



A PLACE TO BELONG

*Stories of Exemplary Practices Across
Head Start*



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INTRODUCTION

It has been an honor to work alongside the Head Start community for the past 25 years as a staff member within the Head Start association community. I often reflect that one of the true responsibilities of associations is to serve as managers of the movement—a movement grounded in pride, driven by justice, defined by excellence, and filled with love and hope for the future.

For more than 60 years, Head Start has inspired pride in all of us who dedicate our work to uplifting this remarkable community. Most importantly, it has transformed the lives of children and families across the nation. Head Start has served as an economic engine—creating local jobs, nurturing future educators, business owners, and community leaders. It has been a trailblazer in early childhood innovation, saving millions in educational costs by identifying learning needs early and closing achievement gaps that might otherwise have gone unnoticed in traditional systems.

Head Start has also offered first and second chances to families facing economic hardship, connecting them with essential community services, empowering parents with the skills to nurture their children's growth, and building bridges to elementary education. Above all, it has ensured that every child and family is treated with dignity, respect, and hope for a brighter tomorrow.

To celebrate this milestone, Head Start WEST set out to elevate stories of everyday excellence—from southern Arizona to northern California, across the Hawaiian Islands, and through the rural communities of Nevada. In each location, we've highlighted examples that showcase the hard work and unwavering dedication of our staff and partners. We have also made recommendations on each topic with an eye on continued improvement. These stories represent just a few among the thousands that could be told from the hundreds of programs across the West.

We hope you enjoy these reflections of Head Start's enduring spirit—and that you'll take a moment to share your own stories of pride and purpose in this incredible movement.



In partnership,

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Ed Condon".

Ed Condon, Executive Director

A HEAD START STORY:

HOW FAMILY ENGAGEMENT PAVES THE WAY FOR A CHILD'S JOURNEY TO SUCCESS

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: FAMILY ENGAGEMENT

Families are children's first and most important caregivers, teachers, and advocates. Engaging families in their child's learning, and recognizing parents as a child's first and most influential teacher is one of the key exemplary practices of the Head Start program ¹

The enduring desire of parents to provide their children with the best start possible in life is nearly universal. It is one of the strongest instincts in human nature to protect, nurture, and encourage children to fulfill their potential and lead healthy, productive lives.

A crucial component to a child's early success is the degree to which their home environment supports the learning process. Head Start implements a structured approach to encouraging Family Engagement as it relates

to the best interest of the child. The program empowers families through education, access to resources, and parental involvement to create an environment in which the child can thrive. The Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework illustrates how the program aims to support families in order to maximize successful outcomes for children.

Through its commitment to supporting the whole family, and providing a structured approach to development for both parent and child, Head Start leads with its exemplary practice of Family Engagement.

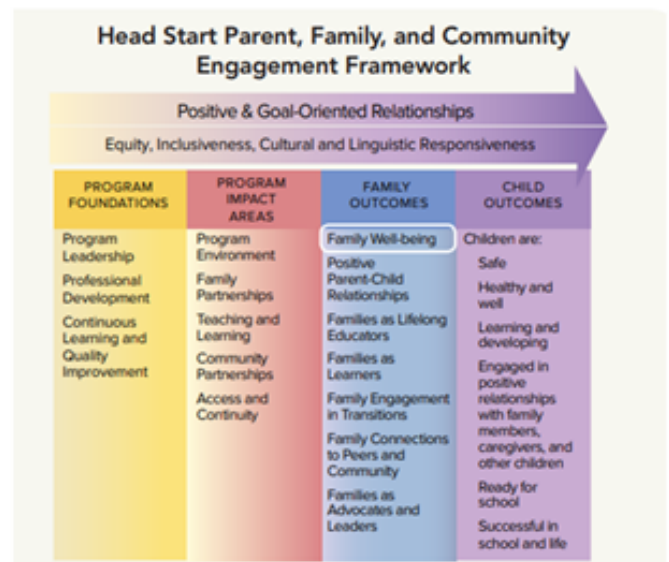


Image source: HeadStart.gov

¹ "Parent" and "family" refer to all adult caregivers who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child. These caregivers include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; pregnant people and expectant families; out-of-household parents; grandparents; legal and informal guardians; adult siblings; and other family members.

FAMILY ENGAGEMENT IN ACTION

By design, Head Start programs are often located in low-income communities where parents may struggle to provide their children with a stable home life, adequate nutrition, and medical care. These are vital components to a child's wellness, and the detrimental effects of their absence often become more obvious once they begin school. Whether a child attends a care center or receives home visits, Head Start staff work closely with families to identify their unique needs, and connect them to appropriate resources and support.



Every family that registers with Head Start joins a comprehensive program that includes several elements designed to encourage Family Engagement:

- A **Family Partnership Agreement** that encourages the parallel learning process between parent and child to develop a goal-oriented approach to education.
- Regular **Parent-Staff Meetings** assess whether a child's activities and well-being align with the goals set out in the Agreement.
- **Community Advocates** at each center connect parents with resources in the community to help foster a stable, healthy home life.
- **Volunteer opportunities** encourage parents to actively participate with the wider program.

A testament to the strength of Family Engagement is the fact that a significant number of parents remain involved with Head Start even after their children have left the program. About 22% of Head Start staff are current or former program parents,² with many choosing to pursue their teaching credentials in childhood education.

HEAD START SUCCESS STORY: PLACER COUNTY FAMILY PUTS DOWN ROOTS

Interview with Brianna Rollins

Parent and Policy Chair - KidZCommunity, Placer County Action Council

Located in the forested Sierra Nevada foothills, the Placer County Action Council (PCAC) provides early childhood support services to low-income families throughout Placer and Nevada counties in Northern California. PCAC serves a population of more than 500,000 residents in a region that covers over 2,000 square miles. Communities range

² Source: <https://acf.gov/ohs/about/head-start>

Brianna Rollins, a bright and vivacious single mother-of-two, perfectly exemplifies the Family Engagement principle within PCAC. Her daughter, Scarlett, recently graduated Head Start to begin kindergarten, while her son, Noah, began in the Early Head Start program and now attends Head Start. Besides being a busy mom, Brianna serves a volunteer role as PCAC Policy Chair, and attends classes at Sierra Nevada College.

Brianna was introduced to Head Start by her mother, when she explored child care options that would align with her class schedule. The location of a Head Start center right across from the college campus made it a convenient choice, and Brianna appreciated the play-based model of learning.

From the outset, Brianna found the staff at KidZCommunity to be supportive and



engaging. “You really feel like they care for your children the way you would,” said Brianna. “It’s reassuring how supportive the staff are.” Teachers worked with her to create a Family Partnership Agreement to outline behavior and learning goals for her children to help them transition to kindergarten. They were also able to receive dental and wellness checks from visiting healthcare providers.

The emphasis on supporting the well-being of the whole family became clear when her assigned Community Advocate helped Brianna locate permanent housing for her family. After a period of instability in their young lives, having a permanent home allows Scarlett and

Noah to build the foundation for a happy, active childhood. “The belief at Head Start is, ‘When the family thrives, the child thrives, so how can we help you succeed?’” said Brianna.

Brianna herself has also flourished since becoming involved with Head Start. Not only is she currently serving as the Policy Chair, improving lines of communication between parents and policy makers, she was recently awarded the Soroptimist International’s ‘Live Your Dream’ scholarship for women. This scholarship will help support her academic pursuits and improve her economic situation in years to come.

THE LASTING IMPACT OF HEAD START

What's clear from both qualitative (Brianna's success story is one of many) and quantitative assessments is that Head Start provides enormous value to the communities it serves. Research has shown that for each dollar invested in Head Start, there is a return on investment of \$7-\$9 in economic gain.³ This valuation is a result of reduced need for special education, welfare, and other support services for low-income families, as well as improved employment prospects.

With economic uncertainty one of the few certainties American families face in recent years, providing children with every potential advantage has become even more crucial. Over the past 60 years, Head Start has successfully developed methods to help parents get, and stay, engaged with their children's education because it is proven to have a direct impact on children's success.

As the needs in their communities' change, Head Start programs continue to remain agile and innovative to respond effectively. Leadership remains focused on facilitating Family Engagement in ways that empowers parents to make permanent improvements in their families' lives. Through a network of comprehensive services, education, and volunteer opportunities, Head Start supports parents in becoming their child's most influential lifelong teacher.



³ Ludwig, J. and Phillips, D. (2007). *The Benefits and Costs of Head Start*. Social Policy Report. 21 (3: 4); Deming, D. (2009). *Early childhood intervention and life-cycle skill development: Evidence from Head Start*. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, Meier, J. (2003). *Interim Report. Kindergarten Readiness Study: Head Start Success*. Preschool Service Department, San Bernardino County, California; Deming, D. (2009). *Early childhood intervention and life-cycle skill development: Evidence from Head Start*.



Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work:

Increase Investment to Head Start

1 Provide increased funding so that local programs have the resources to hire and retain professionals with a strong background in working with children and families. Individuals with extensive preparation—ranging from bachelor's degrees in social work or human services to clinical certifications and master's-level qualifications—are better equipped to foster meaningful engagement and help families achieve their goals.

Examine Caseloads for Family Service Advocates (FSAs)

2 Utilize data to determine best the intensity of caseloads for Family Service Advocates would ensure families needing greater intensity of services receive it. Linking case load reviews to family outcomes benefits everyone involved, especially the children striving to meet school readiness goals. Build strong relationships with both the child's teachers and families, services become more personalized and effective. Trust-building, goal setting, and supporting individual family growth require time and focused attention—resources that are only possible with manageable caseloads.

Create Family-Friendly Facilities to Foster Collaboration

3 Develop welcoming spaces where parents can actively engage with educational staff, community organizations, and one another. These facilities should encourage family participation in children's learning and provide opportunities for collaboration with early childhood education (ECE) providers, school systems, faith-based organizations, and agencies serving children with disabilities or culturally specific needs.

Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work (Cont.):

4 Implement Technology to Support Family Engagement

Adopt modern technologies that streamline family engagement with Head Start, other community services, and the transition to elementary school. Tools that allow for real-time input, access to services, and family feedback will enhance both the credibility and effectiveness of Family Services staff.

5 Strengthen Partnerships with Workforce Service Providers

Enhancing Head Start's family support requires intentional collaboration with institutions that specialize in workforce development. Building bridges between systems benefits children and families alike. Promoting proven strategies such as Parent Apprenticeship Programs —will expand opportunities and foster lasting personal and educational growth across generations.



A HEAD START STORY:

HOW SCHOOL READINESS PAVES THE WAY FOR EDUCATIONAL ACHIEVEMENT

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: SCHOOL READINESS

The Head Start Approach to School Readiness means that children are ready for school, families are ready to support their children's learning, and schools are ready for children.

The Exemplary Practice of School Readiness is truly at the core of the Head Start mission. Sixty years ago, Head Start was developed to provide children in lower-income households with the opportunity to begin traditional schooling on a more equal level with their peers. Today, Head Start has compiled decades of early childhood learning research to develop a framework of developmental building blocks that help teachers and families prepare children for a successful start in Kindergarten. For teachers and administrators at Head Start, the Early Learning Outcomes Framework is the blueprint for building a curriculum that results in measurable School Readiness.

The Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework (ELOF) outlines five key Domains which encompass successful skill development areas¹:

- *Approaches to Learning*
- *Social and Emotional Development*
- *Language and Literacy*
- *Cognition*
- *Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development*

Central Domains					
	Approaches to Learning	Social and Emotional Development	Language and Literacy	Cognition	Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development
Infant / Toddler Domains	Approaches to Learning	Social and Emotional Development	Language and Communication	Cognition	Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development
Preschooler Domains	Approaches to Learning	Social and Emotional Development	Language and Communication	Mathematics Development	Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development
			Literacy	Scientific Reasoning	

¹ Interactive Head Start ELOF: Ages Birth through Five: <https://headstart.gov/interactive-head-start-earlylearning-outcomes-framework-ages-birth-five>

Many Head Start centers use the ELOF Framework as a foundation to create an adapted Curriculum that best serves their student community's unique needs. Families are engaged in the selection of the curriculum as well as provide feedback on instructional materials used by the program. Head Start promotes intentional and effective teaching practices to ensure quality child development services in each of the five ELOF domains. Teachers carefully monitor students in the classroom against a number of social, emotional, cognitive, and physical milestones to ensure they are progressing in each of these areas. Examples of the measurable Goals that can exist within the Framework Domains are:

Approaches to Learning:

- Demonstrate a positive attitude towards learning
- Ability to express themselves through creative role play

Social and Emotional Development:

- Show an ability to manage their own emotions and behaviors.
- Show an ability to form positive relationships with adults and peers

Language and Literacy:

- Understand directions in English and/or their native language
- Recognize the alphabet, letter sounds, and upper/lower case letters

Cognition:

- Beginner math skills such as spatial relationships, pattern recognition, shape recognition, counting, and basic problem solving skills
- Observation of their environment, developing theories, research, and communicating their findings to others

Perceptual, Motor, and Physical Development:

- Control of large muscles for movement, coordination and balance
- Fine motor movements, such as using tools for writing and drawing

Head Start centers implement curricula that apply to the children and families in their community. Programs may choose to make adaptations or enhancements to better meet the needs of specific populations and/or communities while ensuring it meets the adaptation requirements in the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Each child's progress is recorded at three points throughout the year to establish a record of skill development. As children age through the program, teachers record progress across the range of Framework Domains to assess a child's School Readiness. Over time, teachers encourage children to learn new skills by building on their existing skills and knowledge. This process is known as 'skill scaffolding', and helps children build confidence and motivation to continue pursuing what interests them.

HEAD START SUCCESS STORY: BONITA CHILD-PARENT CENTER BRIDGES A SUCCESSFUL KINDERGARTEN TRANSITION

Interview with Brenda Peña

Lead Teacher, Four-year olds Class

Second in Command Bonita Center, Child-Parent Centers, Southeastern Arizona

From the minute Brenda Peña begins describing her work as Lead Teacher of the four-year olds class at the Bonita Child-Parent Center, it is clear that she is the kind of teacher every child deserves. Her compassion for the children and families at the Center is sincere and heartwarming. She describes herself as her students' "co-learner," modeling a love of learning and academic exploration.



A second generation educator, Brenda's teaching style is influenced by her father. "The most important thing he taught me after his 30 years in education was to always be present with my students," said Brenda. Her admiration for her father's dedication to his work is clearly reflected in the care she pours into her own classroom. Honoring family connections is a consistent theme in Brenda's philosophy. She encourages parents to be actively involved in their child's education with regular progress check-ins and visual reminders in the classroom of the parents' dreams for their child's success. Her work has been recognized in national research² that explored childrens' views of life living in a border town, as well as an advisory role with the University of Arizona Education and Human Services program.

Bonita teachers apply an adapted version of the Early Learning Framework called Languages of Learning, that embraces the bilingual and multicultural environment of their community. The curriculum is designed to prepare the children for challenges and empowers them to explore their innate curiosity about the world around them.

A recent example was the incident of 'Susie', a bird that met a mysterious and unfortunate end in the Bonita schoolyard. Rather than dismissing the childrens' desire to understand Susie's fate, the teachers used it as a way to introduce the concept of developing hypotheses, research methods, story telling, and writing to encourage skill development while allowing the children the freedom to pursue their curiosity about Susie. Interested learners are motivated learners, and the teachers at Bonita are quick to pivot lesson plans to develop



2 "Bridging Borders: Children's Right to Dignity, Civility, and Dialogue." Reggio Alliance, 2018, www.reggioalliance.org/wpcontent/uploads/2019/01/NAR18_Innovations_Web_253_BridgingBorders.pdf.

practical skills that will help the children pursue their natural inquisitiveness. Observing and analyzing each child's progress at regular intervals helps the teachers 'scaffold' skills appropriately according to the local curriculum.



This emphasis on preparing children for a successful start in Kindergarten within the classroom is supplemented by support from the wider education community. Each year, Brenda invites the public school Kindergarten teachers to read to her class and meet with the parents. Children review a map of their route to school, plan how to pack their backpack, and discuss what they look forward to doing in school. This 'bridge' helps to establish a level of familiarity and comfort about the next step in their academic journey.

The result is children who begin Kindergarten the following fall prepared to learn, eager to learn, and confident in their skills. "The Kindergarten teacher at Clawson Elementary [the local public school] tells me that she knows right away when a child comes from a Head Start program," said Brenda. "The children are self-regulated, possess critical thinking skills, are more outspoken, ready to learn, and are able to negotiate and problem solve at a different level from their peers."

HEAD START IMPACT REPORT

As a federal program, Head Start centers are required to report on their alignment to ELOF and submit evidence of results that support School Readiness. Beyond the data gathered by teachers regarding students' progress while in Early Head Start or Head Start programs, further research was needed to assess the longer term impact of Head Start programs.

In 2010, the Department of Health and Human Services published the Head Start Impact Report, examining the long-term effect of Head Start on children's academic success as they age, although some aspects of the study design were controversial at the time of its publishing. The Impact Study followed the academic journeys of about 5,000 3- and 4-year-olds who were randomly assigned to a treatment group (in which they had a seat in Head Start) or a control group (in which parents made their own choice without the initial offer of a Head Start seat). The study examined students' progress over a six-year period,

beginning in the fall of 2002 and ending when the student had completed third grade. Key findings from the report state, “Providing access to Head Start has a positive impact on children’s preschool experiences. There are statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group on every aspect of children’s preschool experiences measured in this study.” The report also looked at the longer-term effects on children’s School Readiness, “Access to Head Start has positive impacts on several aspects of children’s school readiness during their time in the program. For the 4-year-old group, benefits at the end of the Head Start year were concentrated in language and literacy elements of the cognitive domain.”

Controversy around the study design reflects the difficulty of designating fully ‘random’ or ‘control’ groups per outlined criteria. Subsequent analyses that have been done on the Impact Study itself have revealed that it does not provide the full picture of the longterm impact of those children with access to Head Start programs, as opposed to those in home-based care or other childcare programs. Study analysis done by Patrick Kline and Christopher Walters³ indicates that indeed, the children who attended Head Start demonstrated a significant cognitive improvement over those in home based care. The Brookings Institute evaluation of these study analyses summarizes, “The Head Start Impact Study reanalyzes and the decades of research on Head Start show that on a variety of outcomes from kindergarten readiness to intergenerational impacts, Head Start does work, particularly for students who otherwise would not be in center-based care.” Further evidence for long-term benefits of Head Start involvement were outlined in a 2018 report by Andrew Barr and Chloe Gibbs⁴ that stressed, “We find evidence of intergenerational transmission of effects in the form of increased educational attainment, reduced teen pregnancy, and reduced criminal engagement in the second generation.” These long-term benefits are significant in measuring the true impact of a child’s involvement in Head Start.

3 “Evaluating Public Programs with Close Substitutes: The Case of Head Start”, *Quarterly Journal of Economics*.
<https://academic.oup.com/qje/articleabstract/131/4/1795/2468877?redirectedFrom=fulltext&login=false>

4 “Breaking the Cycle? Intergenerational Effects of an Anti-Poverty Program in Early Childhood”.
https://static1.squarespace.com/static/563b95a2e4b0c51a8b87767c/t/5bbe1accOd9297fOaa8fe61e/1539185357919/Head+Start+Intergen_1_11_2018.pdf



Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work:

Promote Active Engagement of Local Leaders

Engaged local leaders are critical to supporting families and optimizing children's early learning. Education organizations at the county level—including public, charter, private, faith-based, and homeschool systems—should be welcomed to the table so Head Start can articulate its goals and strategies, ensuring children are ready for school and lifelong learning.

Build Collaborative Models for Classroom Staff and Parents

Classroom staff and parents should receive joint professional development with Kindergarten educators to ensure seamless transitions. In alignment with the Head Start Act Section 642A(4), training should include policies, parent engagement strategies, social-emotional development, and behavioral health topics, ensuring all frontline staff share a comprehensive understanding of children's needs.

Provide Parents with Tools for Planning

Head Start should serve as a central resource for families exploring educational options—including public, charter, private, faith-based, and homeschool systems. By offering community meetings, education fairs, and planning tools, Head Start can help parents make informed choices that meet the unique needs of their children.

Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work (Cont.):

Elevate Support for Children with Special Needs

4 Head Start and Early Head Start programs have a strong record serving children with disabilities, often exceeding regulatory requirements. We recommend innovations to support special needs students during the transition to K–12, including coaching and mentoring for teachers from educational and behavioral health specialists. Programs— particularly in rural areas—should be allowed flexible service delivery options and waivers to address resource challenges.

Provide Resources in Families' Home Languages

5 Providing school resources in a child's home language strengthens home-school connections and supports long-term student success. Research shows that accessible, language-relevant materials empower parents as their child's first teacher. Resources can include reading strategies, health information, including mental health considerations, and guidance on child development, promoting confidence and engagement in their child's wellbeing. From reading aloud strategies to health information, parents can be empowered using their home language.



A HEAD START STORY:

HOW STRONG PARTNERS SUPPORT CHILDREN'S SUCCESS IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: COMMUNITY ENGAGEMENT

Community engagement refers to the mutually respectful, strengths-based relationships between Head Start staff and families, community members, and agencies. These relationships support parents' roles as valued community members and their progress toward their goals for themselves and their children.¹

The phrase “It takes a village to raise a child” perfectly illustrates the Head Start Exemplary Practice of Community Engagement. As explored in the first two articles of this series, Head Start staff work with parents and caregivers to create a goal-oriented approach to each child’s participation in Early Head Start and Head Start programs. This approach is followed by careful monitoring of a child’s progress across the five central domains of early childhood development, as outlined in the Early Learning Outcomes Framework.

However, family engagement is only one aspect of a successful Community Engagement initiative. Community Partners are a crucial component of the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework, expanding caregiving resources in order to maximize successful outcomes for children. Community partners provide tangible child development support and resources that families and staff want and need. They can work with families and Head Start staff toward goals outlined in the Individualized Family Plans. These include parents’ educational advancement, economic mobility, and other aspects of family well-being. Examples of Community Partners may include local school districts, healthcare and social services providers, and higher education and workforce training resources. While Head Start staff are well-educated, passionate caregivers, and are keen to provide their children and families with excellent care, community partners provide centers with invaluable support when it comes to situations that require specialized knowledge and assistance. These types of resources might not be accessible to families without the “glue” of the Head Start program identifying a need, and connecting the child and family to appropriate ancillary support services.

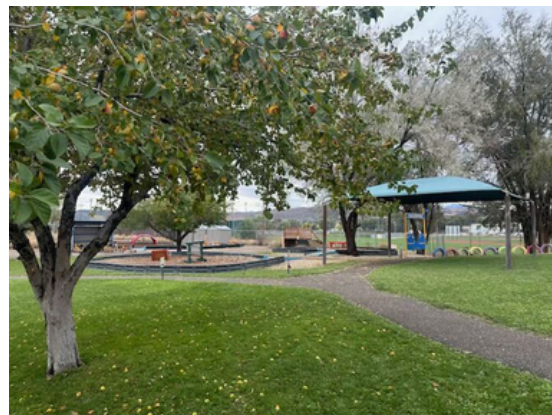
In this series, we have already seen two examples of the effectiveness of community partners; assistance securing long-term housing provided a more stable family environment,

¹ <https://headstart.gov/community-engagement/article/engaging-community-partners-strengthen-family-services>

and local Kindergarten teachers visiting Head Start classrooms to help “bridge” the transition for children and parents. This article will highlight another example of how an inter-agency partnership provides an otherwise inaccessible level of care to a rural community.

COMMUNITY PARTNER ENGAGEMENT IN RURAL COMMUNITIES

The definition of a “rural” community varies across government departments, with the term being generally applied to areas not considered “urban” based on factors such as population size and density. According to the 2020 Census, 20% of the U.S. population is considered “rural”.² Head Start staff operating in rural communities face a number of challenges including; lack of transportation, geographic distance between service areas, limited



social services, economic prospects for the workforce, social isolation, recruitment of qualified staff, and an extremely limited number of pediatric medical specialists. These circumstances demand resourcefulness of Head Start leaders who are tasked with identifying pressing needs in their community, and developing a network of partnerships that will support the success of the child and their family.

PROVIDING EXCEPTIONAL EARLY CHILDHOOD CARE THROUGH STRATEGIC PARTNERSHIPS

Interview With

Cheri Moring

Executive Director - Head Start of Northeastern Nevada

Sandra (Sandy) La Palm, M.Ed.

Developmental Specialist III - Nevada Early Intervention Services

Shelby Logan

Head Start Parent

Located nearly 300 miles east of Reno along Interstate 80 lies the “frontier” city of Elko, Nevada. Beautiful and remote, its geographic distance from major urban areas means there are limited social services on hand to support a population that is disproportionately in need of them.

² [https://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/about-us/what-](https://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/about-us/what-isrural#:~:text=The%20Census%20does%20not%20define,is%20not%20urban%20is%20rural%20.)

[isrural#:~:text=The%20Census%20does%20not%20define,is%20not%20urban%20is%20rural%20.](https://www.hrsa.gov/rural-health/about-us/what-isrural#:~:text=The%20Census%20does%20not%20define,is%20not%20urban%20is%20rural%20.)

From her office in Elko, Executive Director of Head Start Northeastern Nevada, Cheri Moring oversees operations across a large region. Service areas include the cities of Elko, Spring Creek, Carlin, Wells, Ryndon, and Osino. Two centers serve a population of 54,000, so maintaining strong community partnerships is vital to providing continuity of care for Head Start children and families. Cheri's community network includes 25 partners, such as Boys and Girls Clubs, workforce development, school districts, and healthcare providers.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP IN ACTION: HEAD START AND EARLY INTERVENTION SERVICES

One of her most significant partners is the Nevada Early Intervention Services (NEIS), a department of the state-funded Aging and Disability Services Division. This program provides services to children from birth until age three with developmental delays or disabilities, as well helping their families connect with resources.

The partnership between Head Start Northeastern Nevada and NEIS has a long history. The first Head Start center in Elko opened in 1971, and has become established as an essential resource for local families. It not only addresses the need for free childcare, but also brings together crucial healthcare and social support services. The state-funded NEIS program



expanded to the Elko area in the mid-1990s, and performs a crucial role within the Head Start partner ecosystem. At least 10% of the 145 children currently enrolled in Head Start also receive services through NEIS for a range of developmental delays and disabilities. Developmental Specialist Sandy La Palm has worked within both Head Start and NEIS for the past two decades. She is a strong advocate for the families in remote areas of the Silver State. Her passion for ensuring local children receive the best care possible is matched only by Cheri's drive to do the same.

Due to the rural nature of the communities they serve, staff at both Head Start NE and NEIS initiate family engagement with in-home visits, allowing staff to make referrals in the cases where they see a potential need. In-home visits offer a two-fold advantage; to meet the family and the child where they are most comfortable, and to allow for a natural evaluation of the child's developmental progress. Two in-home assessments are given to identify any potential areas of concern in a child's development. Staff use the results to determine whether a child should be referred to other services. Head Start staff are trained to recognize certain signs that a child may need services provided by NEIS. Vice versa, NEIS staff recommend the Head Start enrollment to families who would benefit from the comprehensive program.

Once enrolled in the Head Start program, families benefit from access to a range of resources – including health and wellness checks, workforce development, and more – that they would not have otherwise. Families participating in the early intervention program receive services in their natural environment, whether at home or in a child care center. Services ranging from nutrition, to occupational, physical, and speech therapy, specialized instruction, and more, customized to the child and family’s needs and priorities.

The partnership is one of consistent communication and a deep knowledge of the services each other can provide. In other words, this partnership and others like it, expand “the village” of care each child receives. Cheri and Sandy are quick to credit one another when discussing how their organizations work together to refer families for services, and maintain an incredibly personalized level of care. This strong partnership has led to a number of ‘success stories’ over the years. For Cheri and Sandy, stories like CJ’s make it worth all the hard work and energy they pour into supporting their children and families.

COMMUNITY PARTNERSHIP SUCCESS: CJ LOGAN

When describing CJ’s journey with NEIS and Head Start, her mother, Shelby, becomes emotional. Her gratitude for the impact the partnership has had on her daughter’s life is palpable.

“I am genuinely so thankful for the work that Head Start and NEIS have done to help my daughter. I do not think she would be on the path she is without all their support.”

A few years ago, the path looked very different for Shelby’s family. A few months after CJ was born, Shelby noticed a peculiar stiffness in her daughter’s right side. In-home assessments conducted by Sandy resulted in a swift and substantive care plan through NEIS that brought together a team of specialists to provide appropriate care. Diagnosed with cerebral palsy, CJ’s motor development was severely impacted, and Shelby faced the daunting task of becoming her young daughter’s primary support system and advocate.

“We live in a rural area, where there are just no available specialized child care services,” said Shelby. “Early Intervention Services is the only resource for such young children that can connect parents to child care specialists.” Once CJ’s Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) was developed with her family, Sandy recommended Shelby apply for the Early Head Start program. Reluctant at first, but eager to help her daughter improve, Shelby enrolled CJ into the local program. She quickly found that the staff was wholly invested in helping CJ



thrive in the environment. CJ's NEIS team and Head Start's teachers and staff went above and beyond to make adaptations to her classroom environment and materials, which led to improved access and inclusion, so CJ could fully participate in all classroom routines and activities alongside her peers.

A few examples include:

- *Consideration for CJ's left hand use included intentional positioning during mealtimes and at the sensory table as well as providing left-handed scissors.*
- *Classroom furniture was arranged to allow for easier movement around the room.*
- *Classroom location was selected to allow for easier access to the playground across even ground.*



Sandy and the Head Start team worked closely with her family on CJ's transition plan when she turned three. They planned for months in advance to ensure a seamless transition from early intervention into school district services and from Early Head Start to a Head Start preschool classroom. Today, CJ is doing remarkably well. Her motor skills have improved to nearly the same level as her peers, a testament to the dedication of staff at both organizations who work to

support her development.

"The difference in CJ is night and day," says Shelby. "She continues to progress, in huge part thanks to NEIS and Head Start. Families in rural areas really need these programs. The staff are so dedicated to providing care for the less fortunate, they really care about the families that need help the most."

There are thousands of rural communities like Elko throughout the country that lack adequate childcare, healthcare, and social services. The challenges of living in geographically dispersed areas with limited economic resources make it difficult for families to identify and access care options. The Logan family's journey illustrates the importance of Head Start Community Partnerships that bring together a network of essential services in rural areas. Proactive engagement with families, partnerships with specialized healthcare professionals, and unwavering commitment to providing each child with a path to success tailored to their needs are just some of the reasons Head Start is an essential resource in rural communities across the U.S.



Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work:

Expand Early Intervention Collaborations

1 Head Start and Early Head Start programs are uniquely positioned to identify and respond to developmental concerns at the earliest stages. To maximize impact, community collaborations must be funded and strengthened to support effective early identification and intervention systems for children with special needs. Locally designed resource and referral systems should connect families with hospitals, pediatricians, and community providers to ensure timely access to appropriate services. Blending funds from IDEA, CDC, Head Start, and state and local investments can create a comprehensive continuum of care that ensures no child falls through the cracks.

Provide Community-Based Training for Parents, Educators, and Intervention Providers

2 As children's and families' needs evolve, Head Start programs and their community partners should participate regularly in training programs and resource-sharing events. These trainings should:

- Equip parents with the knowledge and confidence to engage in available services.
- Provide educators and intervention providers with the most up-to-date strategies and resources.
- Strengthen connections between medical and educational systems to improve care coordination.

Such efforts ensure families, schools, and health systems work together effectively to support children's development.

Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work (Cont.):

Expand State Investment in Transitional Kindergarten and Public Preschool

3 Across the nation, opportunities for Transitional Kindergarten (TK) and public preschool are growing. For students with disabilities, program effectiveness depends on early screening, individualized supports through the IEP process, supportive learning environments, and highly trained educators. With federal funding remaining flat this year and projected to decline in the next fiscal year, state and local investments are essential to expand access and maintain quality. Advocates must be vigilant in urging state leaders to prioritize these investments.

Embrace and Support Parental Choice

4 Head Start should strengthen collaborations not only with Title I schools, but also with a broad spectrum of educational options that serve children with disabilities—including charter schools, homeschool networks, community schools, faith-based institutions, and private programs. By working as advocates and partners, Head Start programs can help families navigate choices and build pathways that honor parents' aspirations for their children.

Host Statewide Summits to Showcase Exemplary Practices

5 To advance innovation and strengthen community partnerships—particularly in special education—Head Start should champion statewide summits that spotlight exemplary practices. These convenings, whether in-person or virtual, provide opportunities for programs to share models, learn from peers, and celebrate high-impact strategies. Association conferences can serve as powerful platforms to elevate success stories, disseminate lessons learned, and inspire replication across communities.

A HEAD START STORY:

HOW HEALTHY MEALS LEAD TO HEALTHY COMMUNITIES

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: HEALTH AND WELLNESS

"Health is the foundation of School Readiness."

The Head Start early childhood education program builds essential foundations for early childhood learning, giving children the academic and developmental skills they'll need for school. Preparing a child for academic success requires a program that supports the development of both mind and body. As a national network with local control, Head Start centers across the country are flexible to remain responsive to the unique needs of the communities they serve.

One of the ways in which Head Start serves communities is by addressing the wellness needs of young children and their families, and providing services that support physical, social, and mental health. Head Start services address health and wellness in four key areas:

- **Comprehensive Health Screenings:** Following the Early and Periodic Screening, Diagnostic, and Treatment protocol within 45 days of enrollment ensures children receive medical, dental, vision, and behavioral screenings and follow-up care.
- **Nutritional Support:** Healthy and nutritious breakfast, lunch, and snacks are provided to each child.
- **Physical Activity:** Children are encouraged to engage in regular physical activity.
- **Mental Health Services:** Professional support is provided to foster the social and emotional well-being of children and families.

HOW NUTRITIONAL NEEDS IMPACT SCHOOL READINESS

It is well-documented that proper nutrition is essential to the development and function of the human brain. The early years are crucial, as children require a consistent intake of vitamins and minerals in order to develop physically and cognitively. Essential nutrients for growth include proteins, fats, carbohydrates, vitamins, minerals, and water. The importance of adequate nutrition in the context of early childhood development was examined in a 2022 study by a team at the National Institute of Health.¹ Nutrition standards set through

¹ 'The Effects of Nutritional Interventions on the Cognitive Development of Preschool-Age Children: A Systematic Review': <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC8839299/>

the federal Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP) reimbursement program sets guidelines for “meal patterns” that address key nutritional needs by age and are designed to help develop healthy eating habits. The CACFP standards support the service of a greater variety of vegetables and fruit, whole grains, lean meats/meat alternative, and low-fat and fat-free dairy while minimizing added sugar and saturated fat. Federal funds reimburse Head Start programs that comply with these guidelines. Nutrition is one of the key areas in which Head Start provides support to families due to its importance in ensuring School Readiness.

Head Start provides children with access to a high-quality nutrition program in the following ways:

- Serving nutritious meals and snacks that meet a substantial portion of children’s daily nutritional needs, per CACFP guidelines.
- Conducting nutrition assessments and offering counseling.
- Collaborating with families to provide education on healthy eating, physical activity, and making nutritious food choices at home.
- Integrating nutrition education into daily classroom activities and the encouragement of family-style eating to build healthy eating habits.



For families facing food insecurity, staff can help parents connect with community resources to access food, or sign up for federal programs like the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and the Special Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program for Women, Infants, and Children (WIC).

In this article, we will learn how the Early Childhood Services team at Maui Economic Opportunity supports children and families in developing and sustaining healthy eating practices as part of the journey toward School Readiness.



HEAD START SUCCESS STORY: MAUI ECONOMIC OPPORTUNITY FOLLOWS RECIPE FOR SCHOOL READINESS SUCCESS

Interview with Maui Economic Opportunity Early Childhood Services Staff

Debbi Amaral

Director - Early Childhood Services

Alexandria (Alex) Domingo

Assistant Director - Early Childhood Services

Ashley Caris

Health Manager



The beautiful Hawaiian islands of Maui and Moloka'i are home to a vibrant, diverse, and resilient community. The concept of 'ohana' (family) is lived and breathed every day amongst people that look out for and help one another in challenging times. Families that participate in the Head Start program offered by the Maui Economic Opportunity (MEO) Community Action Program find this same mindset is infused in the care and attention given to each child.

MEO provides a broad range of key services to the community, including business development, housing assistance, transportation, and youth programs. The Early Childhood Services department operates eight Head Start centers throughout the island of Maui, and one center on the rural island of Moloka'i for children aged 3-5. They also operate a separate Kahi Kamali'i Infant and Toddler Center in Wailuku. In all, MEO Head Start is able to provide care for 180 children in the 3-5 year old age range.

Debbi Amaral, the Director of MEO Early Childhood Services is quick to credit her team for their daily efforts to help the families in their community, "We have incredibly passionate staff. The work that we do could not be done unless one truly believes in the importance of the work we are doing." The health and wellness, and specifically nutrition services, provided by Head Start address a real need for many families. The socioeconomic situation faced by low-income or no-income households in an area with a very high cost of living presents significant challenges to establishing regular, balanced meals at home. Parents working multiple jobs often do not have access to high-quality ingredients, nor the time to prepare and enjoy home-cooked meals with their children. Mealtimes at each MEO Head Start center address two crucial components of early childhood development; USDA-

approved nutrition standards required for optimal physical development, and the social environment to model healthy eating behaviors.

WHY MEALTIME MATTERS: NUTRITION

Meal patterns follow the prescribed CACFP guidelines to ensure children receive a balanced diet of foods that include a variety of vegetables and fruit, whole grains, lean meats/meat alternative, and low-fat and fat-free dairy. Prepared meals are regularly picked up from the Department of Education office on Maui and distributed to each center. If a child has special needs such as food allergies, staff will make substitutions on-site before serving.

Head Start teachers are acutely aware of the importance that adequate nutrition plays in supporting the overall goal of School Readiness. Hungry children have difficulty concentrating or regulating their emotions, which can lead to a lack of focus and behavior



problems. When children are well-fed, they are ready to learn. The routine of devoting time and attention to eating helps the children remain present and focused on classroom work throughout the day.

WHY MEALTIME MATTERS: BEHAVIOR

MEO Head Start staff dedicate 30-45 minutes each to three family-style meals each day; breakfast, lunch, and snacktime. Mealtimes at MEO Head Start centers are leisurely pauses in the day's activity, intentionally structured as an environment in which children can learn and model healthy eating behaviors. Staff use this opportunity to practice vocabulary and table manners, as well as encourage children to develop

the fine motor skills required to self-feed. Mealtimes also provide an opportunity for family engagement and education. Parents are invited to join their children for mealtimes as their schedule permits. Staff note how the simple act of eating together in the classroom is a unique opportunity for parents and children to bond over a shared experience, and expands the potential for improved eating habits for the whole family. "Often parents decide what to eat based on the here and now i.e. what is easiest. They don't necessarily see the long-term impacts of what is being eaten today," says Alex. "We continually provide opportunities for education so they can understand the long-term benefits of proper nutrition. Any family that we can educate and help them to see things differently, is one more family that is having better meals, better conversations, and more enriching experiences with their child."



Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work:

Strengthen Nutrition Services and Parent Education

1 Federal and state agencies should encourage and fund integrated nutrition education efforts within Head Start's family engagement and health frameworks. Policies should support coordination between Head Start programs, CACFP sponsors, and local public health departments to ensure that nutrition education is culturally responsive, evidence-based, and accessible to families year-round. All agencies should develop a Family Nutrition Education Plan which incorporates structured parent nutrition sessions into annual agency training and parent engagement calendars, aligning with CACFP guidelines and family wellness goals.

Promote Foods of Cultural Importance

2 Head Start programs should intentionally include foods of cultural importance in meals and learning experiences. This affirms children's cultural identities, strengthens family engagement, fosters belonging, and supports inclusive, respectful nutrition education that broadens understanding of diverse traditions. Develop parent handouts, workshops, and meal-planning tools that reflect local foods, languages, and cultural traditions, reinforcing trust and engagement.

Elevate Exemplary Practices Funded by the Office of Head Start (October 2025)

3 Head Start WEST will identify, document, and elevate exemplary practices from projects funded by the Office of Head Start in October 2025. Sharing these innovative, evidence-informed strategies strengthens service quality, improves outcomes for children and families, and fosters continuous learning and replication of effective approaches across the Head Start community.

Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work (Cont.):

Promote Research Partnerships

Local Head Start agencies should support research partnerships exploring the link between nutrition and cognitive growth in early education. Collaborations with academic institutions, public agencies, and community organizations will expand evidence on how nutritious, culturally responsive meals enhance learning, development, and long-term child success. Research partnerships should examine cross-agency partnerships to evaluate co-delivered nutrition education, community gardens, and partnerships with partners such as WIC.

Expand Professional Development for Education Staff

Head Start WEST will provide expanded professional development to help education staff integrate nutrition education into classrooms. Training, resources, and ongoing support will enable teachers to deliver culturally relevant, developmentally appropriate lessons that promote healthy eating, cognitive and physical development, and family engagement in lifelong wellness. All trainings should be guided by program evaluations and impacts identified in data collection.



A HEAD START STORY:

HOW LOCAL COMMUNITIES COMBINE FUNDING TO MEET CRITICAL NEEDS

EXEMPLARY PRACTICE: LOCAL GOVERNANCE AND LEADERSHIP

"Head Start is a national network with local control and tailored services."

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start has provided a path to School Readiness that works within local communities to identify and adapt to the unique needs of the families they serve. As a national network with local control, Head Start aims to provide potential solutions and support that align with those needs. To execute on this mission, local Head Start leaders must develop strategies to fund a comprehensive set of services in their program. As we will explore in this article, funding for Head Start programs across the country comes from several sources. A majority of programs combine federal funding with funds from their state and local prekindergarten programs. The strategy of combining funds from multiple sources to address needs identified by the local community is key to the principle of local governance.

A LOOK AT MULTI-SOURCE FUNDING MODELS

Head Start uses three primary terms to describe the dynamic of funding sources used to achieve program goals and support community services. The strategies of **Blending**, **Braiding**, and **Layering** are the use and management of two or more funding sources to support operation of Head Start programs:

Blending – Combining funds from two or more funding sources together to fund a specific part of a program or initiative.

Braiding – When funds are braided, two or more funding sources are used to support the total cost of a service while maintaining their separate identities.

Layering – Fund layering is used to guarantee that programs can improve service quality without duplication or replacement of existing child care funding. Funding from different sources are “layered” to fund comprehensive services that meet the needs of parents.

While all Head Start centers receive the majority of funding from the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 94% of programs also receive funds from other federal, state,

and local government sources or from private sources.

At the national level, these might be:

- **Migrant and Seasonal Head Start** - Dedicated to programs serving children from agricultural working families.
- **Child and Adult Care Food Program** - Reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults.
- **Title 1** - Financial assistance to local educational agencies to help struggling students in low-income areas meet state academic standards. Funds can be used for early literacy and math skills development.

At the State and local level, these might be:

- **State Investment in Direct Services:** According to NHSA 14 states currently fund Head Start and Early Head Start with dictated resources from the state's general fund.
- **State Child Care Funds:** Funded by Federal Child Care and Block Grant dollars and State dedicated Child Care grants.
- **State TK or Preschool:** Targeted School Readiness funds by State Departments of Education to serve 3-and-4-year-old children
- **Local Child Care funds:** Funds raised by a specific local tax by a city to offset cost or increase access.

PARENT ENGAGEMENT KEY TO ADDRESS COMMUNITY NEEDS

The principles of family engagement and parent choice are deeply woven into the Head Start philosophy. The last 60 years have proven that the best decisions happen locally. Every Head Start program tailors their services to meet the unique needs of the children, families, and communities it serves. Local leadership relies on several methods of engaging parents in their child's education journey. Two examples that will be expanded on below:



- The Policy Council (PC) includes parents in the decision making and budget approval process at every Head Start program.
- Tools like the Community Needs Assessment, a detailed survey conducted prior to each five year grant cycle, are crucial in helping identify the most pressing needs.

GLENN COUNTY OFFICE OF EDUCATION FUNDING STRATEGY

SUPPORTS PROGRAM EXPANSION

*Interview With Glenn County Office of Education
Ryan Bentz
Superintendent of Schools*

*Heather Aulabaugh
Director of Child and Family Services*

Glenn County sits squarely in the agricultural heartland of Northern California's Sacramento Valley. Framed by the Mendocino National Forest to the west, and the Sacramento River to the east, Glenn County's population is just north of 28,000. Agriculture is the primary industry, with over 1,000 working farms. The majority of the community is considered working-class. Forty-one percent of Glenn County households have an income below the self-sufficiency standard (\$67,680 annually), compared to 35% statewide. The Glenn County Office of Education (GCOE) supports eight school districts, three charter schools, and three infant/toddler centers in the communities of Orland, Willows, and Hamilton City.

A look at GCOE's budget narrative provides an excellent look at how one county school system manages the complexity of multiple funding streams to provide solutions for the community.

FEDERAL FUNDS INCLUDE:

- **Training and Technical Assistance Award** - Federal grant provided to organizations to offer specialized training to help meet technical, managerial, and financial goals.
- **Child and Adult Food Care Program (CAFCP)** - Federal program that provides reimbursements for nutritious meals and snacks to eligible children and adults.

STATE FUNDS INCLUDE:

- **General Child Care (CCTR)** - General Child Care program serving children up to age 12 in center-based and family child care home settings.
- **State Preschool Program (CSPP)** - State Preschool program serving 3 and 4 year olds in a center-based setting.



OTHER FUNDING SOURCES:

- **Childcare Resource and Referral Grant** - State and federal funds provide a childcare subsidy for eligible families to reduce or cover the cost of alternative childcare services for their children after 4PM.
- **Contributions** - Made by parents and the community in the areas of; curriculum support, classroom assistance, facility maintenance, Policy Council, and Selfassessment volunteers. This is an important piece of the puzzle as Head Start programs are required to obtain 20% of the non-federal share of their total budget, partially through a combination of cash and in-kind contributions. These resources come from community partners, staff, and families, and must be documented and verified to meet federal requirements. State contracts also contribute to the non-federal share, which is a significant benefit to their implementation.

LAYERING FUNDS TO PROVIDE QUALITY COMPREHENSIVE CARE

Like many school systems around the country, GCOE faces the challenges of balancing the requirements and applications of multiple different state and federal funding sources in a way that best benefits children and families. Superintendent of Schools Ryan Bentz, is clear that working with multiple funding streams is essential for the program to operate, “To be able to serve around 130 students in our classrooms, we have to have state and federal funding, and be able to use blended and layered funds.” He considers parent buy-in through channels like the Parent Policy Council (PC) an important resource, acting as the checks and balances to ensure that Head Start serves the community in the way that the community needs to be served. The program maintains open channels of communication with their parents throughout the year. Policy Council meetings are attended by a Board Liaison who communicates concerns and questions to the School Board. Broader community needs are determined through tools such as the Community Needs Assessment, as well as ongoing input from the PC, and surveys distributed to parents throughout the year.

Funding strategies in each school district vary based on community needs. To adapt childcare services to their community, GCOE “layers” funds to provide comprehensive care services to all enrolled children, whether or not they are enrolled in Early Head Start/Head Start.

Below is a look at how GCOE segments the school day according to funding source:

Time of Day	Funding Source	
7-8am (early start)	CCTR	CSPP
8am-12pm	Early Head Start	Head Start
12pm-4pm	CCTR	CSPP

This “stacking strategy” offers key benefits for children and families dually enrolled in state and federal programs. Families gain access to extended care hours, while teachers receive enhanced professional development that strengthens their ability to deliver targeted care and learning support where it is most needed.

“This strategy works because state and federal funds complement each other,” explains Heather Aulabaugh, GCOE Director of Child and Family Services. “Head Start is primarily a social service program with an educational component, while state programs focus on education with supportive social services. Together, they create a more complete system for children and families.”

LAYERING FUNDS TO PROVIDE QUALITY COMPREHENSIVE CARE

In preparation for the 2023-2028 Head Start grant cycle, GCOE distributed a comprehensive Community Needs Assessment that aligned with the requirements of the Head Start Program Performance Standards to determine community strengths, needs, and resources. Assessment outcomes were reviewed and incorporated into the GCOE 2023-2028 Strategic Plan.

Three key takeaways from the Needs Assessment:

- 76% Requests for child care were for children under the age of five.
- The rate of requests for children under the age of two rose rapidly since 2014.
- Over 90% of requests for full-time care were for children 0-3 years of age.

In response to the clear and growing need for childcare in the 0-3 age range, GCOE laid the groundwork for repurposing a set of modular buildings that had recently become available in Orland. Parent participation was key at every stage of the process; feedback was gathered at multiple stages regarding program development, construction, and classroom decoration. The result is a new Infant/Toddler center that is truly designed to meet the needs of the community. Heather succinctly explains why their participation is important to the future of the program, “We want parents to be fully invested in the process because they can become advocates of the program, and actively recruit other families to enroll.”

Chapman Infant and Toddler Center in Orland



Before



After



Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work:

Inter-governmental strategies to Optimize Local Control

1 A hallmark of Head Start as illustrated in this paper is the ability to build program options utilizing federal, state and local funds in some jurisdictions. This efficient collaboration of resources ensures children and families receive the most appropriate services identified by the community assessment. It is essential for Federal and State government representatives prioritize these designs and form collaborations to assist local programs ensuring sustainability. From recordkeeping to on-site monitoring, program reporting and health and safety regulations could be designed with the goal of reducing burdens on local programs.

Facility Development Support that Encourages Collaboration

2 An essential element of high-quality learning environments. For the Head Start model, this includes space for adult education/parent engagement, health services and space to train future teachers, volunteers and therapeutic services to families. Too often facilities are inadequate to support the gold standard of Head Start local programs. It is essential that regulations, facility waivers, and funding incorporate a variety of funding sources for development, construction and ongoing ownership. It is essential that federal, state, and local funders recognize that flexible and sustainable facilities funding is pivotal to ensuring quality, safe, and healthy environments for children, families, and the early childhood workforce.

Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work (Cont.):

Fiscal and Governance Training to Support Co-funding Environments

Local Education Agencies and Community Non-profits need ongoing training to ensure the correct stewardship of funds and oversight of the agency. Oversight agencies must collaborate regularly to provide accounting policies and procedures that assist local programs with cost allocations, funding terms and conditions and governance. This supportive effort will reduce any waste and optimize taxpayers' investments in early care and education services in their local communities. Above all, robust internal controls are essential to maintaining fiscal integrity, accountability, and public confidence in the use of federal and state funds.

Elevate Quick Response, Temporary and Mobile Services

In the West, disasters are often occurring. In the event of a natural disaster or service disruption, Head Start programs should be prepared to mobilize in quickly so that services to children do not diminish. State and Federal funding officials should pre-approve, to the degree possible service plans so that local agencies do not have any service disruptions or loss of funding. From wildfires to volcanos, facilities issues to serving homeless populations, Head Start programs and state funding partners need to be agile in their service delivery.

Community Assessments Data to Include Funding Resources

We recommend Head Start Community Assessments include data of funding sources for the purpose of expanding services and meeting community needs. Community Assessments are intended to serve as a central planning resource for Head Start and acts as an organizational compass for leadership, staff, and community partners. The assessment supports program leadership and staff in decision-making, by helping to build a better understanding of the communities served. However, an assessment of resources available to deliver services is not included in the analysis.

A HEAD START STORY:

HOW CHANGES ON THE HORIZON WILL IMPACT THE WORK WE DO NOW

In July 2025, Kristen Hayes, Consultant, presented to the Head Start WEST Executive Leadership Council on strategies for programs to thrive in the coming years. This paper summarizes her insights.

Over the last 60 years, Head Start has responded to significant changes in social, education, and health care policy, all while managing grant requirements and administrative priorities. In recent years, the pace of change has accelerated, creating a complex landscape filled with opportunity, excitement, apprehension, and occasional tension. As we celebrate Head Start's 60th anniversary, we recognize that change will continue at both the federal and state levels, requiring constant evaluation of organizational and programmatic strengths as well as opportunities for innovation.



BALANCING LEGACY AND MODERNIZATION

Forward-thinking program leaders must balance Head Start's legacy with the demands of modernization.

- **Legacy:** Something transmitted from the past—Head Start's legacy is the foundation guiding decision-making and inspiring commitment to serving the nation's youngest learners. Time and again, the community has rallied to Head Start's call.
- **Modernization:** The act of becoming more current, efficient, or technologically advanced. Modernization often involves updating outdated practices and embracing operational and technological efficiencies. While compliance has traditionally been rewarded over innovation, modernization is essential for program sustainability.

The balance between legacy and modernization was evident during the COVID-19 pandemic. Head Start programs quickly adopted virtual learning and engagement, demonstrating that honoring legacy and embracing modernization are not mutually exclusive. Lessons learned during the pandemic will be critical as programs navigate future changes, including an evolving workforce. Millennials now hold leadership and management roles in Head Start, and by 2030, Generation Z will comprise roughly 30% of the U.S. workforce. With Baby Boomers largely exited, programs must adapt to generational differences in work styles, career mobility, and technological fluency. To remain relevant, Head Start must evolve as an employer of choice.

Within the next five years, balancing legacy and modernization will transition from “nice to have” to “must have.” Three modernization strategies are essential for Head Start leaders at every organizational level:

- Succession Planning
- Artificial Intelligence (AI)
- Contingency Planning



SUCCESSION PLANNING

Succession planning involves identifying and developing potential successors for critical positions to ensure program continuity. While not explicitly required by statute, it is vital for organizational sustainability. It should be applied to leadership and key positions, aligning with the agency’s mission, vision, and strategic priorities. Effective succession planning includes reviewing position descriptions, evaluating structures, and ensuring competitive compensation.

Key questions for programs:

1. *What are our critical positions?*
2. *Do current descriptions reflect the full scope of each role?*
3. *Are positions built around a person rather than desired outcomes?*
4. *Are roles manageable for one person?*
5. *Is compensation competitive to attract qualified candidates?*



ARTIFICIAL INTELLIGENCE (AI)

Generative AI has emerged as a transformative workplace tool. By March 2024, hundreds of millions of users accessed AI tools for tasks ranging from scheduling to content creation. AI can enhance operational efficiency, support data analysis, and improve storytelling. Early adoption in Head Start includes virtual assistants for scheduling and AI-assisted communications.

However, AI also raises ethical questions around privacy, copyright, and reputational risk.

Key questions for programs:

- 1. Who leads AI strategy within the program?*
- 2. Does training include responsible AI use?*
- 3. How are vendors and partners employing AI?*

CONTINGENCY PLANNING

A contingency plan is a “plan B” for addressing incidents or interruptions to normal operations. The COVID-19 pandemic highlighted the importance of having live, adaptable contingency plans. These plans should be reviewed annually and cover potential loss of funding, classroom space, or community partnerships.

Key questions for programs:

- 1. Does a contingency plan exist for incidents outside our control?*
- 2. How often is it updated?*
- 3. How would potential funding losses impact non-federal share, administrative costs, and indirect cost pools?*



Balancing legacy and modernization requires focused human and financial resources. As Harvard Business Review suggests:

- What decisions today will still make sense a year from now?*
- If this decision were used as an example of leadership, what would it teach?*
- What is the cost of waiting?*



Looking To The Future: Three BIG Trends Affecting Head Start

These trends underscore Head Start's need to actively implement the strategies above:

Labor Shifts:

Competition for skilled education professionals—including leadership, classroom, and allied staff—will continue to drive up costs. Achieving wage parity with TK–12 systems remain a challenge as both systems are under pressure to raise wages, qualifications and workplace wellness.

State-Level Early Education Expansion:

State programs are growing, but may impose fees, diverse eligibility requirements, and limitations on comprehensive service models. Programs must adapt or secure multiple funding sources. Head Start's historical flexibility allows for local adaptation. Efficient operations and technology will be essential.

Federal Funding Uncertainty:

Federal investments and oversight in early care and education will take years to rebound. The dismantling of federal regional offices creates ripple effects, limiting planning clarity. Discretionary funding pressures from health care, military, Social Security, and Medicare will continue consume federal resources. Advocacy and coalition-building are critical to securing necessary resources.



ABOUT US

The Region 9 Head Start Association Inc. doing business as Head Start WEST (HSW) is a not-for-profit organization created to support at-risk families and to represent the interests of Head Start WEST programs. We are committed to elevating the Head Start Community through education, training programs, and services.

HSW provides assistance to Head Start programs in Arizona, California, Nevada, Hawaii, and the Pacific Region to ensure their ongoing viability and vitality. We represent the largest geographical region in the United States and serve more than 130,000 infants, toddlers, preschool children, and families. The association's members deliver the following services: Head Start, Early Head Start, and Early Head Start Child Care Partners.

Since 2001, HSW has provided programs, conferences, trainings, and events to continue elevating the conversations of the Head Start Community so that we may all better serve the families and children throughout our region.

Head Start WEST provides programs and services that assist members to:

- elevate the overall Head Start conversation
- meet or exceed Head Start program performance standards
- provide high-quality, innovative, and community-based comprehensive services
- gain access to professional development and training
- network with other Head Start program leaders, teachers, advocates, and parents

The Head Start WEST Association also lends additional power to Head Start's voice and advocacy with government officials, stakeholders, and the public. HSW collaborates with other state [Head Start Associations](#), the [National Head Start Association](#), the [National Migrant and Tribal Head Start Association](#), the [National Indian Head Start Directors Association](#), and the [Office of Head Start](#).

Our Manifesto

We are passionate about the possibility of giving all families and children from birth to 5, an opportunity to succeed in school, and in life. This is our purpose.

The Head Start Community is our inspiration, and we wish to foster inclusivity, kindness, knowledge, leadership, courage, and innovation. It is our duty to elevate the Head Start Community by offering insightful, innovative, and pertinent programs and services via our conferences, networks, events, and advocacy.



ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

It cannot be overstated that a project of this magnitude requires the extensive support of a collection of hardworking, passionate, and incredibly knowledgeable individuals. Over the course of 2025, Head Start WEST cast a net far and wide to gather stories of exemplary practices across the Head Start community. This is the first manifestation of these stories and it would not be possible without the dedication of those who take on this work day to day, hour by hour, second by second.

Head Start WEST would like to thank Theresa Robles, Kristen Hayes, and Cynthia Yao for giving to this project countless hours of research, interviewing, writing, and editing – drawing on lived and learned experience between them.

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Of course, a thank-you to you, the reader. May you find yourself in these stories and be emboldened to share your own. Head Start is a whole of many parts. Thank you for doing yours.

Lastly, Head Start WEST extends our utmost gratitude to the youngest of our society—to the little learners who go through the Head Start program, who learn essential skills, receive necessary medical care, eat nutritious meals, and will someday grow into spectacular versions of themselves—their potential already incubating in classrooms across this country.

At the end of it all, in every paragraph, word, and even the spaces between letters—it is about the children.

To the future we see, and the one they will build.

Thank you



HEAD START



Elevating the Head Start Community™



WHAT WE DO



Support Head Start agencies with caring, inclusive solutions that help every program succeed.



Inspire bold, forward-thinking leaders through training, conferences, and learning.



Connect organizations to share wisdom, build trust, and meet challenges together.



Collaborate creatively with others to expand opportunities for children and families.



Give voice to our communities and standing strong for early childhood services.

Contact Us

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LEARN MORE



www.headstartwest.org

HEAD START



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