



Call to Action-2016  
Response to the proposed policy statement

***Family Engagement: From the Early Years to the Early Grades.  
Sharing Excitement and Caution***

The Wisconsin Head Start Association commends you on the creation of this ground-breaking Policy Statement. We believe that it lays out both the opportunity and the necessity to involve parents as partners in the learning of their young child. We have long believed that effective family engagement must be a key component in redesigning a school system that truly is successful in preparing children for their demanding future.

The Wisconsin Head Start Association is made up of 42 grantees providing Head Start services and 20 grantees providing Early Head Start services to families in our state over the last 50 years. We serve every one of the 72 counties in our state and interact with 424 school districts that serve the children of our state.

Given our 50-year history of working with young children in Wisconsin who struggle with poverty, we KNOW that working with parents as partners is critical to our success as Head Start programs. The theme *Family Engagement from the Early Years to the Early Grades*, is both correct and captures the huge challenges we face. The low-income parents that we serve learn how to take responsibility and support the learning of their child. Head Start, at its core is a dual-generation program that gives careful attention to our internal family engagement plan and simultaneously integrates a complex child development plan. Through parent education, support groups and daily encouragement from Head Start staff; parents realize the importance of their child's learning and receive materials and ideas that are used at home.

Parents are partners in Head Start programs. Head Start staff are invited by parents for regular home visits throughout the year. Parent conferences where they are treated as valued partners, are time to review, with their child's teacher, data and examples of their child's learning progress at Head Start. Both parent and teacher learn from these meetings. Understanding why reading daily to children is important, parents come to programs celebrating reading, and take a book home with them. Parents develop trusting relationships with their child's teacher and other supportive staff members such as family services workers. They, like their children, are prepared to engage in the lifelong educational process when they leave Head Start.

A significant concern is the lack of partnering with families that takes place once they leave Head Start programs. Parents feel empowered to continue active participation in the educational process their child begins in Head Start. Yet too often, parents are kept out of

participating in meaningful ways in the K-12 system. Joining Parent-Teacher groups with the focus of fundraising for school supplies, is not the engagement that parents seek. It is important, but for true educational intervention, parents must be seen by K-12 teachers, Principals and District personnel as partners for success. If we are to truly succeed with young children at risk, we must quit peeling parent and child apart at the front door of the school only to invite them in when the school needs their help in a situation where their child is not doing well. Once a parent is shunned or treated as unimportant, it is very difficult to get meaningful involvement.

### *Parents matter in Head Start*

Parents know whether they are being treated with respect. Respect is at the very core of any partnership, be it between two adults or two institutions. Head Start staff see parents as partners in their child's learning and create a culture that is built around this.

When federal regulations were being developed that defined Head Start program functions, parents were positioned and treated as important. The idea of a Policy Council, charged with meaningful involvement in helping to understand and formally approve or disapprove of the child development plan, the family services plan and half a dozen other internal operational plans necessary to operating a Head Start program, was made up of parents, community members and staff.

The proposed policy statement reflects what we know really works for young children and their families. Within the 17 pages of the statement, real issues so critical to meaningful parent and family engagement is seen.

Wisconsin Head Start Association applauds the proposed policy statement for tackling sensitive topics such as:

- “Creating equal partnerships” between families and professionals.
- Families as their child’s “first and foremost teachers, advocates and nurturers”.
- The creation of “positive relationships” between families and staff in the institutions serving the young child. Not treating family engagement as a “box to check”, but rather of critical importance to all that is occurring in the young child’s life.
- Building within the parent a positive attitude toward school that translates to enhanced academic performance of their child.
- The creating of a “culture where families are seen as assets and partners in their child’s development, learning and wellness”.
- Relationship development requiring a series of regular contacts over time with a goal-oriented commitment from each party.
- Giving a priority to the child’s social emotional and mental health, working closely with families.
- Building both staff competencies and family competencies to succeed in their respective parts of the partnership.
- Providing services that are responsive to the culture and linguistics that are appropriate in the life of the child and his or her family.

- Creating systems that embed effective family engagement within every aspect of the work that is being done through child care providers, Head Start, public schools and community service agencies.
- Continuous improvement as necessary approaches for services based upon the data that is emerging.

### Commitment to continuous improvement

Wisconsin Head Start Association is committed to continuous improvement and along with others in our Region V Head Start Association, developed a concept to provide measureable data on the quality of relationships between parents and Head Start staff. In partnership with NORC at the University of Chicago, a digitized record and analysis of parent experiences was developed and launched. This project has expanded to include the National Head Start Association, and supported by the Rainin Foundation of Oakland, California and the Ford Foundation. The focus is to create a tool that will inform the practice of Head Start staff to continuously improve the quality of their work with parents. As an association, we encourage additional support for these types of projects that have a proven successful track record.

Partnership and respect between LEA's and early childhood programs is critical to the success of the proposed Policy Statement. There have been legislative advances. As an example, in the Head Start Act of 2007 grantees were required to enter into formal agreements/memorandums of understanding with their local LEA's. The LEA's had no such requirements, so creating these agreements were at times nearly impossible. The new Every Student Succeeds Act (*ESSA*) signed into law December 18, 2015 by President Obama, changed that by requiring LEA's to have a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU) with their local Head Start program. This now creates one more signal of mutual accountability and moves the idea of a commitment to continuous improvement forward.

### Moving the Policy Statement forward into practice.

The proposed policy statement addresses the roles of the states, beginning on page 7, with terms like "*recommendations* for state action"; "family engagement *should* be emphasized"; states *should* highlight the role families play in their child's brain development, etc. As Head Start operated by Health and Human Services are "federal to local" programs, we realize that this is not the case for the Department of Education programs that operates on a federal to state level. In this reality, DOE has less ability to direct specific behaviors. Cross-systems partnerships will need to be developed for success of the new policy statement.

The Wisconsin Head Start Association makes the following recommendations to the proposed policy statement:

- Use the proposed policy statement as a template against which the Performance Standards are written. This is an open window of opportunity that will too soon close. The Office of Head Start is in the process of creating a new set of Head Start Performance Standards. As currently proposed it would weaken the importance of parent engagement in some areas while encouraging it in others. The Performance Standards are the core regulations that drive Head Start's work.

- Create a system for assurance that the regulations and expectations of providing services are in complete alignment with the policy statement. In every program operated by HHS it should be required. Where HHS cannot require these actions by an organization delivering services find ways of incentivizing these actions. Positive rewards always create better relationships and partnerships than threat of defunding or other punishment.
- Create a culture of change that requires cooperation and meaningful engagement between agencies working with families in both DOE and HHS. Realize that while educating teachers and families to enable them to move equal partnerships forward, program administrators must be prepared at the federal, state and local levels to embrace these policies. Creating cultural change requires that these senior and middle managers within HHS and DOE believe in the research, the experience and the importance of what you address within the policy statement.
- Training for community partners such as: building administrators, child care directors, Head Start directors and those who daily manage services to children and families. Within the Head Start system regularly providing training in both the regulations and attitudes necessary to successfully creating partnerships between staff and parents, takes place often.
- Inform our communities of changes. Hearing of proposed changes must be shared in multiple ways over a period of time.

### Supporting changes on multiple levels

The Wisconsin Head Start Association will engage with the new policy statement in the following ways:

1. Include the proposed policy statement on our WHSA website and encouraging member agencies to include a link to the policy statement on their websites.
2. Member agencies will share the policy statement or a summary with parents in their programs and LEAs in their target areas. It can become a part of the negotiations that result in a joint and meaningful MOU.
3. Work with the WHSA Board and WI Head Start Collaboration office to distribute the policy statement to the 424 LEA's within our state with particular focus on those providing 4K services.
4. Work with other professional organizations and colleagues to distribute the policy statement with focus on developing meaningful partnerships for implementation of the policies proposed.
5. Establish joint training opportunities for Head Start, child care and public school managers, teachers and staff regarding the opportunity and challenges in implementing this proposed Policy Statement.

The Wisconsin Head Start Association is proud of the forward thinking vision of the proposed policy statement. WHSA compliments the thoughtfulness that went into creating the statement. On behalf of the young children and families of Wisconsin, we are pledged to do

what we can to drive these actions forward. WHSA believe that for children of our state to succeed in their future, the thoughts, recommendations and requirements that will come from this policy statement are of absolutely critical importance.

We know the important dimensions identified in this policy statement will make a major difference in our delivering upon the promise that Every Student Succeeds in America.

Thank you for your attention to our recommendations.



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Please Note:

Attached is *What Really Makes Head Start Work? You May Be Surprised!* a thoughtful piece written by Dr. Tim Nolan, a long-time Wisconsin Head Start Director and author of numerous works associated with early childhood education and leadership. A number of Head Start agencies have adopted the term “Compassionate Partnering™” as a part of their mission statement-training their staff teachers, parents and managers in how to accomplish it most effectively. It is being used to shape the culture of compassionate partnerships between parents and staff members in Head Start programs from Florida to Alaska.