

From First Teachers to First Advocates

Head Start's Role in Empowering Parents

by Emmalie Dropkin

The powerful two-generation effects of Head Start on child development and family stability are rooted in the program's most central value: Parents are their children's first teachers. In 1965, parents were teachers and volunteers in the first Head Start classrooms. In 2013-2014, more than 56,000 Head Start staff were current or former Head Start parents and more than 800,000 current Head Start parents volunteered in their children's classrooms. Every program across the country was led by a Policy Council made up of parents empowered to make decisions about program design in order to meet their communities' needs. This large-scale engagement of parents, especially at a time when so many schools in the K-12 system struggle to make parents feel welcome, raises a question: What is Head Start doing right?



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NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Acknowledging Children and Supporting Their Needs

Engaging parents begins with recognizing and respecting every parent and every child. Lavania Burrous enrolled her granddaughter in Head Start knowing that her granddaughter needed special supports: she is deaf and was struggling with separation from her mother. Two years later, Lavania's grateful as she remembers explaining her granddaughter's hearing loss to the teacher and watching the teacher begin to sign. In the time since, the program has brought in special programs and trained other teachers to be sure every support is in place.

By ensuring her grandchild's needs were met, Transition Resources Corporation Head Start got a fierce supporter in Lavania. As a result, she has helped build her center's parent group dramatically, made fundraising her goal one year and helped raise \$150,000, organized parent volunteers, and made care packages for staff. Lavania's dedication and enthusiasm stand out, but she is one of hundreds of thousands of

parents and grandparents who share this commitment to their local programs.

Allowing Parents to Define Engagement

Some schools respond to mandates to involve parents by creating specific formulas and activities, boxes to fit parents into. Part of Head Start's success is in giving parents the leadership to identify areas where they are able and willing to help the program. While Head Start parents are overwhelmingly from low-income families, they can bring great resources in the form of strengths and skills. Joshua and Shonda McKinzie joined their program's Policy Council after their middle child enrolled in Head Start at the Community Action Program, Inc. of Western Indiana. Joshua says that sharing and talking with parents helped him see ways he could make the program stronger.

A "Breakfast with Dad" activity was held early on weekday mornings and wasn't drawing many dads. Joshua worked with a Parent Advocate to build the group of fathers and add flexibility so the "Breakfasts" could be held any day or time that the men agreed was convenient to gather

with their children. Today, Joshua is the "Dad and Me" facilitator and his wife was inspired to become a member of the Head Start staff.

Partnering in Community and Friendship

Beneath the success that Head Start has with parents is a true sense of partnership. Parents and family members are welcomed with a sense of friendship and an acknowledgment that the strengths they bring and their commitment to the best for their children are all it takes to find a home in Head Start. Both Lavania and Joshua talk about being friends with program staff, even those who aren't currently teaching their children, and about feeling comfortable dropping by their centers to lend a hand. About one-quarter of Head Start staff nationally began as parents, but all staff have learned to recognize and welcome family engagement. Especially for parents who themselves had negative experiences with education, these relationships can set a course to being deeply involved throughout their children's lifelong education.

Empowering First Advocates

This year, the National Head Start Association has launched the First Advocates Pilot Project, an effort to scale Parent Ambassador models developed by the Washington State Association for Head Start and ECEAP and the Illinois Head Start Association in three new states: Indiana, Kansas, and North Carolina. First Advocates recognizes that in addition to being teachers, parents play an important role as advocates, both within the education system and in the world at large. As First Advocates representatives from Indiana, Joshua and Lavania traveled to Washington, DC, in January and met with their Congressional delegation to


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share the importance of Head Start in their communities. Over the course of one year with the project, First Advocates will gain skills for communicating with the press, giving public testimony, and building long-term relationships with elected leaders. They know their

children's strengths and needs better than anyone, and just as they are their children's first and best teachers, they now have the tools to be their greatest champions.



Senator Joe Donnelly from Indiana poses with Head Start parents Lavania Burrous and Joshua McKinzie
Photograph by Olivia Burlingame Gombri, National Head Start Association