

What Really Makes Head Start Work? You May Be Surprised!

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Head Start is one of the most successful people-programs ever created. In its first 50 years of service it has touched the lives of over 31 million preschool children and their families...10% of the population of America. Formal research tracking the lives of children indicates each dollar spent on comprehensive, full-service early childhood programs returns 11 to 16 dollars in reduced later public expenses. While some cognitive gains might be lost, life gains are not! These savings are due to a reduction in the need for public school special education, dramatically reduced incarceration and teen pregnancy and increased levels of employment as young adults.

What *REALLY* makes Head Start work? It is critical that you, as a parent of a young child who might benefit from this program, fully understand its potential for you and your family. You'll find that we have a program designed to support your success as a parent. It is designed to support you as your child's primary teacher. It is designed to offer you a partnership with some of the most talented, highly trained and deeply committed early childhood experts in the country.

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 misunderstood. This briefing includes direct recommendations for parents and community members who want to help families succeed.

A Search For Some Quick and Easy Answers

Head Start's success *seems* easy to explain. Some claim its success is due to the fact that it serves children early. But public school kindergartens that have long served 5-year-old children, and who increasingly are reaching out to 4-year-olds, also serve children early. *Public school kindergartens, however, do not begin to get the results that Head Start does.*

There *must* be something other than early service delivery.

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 spend time at the Head Start center. And yet Head Start works.

There must be *more* to answering this question.

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 the visible dimensions of mission, structure, regulation and systems. When examining Head Start, much can be learned from these “hard” dimensions of organizational functioning. Head Start's uniqueness can be explained by looking at these dimensions.

The Mission

The mission of 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. Invented by physicians and psychologists as an in-depth intervention program, educational experiences were assumed to be only one service to

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.

As we study both large and small organizations in both for-profit and not-for-profit formats, clarity of mission is directly related to the ultimate success of the organization. Charles Garfield in his book *Peak Performers* (1988) studied an organization that managed to get several thousand employees unified behind the NASA mission of getting the first man to walk on the moon. Garfield used as an example of this commitment the janitor who, when asked what his job was, responded “I keep the work areas clean so the scientists can do their work so that we can get the first man to walk on the moon.” Head Start also feels such a close link to their 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. A total of 1,650 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, local grantees may be nonprofit or for-profit corporations created solely to provide Head Start services, public schools, community action programs, governmental units 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 retain 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. Federal Head Start personnel’s main role includes policy creation, grant administration and monitoring. Currently Head Start has funding of over eight billion dollars. Federal management is handled by 225 federal employees—a lean ratio 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. The accumulated requirements surrounding the program after 30 years are substantial, but not overwhelming.

All local agencies must conform to over 2,200 performance standards. As part of an annual refunding process, a 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 conduct an on-site review of the local agency’s compliance with the performance standards.

Head Start has been managed with a “loose-tight” style by the federal government, borrowing from terminology popularized by Tom Peters and Bob Waterman in *In Search of Excellence*. The “tight” management dimension appears in annual

refunding, constant testing against performance standards and monitoring. The “loose” dimension appears in great flexibility in program design and service delivery. This results in a highly diverse program 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. Agencies are required to *have* a curriculum, which is determined by Head Start parents and staff within each local agency. No attempt 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

Head Start’s persona was and is defined by its *systems*. In addition to an educational delivery system, there are systems to ensure the delivery of health (medical, dental and mental) services; nutrition services; parent involvement services; special services to handicapped children; social services; and transportation services. All systems must exist in every Head Start agency (with the exception of transportation in an agency where there is no demonstrated need).

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 systems model that Head Start employs is like that of some corporate structures who hold subsidiary organizations responsible for results while allowing a great deal of local autonomy in *how* the work is performed. Some of the large conglomerates have reduced this reporting relationship to a single complex financial indicator. A good example of this is the Teledyne Corporation, which has a largely financial relationship with its widely diverse group of companies. While it is no surprise that the federal administration of Head Start has not achieved *this* level of hands-off management, it has historically been more in this spirit than most would expect.

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, 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 member serving that family.

A COMPASSIONATE PARTNERSHIP™...

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

The Head Start staff member enters into a compassionate partnership with each Head Start parent to shape the future of his or her Head Start child.

Take a moment to 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 *900,000 times per year!*

How does it happen?

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

- Trust
- Compassion
- A non-punishing 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 many years of positive history in the communities served. Head Start staff members develop this reputation of trust through years of careful work, which results 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 member is likely to naturally gravitate to the child. Parents are impressed early with both the caring and skill Head Start staff members demonstrate. This early impression is further strengthened by the contact made between the adults.

Head Start staff members 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 members are *not* trained salespeople. They have no commissions to earn, no quotas to meet. Because of this, they may actually be the *best* salespeople 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 customers’ 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!

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 education—a history that includes regular punishment and embarrassment. Public schools use expulsion as a tool, impacting both parents and children. Many Head Start parents have had their phones removed or utilities cut off for non-payment of bills. Some Head Start parents have found themselves in trouble with the law—a situation loaded with threat and intimidation. 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 staff's *positive attitude*. There is something inherently optimistic about working with young children with their whole lives ahead of them. 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 also true for Head Start. Once again, Head Start is unique. It is not their academic degrees that make Head Start staff members 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 oneself 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* be a profound error. These credentials may reflect knowledge accumulation, but all too often also result in *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 program's design, 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 is the establishment of a 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 1980s 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*. *Businesses are rushing to learn about and apply “design thinking” as a new tool to be customer focused. Public schools often have yet to discover the need to design themselves to fit their customers. Head Start continues to build upon a proud 50 history of being customer focused.*

Every Head Start program must have a Policy Council made up of at least 50% parents of currently enrolled Head Start children. All programs must be reviewed, monitored and *approved* by the Policy Council. An annual needs assessment must be completed to receive funding. 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 parents into entry-level positions. Over forty percent of Head Start staff members are current or former Head Start parents. Head Start staff must also reflect the racial and ethnic make-up of 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 relationship with 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 find ways of meeting those needs.

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

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

The Creation of a Compassionate Partnership!

Finally, the compassionate partnership is established because Head Start staff members are *persistent*. They just keep phoning, visiting and trying. It is easy to not get 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 is 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 ensure the

continued achievement of both the hard and the soft dimensions identified above.

Be aware that the major movement in education today is SHOULD 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 rethinking the public education system itself!

If You Are a State Superintendent, Local Superintendent, School Board Member or Educational Union Leader

Study the points made in this executive summary carefully. Understand what it takes to achieve the results Head Start has demonstrated over the past 50 years.

Determine what you are trying to accomplish. If your desired outcome is to have all eligible low-income children in your community served by Head Start, make a concerted effort to encourage your congressmen and senators to fully fund Head Start with adequate funds to guarantee full enrollment and quality results.

If you want *all* preschool children to receive a Head Start experience, push your state legislators to fund expansion of local Head Start programs to enable admission of preschool children who are not able to meet Head Start admission guidelines. This has happened in several states. Since Head Start typically costs about 60% of public school attendance, expanding current Head Start programs can be an *immediate* bargain. And you'll experience later savings of \$11 to \$16 dollars for every dollar spent! You might even have your district contract with the local Head Start agency to provide services you might want at a considerable dollar savings, which happens across the country right now.

Be aware you *won't be alone* in this effort. Recommendations for school restructure from the National Association of State Boards of Education (especially K-3) strongly recommend Head Start as a model in the creation of a developmentally appropriate curriculum and in achieving critical parent involvement (*Right From The Start*, NASBE, 1988).

Be aware that if you are going to deliver Head Start's exemplary results, you *must* design programs to achieve both the hard and soft dimensions. This means putting parents in decision-making roles. It further means designing and delivering a flexible, developmentally appropriate curriculum. You must create an *intervention program*. It means delivering *in addition to educational services*, social services; parent involvement programs; nutrition programs; transportation;

medical services; dental services; psychological services; and services to children with special needs. It means **accepting responsibility** for *any* problem that might prevent learning.

If You Are a Head Start Administrator

Carefully examine the points made in this executive briefing. Are you structured to meet the hard dimensions? Examine and discuss this with your Board and Policy Council. Examine and discuss, also, how your agency achieves the **soft dimensions** identified above. How do you go about achieving those hundreds or thousands of “compassionate partnerships”?

As you better understand both these hard and soft dimensions, you’ll better be able to **manage** each. Consider them as guidelines for hiring and promotion. For example, can a new teacher or assistant develop a “compassionate partnership” with Head Start parents? If you believe so, hire them. Then train them carefully to do this well. If current staff members are not able to do this well, train and reward them for improvement. If they do *not* become successful at this key part of their job, *find someone who is!*

As you seek to expand your program, do so **carefully** to ensure your continued ability to achieve both the hard and the soft dimensions identified above. By doing so, you **preserve your ability to be uniquely successful. This is critical to your future and the future of Head Start!**

If You’re a Head Start Staff or Policy Council Member

Learn about both the hard and soft dimensions of Head Start. Learn how to achieve compassionate partnerships with those with whom you work, whether a parent or a fellow staff member. Nurture these relationships daily.

In Conclusion

As each of us—legislative leaders, educational leaders and Head Start professionals—works 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 focus not only on the easier-to-see hard dimensions of mission, structure, regulation and systems. **Those who would seek to strengthen Head Start by imposing “one size fits all” solutions are likely to damage rather than strengthen the program.** 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, then **we are destined to fail.**

Head Start gets its strength from annually tailoring the services it offers to the identified needs of their community.

There are no cheap partial answers. We cannot achieve Head Start’s success by selecting some of its dimensions and excluding others. Head Start is much more than an educational program. **Head Start is an intervention program that will go to great lengths to help an enrolled family do what it takes to have their child succeed. This work is built around the accomplishment of a compassionate partnership and will fail without this.**

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.

Please note: If you have comments or questions regarding this executive briefing, please direct them to:

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