNMENT'S ROLE

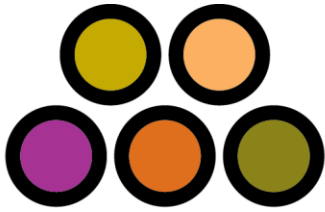
The Federal Government should encourage Head Start programs to focus on the elements of quality proven to create the conditions in which young children learn best. Head Start is currently a comprehensive program that addresses the domains critical to a child's development and school readiness. This principle should remain core to the program with an emphasis on ensuring the development of social-emotional skills we know are critical to ensuring Head Start students are prepared for the rigors of school and life. Reauthorization should also incorporate the information generated through more recent efforts, like data from the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), and use that information to help programs improve quality. Additional recommendations may include:

- Head Start should continue to be a provider of full-work day, full-year birth through age five services and explore ways to create a more seamless continuum of care by linking

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- Early Head Start and Head Start more closely to other early learning programs in the community, including child care and home visiting.
- Focus performance standards on promoting characteristics that lead to success. The role of the federal government should be to prioritize performance standards that result in optimal outcomes for children but to give programs flexibility in how they meet those standards. Examples might include ensuring providers have a coherent instructional guidance system, professional capacity, strong parent-community school ties, a child-centered learning climate, and strong leadership.
 - Support partnerships between Head Start providers and, where available, local research/evaluation organizations, like institutions of higher education, as a way to help observe and improve early learning programs.
 - Maintain CLASS or other comparable tools, which are reliable predictors of student success in later grades. Students who learn from teachers with higher CLASS ratings or ratings from comparable tools are proven more likely to perform well at higher levels after graduating from Head Start.
 - Incentivize and assist with implementing effective professional development strategies and/or programs, which may include:
 - o Encouraging Head Start and school districts to pool resources to provide appropriate professional development.
 - o Using CLASS, or other comparable tools, as a teacher professional development tool, (e.g.: as a resource for coaching and mentoring) and not just a metric for measuring quality.
 - Explore opportunities to further professionalize and retain infant/toddler teaching staff, such as through improved salary and compensation, education, and training opportunities.
 - Maintain a designation renewal system, but improve and increase transparency of the recompetition and redesignation process, and evaluate the existing process to see if there are opportunities for improvement. These may include:
 - o Release criteria used to score applicants, guidance given to reviewers about scoring applications, and information about the applications received for each proposal as well as the scores received by those applications.
 - o Release scores and applications to each applicant so providers can improve weaknesses and reinforce strengths as a way to continuously improve.
 - o Conduct a formal evaluation of the system to determine whether there are process improvements that, if made, would help achieve its goal of improving program quality.

VALUING COORDINATION

The Committee, in its request for comment, referenced a GAO report discussing the number of government programs that, in some part, invest in early childhood education. While it is the case that the Federal Government makes multiple investments in early learning, only a very small number of programs, such as the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act, Head Start, and the Child Care and Development Fund, include early learning as part of their primary mission. Yet, the current system is only able to enroll half of eligible Head Start children and five percent of



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eligible Early Head Start children. Congress can, however, increase coordination across these various programs to reduce regulatory burdens and eliminate duplicative requirements. Other recommendations may include:

- Coordinate across federal agencies and programs to eliminate requirements for providers to meet similar or duplicative standards and fulfill redundant documentation and monitoring requests. For example:
 - o If a program meets Department of Agriculture food and nutrition standards, the program should be exempted from Head Start food and nutrition standards, paperwork, and monitoring.
 - o If a program meets Head Start performance requirements, the program should automatically be considered to meet the similar, but less stringent, Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) requirements without needing to complete additional paperwork and monitoring requirements.
- The Department of Health and Human Services with federal agencies should work across agencies and with states to align the eligibility and redetermination periods of different programs (e.g.: CCDBG, Head Start).
- Incentivize increasing quality, coordination, and community engagement for infants and younger toddlers by supporting the Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships program.
- Create a public-private partnership pilot program that would encourage alignment between state and Head Start data systems. Head Start providers would partner with private and non-profit organizations to update the provider’s technological infrastructure and capacity, align state and Head Start data systems, and provide professional development on how to use data to drive student instruction. The collection of data should not be misconstrued to support use of assessments or high-stakes testing for accountability purposes.
- Require Head Start programs to enter child, teacher, and program data into their state’s longitudinal data systems, and require states to make data reports available to Head Start in a timely way so Head Start providers don’t have to double-enter data and can act on the data provided. Early childhood data in these systems must be subject to relevant student data privacy and confidentiality projections.

INCUBATING INNOVATION

Encouraging innovative initiatives by Head Start grantees, states, and federal agencies will help foster providers that maximize young children’s growth and development. Some states and programs are already experimenting with ways to expand and improve quality early learning education and care. Lessons can be learned and potentially encouraged by observing these efforts to increase partnerships, align and improve disparate early learning systems, decrease redundancies to more efficiently utilize resources. A reauthorization of Head Start could also:

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- Create a demonstration grant to supplement Head Start efforts. The grant would fund evidence-based early learning initiatives and innovations. States and local providers must file a joint application that explains how they will work together to implement changes, align services, and achieve improved outcomes in order to be eligible.

SUPPORTING PARENT ENGAGEMENT

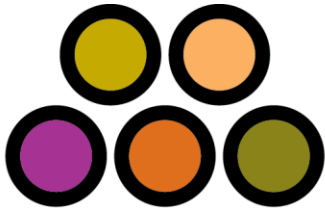
Parents are a child's first teacher, and even when the child makes his/her way to school or care centers parents still play the primary role in their child's development. Head Start has long been a model through comprehensive services and strong parent engagement. Reauthorization should build on this track record to support greater gains in the program-parent connection by including the following:

- Make sure parent engagement and education remains a central priority in all Head Start and Early Head Start grants including through
 - o Supporting, training, and technical assistance to start-up programs, new grantees, and school systems.
 - o Ensure performance standards encourage providers to collaborate with parents when making decisions that impact their child's development.
 - o Incentivizing Head Start programs to offer additional home visits on a voluntary basis and support parenting classes are interactive, relevant and engaging.
- Encourage Head Start providers to work with their Local Educational Agencies (LEA's) to coordinate and integrate services as parents prepare to transition their children to school.

DISSEMINATING INFORMATION EFFECTIVELY

Reducing the burden on families to seek out the early learning programs for which they qualify can be the first step towards ensuring children are receiving a quality early childhood education. Every family should have access to comprehensive information that eases the process of finding early learning and care programs in their community.

- Task State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care with identifying gaps in family awareness of statewide early childhood education and care options, if they have not done so already.
- Replicate the practices of certain states to create a common recruitment system that helps connect families to community providers best able to meet their children's needs. Such a system will eliminate the need for individual efforts by individual programs and will help ensure families have complete information about what programs may be available. Other federal and state funded early childhood programs could be added to this common recruitment system.



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The First Five Years Fund understands the many issues the Committee is facing as it makes decisions about what will be addressed in this coming reauthorization of the Head Start Act. We ask that you give careful consideration to the above recommendations. When taken as a whole, these suggestions work to transform Head Start into a program that is continuous, comprehensive, supportive, and results-oriented for children from birth through age five. Supporting the efforts listed above will help to ensure Head Start continues to prepare its graduates for success in college and life. We look forward to working with you and your colleagues as you progress through the reauthorization process.

Sincerely,

Kris Perry
Executive Director
First Five Years Fund