

# What Really Makes Head Start Work?

## You May Be Surprised!

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Project Head Start is one of the most successful people-programs ever created. Over its first 30 years of service it has touched the lives of over **14.5** million preschool children and their families. Formal research tracking the lives of children indicates each dollar spent on comprehensive, full-service early childhood programs returns six dollars in reduced later public expenses. These savings are due to a reduction in the need for public school special education, one-half the number of incidents involving trouble with the law and increased levels of employment as young adults.

What REALLY makes Head Start work? As decision makers seek to capitalize on the promise this program offers by expanding the program itself--or by reshaping other people-oriented services by adapting "lessons from Head Start"--what is it that we've REALLY LEARNED from over a quarter century of operating this program?

The purpose of this executive briefing is to more accurately describe the key to Head Start's dramatic success. It was created because the secret to Head Start's success is not easy to see and could readily be lost in the scramble to expand Head Start programs and to create what have increasingly been called "Head Start-like" programs. Toward the conclusion of this executive briefing are direct recommendations for legislators.

### The Search for Quick and Easy Answers

Head Start's success seems easy to explain. Some claim its success is due to the fact that it "gets at children early."

But public school kindergartens who have long served five year old children, and who increasingly are reaching out to four year olds, also get at children early.' Public school kindergartens, however, do not get the results that Head Start does. There must be something other than simply getting at children early.'

Another quick answer is that "Head Start involves the parents." While this is true, parent involvement is voluntary and many parents are so involved in work, school and their own problems that they seldom are at their Head Start center. **And yet Head Start works!**

There must be more to answering question this ....

### Getting at the Real Answer

To understand what makes Head Start work requires some serious effort. This is true because the answer is that Head Start's success comes from a unique marriage of "hard" and "soft, dimensions. The hard dimensions are relatively evident and identifiable. The soft dimensions are much more subtle and we are still learning about them. It is this author's belief that while most attention is paid to the hard dimensions as people seek to replicate the success of Head Start, it is the soft dimensions working in concert with the hard dimensions that truly dictate the success of the program.

### Starting With The Most Visible: The "Hard" Dimensions

As one seeks to understand what makes an

organization or program function, the typical place to look is at the visible dimensions of mission, structure, regulation, and systems. When examining Head Start, there is much to be learned from these "hard" dimensions of organizational functioning, for a major portion of Head Start's uniqueness is explained by these hard dimensions.

### The Mission

The mission of Project Head Start is clear: to break the cycle of failure by preparing young low-income children and their families to better succeed in life. This mission has not changed since Head Start was launched in 1965.

This clarity of mission has served Head Start well. It dictates who should be recruited into the program and the services that they should receive. Few "people-programs" are blessed with such clarity of mission.

### The Structure

The structure of Head Start is unique. It is one of the very few publicly-funded programs in existence that represents a direct partnership between the Federal government and local community agencies. 1500 local agencies receive Head Start grants directly from the Federal government. Grantees are required to contribute a substantial portion of the overall program cost (a minimum of 20% of the overall investment through a variety of service and dollar contributions), thus achieving this partnership.

To be eligible for Federal funding, the local Head Start grantee must be a non-profit organization. Grantees may be corporations created solely to provide Head Start services, public schools, community action programs or in a few cases, colleges or universities.

This diverse group of Head Start agencies is important to the success of Head Start. No institution was "assigned" Head Start. Agencies are grantees because they want to provide Head Start services in their communities. This self-identified desire contributes to the success of the program. The business model is like that of

a franchise where possible franchisees compete to get the right to serve a given territory. To retrain the right to serve an assigned area the franchisee must maintain defined standards.

The Federal structure for Head Start has remained lean, forcing many decisions to be made locally. The major role of Federal Head Start personnel has been policy creation, grant administration and monitoring. Currently, Head Start has funding of over three billion dollars and Federal management is handled by only 225 Federal employees--a lean ration which has contributed to Head Start's Success.

### Regulation

As one might imagine, much of what Head Start is today comes from the regulations created to define it, shape it and make it accountable. Most of these regulations come from the Federal offices responsible over the years for Head Start: The Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO), the Office of Child Development (OCD) and the Administration on Children, Youth and Families (ACYF). Some regulations come from the states, which may license early childhood facilities and programs. While the accumulated requirements surrounding the program after 30 years are substantial, they are not overburdening.

All local agencies must conform to over 450 **performance standards**. As part of an annual refunding process, the local agency must complete and report on an extensive self-assessment using these standards as the template against which to test agency performance. Periodically, federally managed assessment teams do an on-site review of the local agency's compliance with the **performance standards**.

Head Start is managed with a "loose-tight" style by the Federal government, borrowing from the terminology popularized by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman in In Search of Excellence. The "tight" management dimension comes in the form of annual refunding, constant testing against performance standards and monitoring. The "loose" dimension comes about in that there is a great deal of flexibility in program design and

service delivery. This results in highly diverse programs with services designed to meet Federal guidelines while meeting locally determined family needs.

To its everlasting credit, the federal Head Start administration has never created a "Federal early childhood curriculum." While agencies are required to have a curriculum, the curriculum is determined by Head Start parents and staff within each local agency. No attempts has been made to prescribe or to standardize what is being taught, thus avoiding the most undesirable situation of a government trying to shape its low income youth in some paternalistic cookie-cutter fashion.

### Systems

The persona of Head Start was and is defined by its *systems*. In addition to an educational delivery system, there are systems to assure the delivery of health (medical, dental and mental) services; nutrition services; parent involvement services; special services to children with disabilities; social services; and transportation services. All systems must exist in every Head Start agency.

These systems are designed locally to meet local needs. They are to be constantly monitored and adjusted to meet changing local needs. They are to be integrated so as to reduce inefficiency and best meet individual family needs. They are not to duplicate existing local resources, and are to work in concert with existing local services.

### The High-Impact, Harder to Identify: The "Soft" Dimensions

The success of Head Start starts with the "hard" dimensions of mission, structure, regulation and systems. These "hard" dimensions are necessary but not sufficient, however, to explain and understand what enables Head Start to be successful. The "soft" dimensions are critical to understanding Head Start's success. These soft dimensions result in the development of a "compassionate partnership" between each parent and the Head Start staff serving that family.

### A COMPASSIONATE PARTNERSHIP.

If there is a single secret to Head Start's success, it is this...

The Head Start staff enters into a **compassionate partnership with each Head Start parent to shape the future of their Head Start child.**

Take a moment and reread the above statement.

This event takes place over and over all across the country, in rural settings and urban, small programs and large. **It is accomplished one parent and one child at a time, currently over seven hundred thousand times per year!**

How does it happen?

This unique relationship develops due to the simultaneous existence of several key factors:

- Trust
- Compassion
- An unpunishing nature
- Positive attitudes of Head Start staff
- Focus on the child
- Closeness to the customer
- The Psychological contract under which Head Start works
- Persistence

### Trust Is Critical

Head Start agencies are trusted by low income parents. Most recruitment of children is by word-of-mouth referrals.

Potential Head Start parents hear good things about Head Start. Head Start has lots to offer and it has many years of positive history in the communities being served. Head Start staff develop this reputation of trust through years and years of careful work which result in positive referrals from current to potential Head Start parents.

### The Message of Compassion

Head Start staff care. Their interest in young

children and families is evident from the moment they meet the parent. They tend to be unpretentious and informal which helps put the parent at ease. Most initial meetings involve the children, and the Head Start staff person is likely to gravitate to the child. Parents are impressed early with both the caring and skill Head Start staff demonstrate. This early impression is further strengthened by the contact made between the adults.

Head Start staff care about and respect the rights of potential Head Start parents. This becomes immediately obvious to the parent whose child will enroll in Head Start. There is no "sales pitch" to turn the parent off. Head Start staff are not trained sales people. They have no commissions to earn, no quotas to meet. Because of this they may actually be the best sales people around. Without even knowing it, they use the best of business sales techniques to connect with and establish a trusting relationship with the parent. They focus on their customer's wants and hopes and make meaningful contact with them in a non-judgmental, non-manipulative manner. They are genuinely compassionate.

#### Head Start Is Unique-It Can't Punish Parents!

The establishment of this compassionate partnership is fostered by the fact that Head Start is, by its structure, legal make-up and philosophy, non-punitive. Many Head Start parents have had a history of being punished, threatened and embarrassed by institutions. Many have been forced to apply for public assistance--their very sustenance--and can lose this aid if they involve themselves in any of a wide variety of situations.

Many Head Start parents have a history of personal failure in their own schooling situation--a history that includes regular punishment and embarrassment. Many Head Start parents have had their phones removed and/or utilities cut off for non-payment of bills. Other Head Start parents rely upon public assistance or a series of unstable jobs to feed and clothe their families--many find their income constantly in jeopardy.

It is simply no wonder that Head Start becomes

such a glowing beacon of hope and support to the Head Start parent. *Head Start cannot threaten to dismiss a child for non-performance of either parent or child. It can only offer to help.*

#### The Positive Attitude of Head Start Staff Enables Partnership

Another contributing force to forming this compassionate partnership is the positive attitude of Head Start staff. There is something inherently optimistic about working with young children with their whole lives ahead of them. The repeated successes--seeing children blossom and overcome major learning deficits--foster a continued upbeat attitude. This makes Head Start staff people good people to be with, and makes establishing a partnership with them desirable to Head Start parents.

In any people-program, key contributors to its success are the people who work with clients. This is true for Head Start. Once again, Head Start is unique. It is not their academic degrees that make Head Start staff successful, even though many possess impressive professional credentials. The success of Head Start staff is most evident in their style. They are informal, casual and approachable. This comes from the heritage of working with young children--work where you are much more likely to be sitting on the floor than at a desk.

You must closely listen and attend to a young child to meet his or her needs. Instruction is heavily one-on-one or in small groups. There are no formal lectures. The nature of instruction is to use lots of music, activity and movement. This informality serves Head Start staff extremely well. There isn't much opportunity to take yourself too seriously. It reduces psychological distance from the parent and greatly enhances the staff person's impact upon both parent and child.

The current drive toward formal academic credentials may reflect knowledge accumulation, but too often also result in *more and more distance between student and teacher or parent and staff member.*

*A compassionate partnership can only be established if the distance between the parent*

and staff member is lessened.

### The Focus Begins With The Child

The focus on the child, inherent in the design of the program, facilitates partnering. While it is clear in the design of Head Start that strengthening parenting skills and enabling parents to solve their own problems is a key to success, the visible focus of the program is upon the child, thus giving the parent some privacy. When trust develops between the parent and Head Start staff member through their joint efforts in working with the Head Start child, the parent very often feels free to voluntarily begin to work on their own problems.

This relationship becomes extremely productive in that the prerequisite to success in solving intrapersonal or interpersonal problems in the establishment of the trusting environment and the self-initiated desire to improve. The result has been breakthrough growth on the part of parents in Head Start--beating illiteracy, completing schooling, becoming self-sufficient, entering substance abuse programs and achieving therapeutic triumphs over emotional problems.

### Closeness to the Customer

A major emphasis in business settings today is an examination of how the organization can become more customer-focused. United States manufacturers have historically created products with no customer input. Service industries have grown up with only minimal focus on true customer desires. Government services are most frequently designed and administered with little input from those they seek to serve. Even though the "customer service" interest of the late 1980's was not even receiving a glimmer of anyone's attention when Head Start was created in 1965, Head Start was established as perhaps the most "customer-responsive" people program in existence.

Every Head Start program must have a **Policy Council** made up of at least 50% parents of currently enrolled Head Start children. All programs delivered must be reviewed, monitored

and approved by the Policy Council. An annual needs assessment must be completed to achieve refunding. The net result is a constantly adjusting, constantly renewing organization built to meet the defined wants of the customers they serve.

The local Head Start agency further stays close to its customer base by hiring a number of parents into entry level positions. Over forty percent of Head Start staff are currently or former Head Start parents. The Head Start staff must also reflect the racial and ethnic make-up of the families being served. This closeness to the customer makes each Head Start agency unique.

The relative smallness of Head Start agencies allows them to adjust programs swiftly. The responsiveness in this system to changing parent wants and needs would make most businesses jealous. Failure to establish a closeness to the customer means no compassionate partnership will be achieved. Remember, the parents - the customers - get to decide this!

### The Psychological Contract

Another "soft" dimension that has shaped Head Start's success has been the psychological contract under which Head Start operates. Every Head Start program is expected to work closely with each family to identify its needs and to develop a plan to find ways of meeting those needs.

Unlike most public schools, who attempt to limit their responsibility to education, Head Start is expected to help families remove any impediment to success that they might have. This encourages a holistic view--a look at the total family and the forces impacting upon it. This also increases the likelihood that what is seen will be causes as well as symptoms.

Head Start staff *simply aren't allowed to limit their focus*. Candidly, many Head Start staff may not even fully understand the complexity and difficulty of some of the problems they confront. In naivety and through sheer heart-felt determination, great progress is made by Head

Start staff who *believe* they can help and thus jump in and work with the family and a wide variety of other service agencies to resolve identified problems.

### Persistence Pays - In the Creation of a Compassionate Partnership!

Finally, the compassionate partnership is established because Head Start staff are persistent. They just keep phoning, visiting and trying. It is easy not to be involved if you're asked just once, or merely receive a note home from school. It is nearly impossible to resist when you're invited to be a part of the program the tenth, nineteenth or twenty-seventh time--by people who really seem to care!

### What Should You Do?

If you are a legislative leader.....

Proceed cautiously when asked to fund "Head Start-like" programs. Many of these programs are designed to look enough like Head Start to attract funding--while, quite possibly, failing to achieve Head Start's results by overlooking or being unable to achieve the critically important creation of a compassionate partnership.

Consider that if you want more Head Start services, the simplest, lowest-cost way to achieve this to expand funding of current Head Start programs. This is possible whether you are a legislative leader at the national or state level. Demand that **any** expansion of Head Start, whether initiated by you or by others, carry with it sufficient funds to assure the continued achievement of both the hard and the soft dimensions identified above.

Be aware that the major movement in education today is NOT to have local educational systems take over Head Start, but to use the Head Start model in both its hard and soft dimensions as a pattern for the restructure of the public education system itself!

### In Conclusion....

As each of us - legislative leaders, educational leaders and Head Start professionals - seek to expand Head Start or to apply what we have learned from Head Start to other programs, we must take the time to REALLY UNDERSTAND WHAT MAKES THIS PROGRAM WORK.

We must not focus only on the easier-to-see "hard" dimensions of mission, structure, regulation and systems. If we try to do this, and lose sight of the need to address the "soft dimensions", and thus fail to establish a compassionate partnership, WE ARE DESTINED TO FAIL.

There are no cheap "partial" answers. We cannot achieve Head Start's success by selecting some of its dimensions and excluding others.

If we'd like to provide a variety of services, but exclude parents from a decision-making role in the program, we will fail.

If we do not do all that is necessary to create a COMPASSIONATE PARTNERSHIP, we will fail.

***These are failures this country--and our families--cannot afford to experience.***