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HEAD START AND STATE PRESCHOOL PARTNERSHIPS:

Lessons Learned from Preschool Development Grantees

Introduction

Partnerships can...

- Improve the quality of partners' programs
- Build consistent and aligned delivery systems
- Strengthen early childhood systems, locally and statewide
- Expand families' access to high-quality preschool
- Enable the sharing of resources and expertise
- Benefit children, families, and communities

Research demonstrates the many benefits which can be accrued from partnerships between Head Start and state preschool programs.* These partnerships can improve the quality of both parties, expand access, and provide more options for families. Partnerships leverage the resources and expertise of both programs. This brief advances the discussion of state preschool and Head Start partnerships by presenting information from the experiences of Preschool Development Grant (PDG) states. The partnership stories of four PDG states – Maine, Massachusetts, Nevada, and Vermont – provide insights into some of the strategies and practices their state preschool programs used.

Understanding the Need

Head Start has supported young children and their families living in poverty for over 50 years. State preschool programs have a shorter history and do not exist in all states. Still, both share the goal of supporting children's readiness for kindergarten and life. There are numerous examples demonstrating how Head Start and state and locally funded preschool programs have successfully collaborated and/or partnered to provide greater access to high-quality preschool for young children and to support families.

Building partnerships takes time, communication, effort, and sometimes, compromise. So, why do it? Why not just continue operating independently? There is a growing recognition in the field that many

* Although this brief is focused on "state preschool programs," many of the strategies and practices are also applicable to locally funded preschool programs.

SPOTLIGHT ON PROMISING PRACTICES

- Successful partnerships between Head Start and state preschool programs benefit both partners.
- Partnerships have increased access to early education.
- PDG states supported both partners to access high-quality preschool.
- Most grantees used PDG funds to expand existing state preschool programs, including their partnerships with Head Start.
- The potential benefits of Head Start and state preschool partnerships far outweigh the efforts to establish and sustain them.
- The strategies of four PDG grantees spotlighted are responsive to the unique characteristics of the communities they serve.



states have a loose collection of parts (i.e., programs and initiatives) rather than an interconnected and efficient system. When states’ early childhood systems are coordinated, they become more cohesive, sustainable, and cost-effective.ⁱ Systems are also more able to serve the varied and interrelated needs of families. Establishing Head Start and state preschool partnerships is a pivotal step in a state’s efforts to build a coherent and interconnected early childhood system.

The potential benefits of Head Start and state preschool partnerships far outweigh the efforts to establish and sustain them. Many of the states that received PDG funding affirmed this assertion by developing or augmenting their state preschool programs. The benefits cited were as follows:ⁱⁱ

- **Increased access to, and duration of high-quality, full-day preschool.** Head Start primarily serves children at 100% Federal Poverty Level (FPL). Since PDG’s income eligibility was 200%, together the programs were able to enroll unserved children with family incomes between 100% and 200% FPL. Additionally, many Head Start programs are half-day and the partnership enabled them to expand to full-day.
- **Shared resources.** Partnerships strengthen each party. Partners may share professional development opportunities which can not only save money and avoid duplication, but also results in more consistent knowledge and practices across the partners. Space is often an impediment to expanding preschools. One partner may have greater access to appropriate spaces for classrooms. Financial resources can be braided to benefit both partners.
- **Shared expertise and knowledge.** Head Start or state or local preschools may possess more expertise in one area than the other partner. For example, Head Start has expertise in providing comprehensive services for children and families, and in family engagement which they can share. The state or local preschool program may have more complete knowledge of all of the children and families in the community.
- **Partnerships at the local level create more buy-in.** Partnership among the major stakeholders in a community, such as Head Start and public preschool, provides the forum for all to be involved and buy into the concept of high-quality preschool.
- **Smoother transitions to kindergarten.** Partnerships among programs facilitates smoother transitions to kindergarten for children and families by creating the space for offering various activities to make families, children, and Head Start teachers feel welcome and excited about kindergarten.

Although partnerships from Head Start and state preschool programs have numerous benefits, there are challenges to establishing and maintaining a successful partnership. The following chart briefly presents some of these challenges; however, the other side lists some key ingredients that might reduce the number of challenges the partnership will face.

Common Challenges	Ingredients for Successful Partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Coordinating across programs to fill slots and reduce waiting lists 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Recognition that Head Start and state preschool partnerships are “mutually beneficial”
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Problem solving where there are different requirements (e.g., teacher qualifications, teacher compensation, program standards, and requirements) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A vision jointly developed in which each partner is seen as “value added” and where success is jointly owned
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Bridging gaps between differences in attitudes, beliefs, and cultures 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Regularly scheduled partnership meetings with open, respectful communication



Common Challenges	Ingredients for Successful Partnerships
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Managing financial resources and accountability for each funding stream 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Verbal and behavioral support from the top leadership of both partners
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Finding time for frequent, regular, and open communication 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> A formalized agreement, such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU)
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Building trust 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Valuing each other's expertise and knowledge
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Getting the buy-in and ongoing support of key decisionmakers (e.g., school superintendent, Head Start director) 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Designate a point person for each partner to manage and cultivate the partnership
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Not preparing for attrition of key participants in the partnership 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Structure for shared planning and decision-making
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Speaking a common language 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Establish metrics for measuring success

Promising Practices from the Field

There are many areas around which state preschool programs partner or collaborate with Head Start. The practices presented below describe the type of collaboration or partnership the 18 PDG states implemented as part of their state preschool programs. All PDG states had some level of collaboration with Head Start. Most grantees contracted with Head Start as PDG subgrantees, and nearly all included Head Start as part of its mixed delivery for delivering preschool.

PDG At a Glance

- Federal grant funded to **18** states
- Grants support states to **expand** high-quality preschool programs in high-need communities and to **build** or enhance their infrastructure for providing high-quality preschool programs
- Funding to provide **high-quality preschool** education and **comprehensive services** to support 4-year-olds and their families living at or **below 200% of federal poverty level**
- PDG quality standards include **full-day school** programming and the **inclusion of children with disabilities**

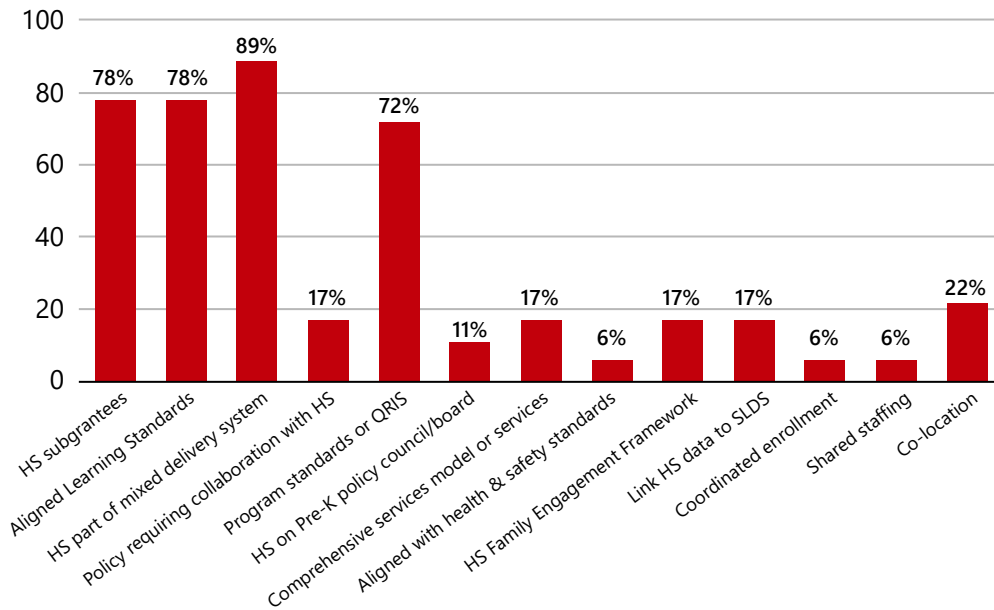
Most PDG grantees noted that their states' early learning and development standards were aligned with Head Start's early learning standards. In a large majority of PDG states, PDG-funded preschools addressed program standards aligned with Head Start's program standards, or both programs participated in the state's quality rating and improvement system (QRIS).

Some PDG states utilized Head Start's family engagement framework and/or Head Start's model for comprehensive wraparound services. A few PDG grantees contracted with Head Start to provide the comprehensive services required by the PDG grant. In a few PDG states, partnerships with Head Start went deeper. These included co-location, shared staffing, coordinated enrollment, participating on policy boards, and linking child outcome data to the state's longitudinal data system (SLDS).

The types of collaborative or partnership activities PDG grantees had with Head Start and the percentage of the 18 PDG states reporting each activity is presented in the graph on the following page.



Percentage of PDGs States' Reports of Their Head Start Collaborative/Partnership Activities



Source: PDG Annual Performance Reports from the 18 PDG states

Partnership Stories from PDG States:

What do Head Start and state preschool partnerships look like? How do they operate? What strategies do they use? What benefits have they realized and what challenges have they encountered? To answer these questions, four PDG grant managers, a Head Start director, and a district-level administrator were interviewed about their partnerships. Their stories are briefly summarized here.

MAINE'S STORY: From the Seacoast to the Mountains, Partnerships Work

When Maine developed the standards for its state preschool program, it relied on old-fashioned Yankee common sense: build on what you already have. Hence, Maine's preschool policies require public schools seeking to open or expand a preschool classroom to first demonstrate they have coordinated with Head Start and other early childhood programs in the community, and it has considered the needs of working families. Another commonsense policy is to fund state preschool like other public education, using the same school funding formula that funds K-12.

From the seacoast to the mountains of Maine, successful Head Start and school district partnerships can be found. Their success is built around both partners' leadership "getting it," regular and open communication, respect for what each entity brings to the table, and braiding Head Start funding with state preschool and PDG dollars. A Memorandum of Understanding ensures all are aware and have agreed to the terms of the partnership. Different communities implement the partnership model that works for them. Some are co-located, some share staff, most share comprehensive wraparound services and unique expertise. Maine's PDG grant funded the expansion of preschool "seats" among the partners, and also supported the capacity of both partners through joint professional development.

The Head Start and school district partnerships identified numerous benefits from their partnerships such as: (1) more heterogeneous social and economic classes; (2) increased mental health and



special education support; (3) targeting and serving more at-risk children and families; (4) district-wide alignment of screenings, assessments, and curricula; and (5) improved transition to kindergarten. But, as the adage goes (and paraphrased here), “it hasn’t all been a bowl of blueberries.” Partnerships encounter challenges. The challenges mentioned include difficulties when the school superintendent and the Head Start director are “not on the same page” and getting buy-in from the top administrators. The practical issues navigating the different requirements each partner has (e.g., nutrition, health, screenings, licensing regulations) and the different staff compensation levels between schools and Head Start. These challenges have been addressed when the partners face them openly and have systems in place to solve the challenges that will inevitably arise.

MASSACHUSETTS’ STORY: Head Start Brought an Important Voice

Massachusetts’ PDG grant supported five high needs urban areas: Lawrence, Lowell, Springfield, Holyoke, and Boston. All had community level partnerships between Head Start, other EEC-licensed programs, and the local school district. It’s important to note that Massachusetts opted to prioritize access to PDG supported programs to eligible children who previously had not been enrolled in any type of early childhood program.

The partnerships in each of the five PDG supported communities were uniquely branded to reflect the local priorities and relationships. Boston Public Schools partnered with a Head Start grantee and program and shared their resources. The Head Start and district partnerships in Springfield and Boston shared the same curricula.

The partnerships across all five communities engaged in similar activities and realized comparable benefits from partnering. They all had an eye on kindergarten readiness. They participated in joint professional development opportunities and coordinated preschool recruitment and enrollment since the districts and Head Start had relationships with different groups. Additionally, the partners shared their different areas of expertise with one another (e.g., Head Start’s knowledge of comprehensive services and families, and the districts’ community-wide perspectives).

Jocelyn Bowne, the Massachusetts PDG grant manager, identified some challenges the communities encountered. In Boston, the Head Start partner sometimes found addressing two sets of standards and requirements to be challenging, although the expectations were aligned. In communities that did not braid funding streams, Head Start programs voiced concerns about losing children to the PDG funded classrooms they were running. Despite these challenges, Jocelyn said that Head Start brought an “important voice in the first two years” of the PDG grant. Head Start reminded people to take an “empathic and respectful view of families.”

NEVADA’S STORY: It’s a Win-Win for Sure

When Nevada was awarded a PDG grant, it had a small but high-quality part-day state preschool program. The PDG grant provided the state with resources to expand to full-day and to greatly increase access for four-year-olds who met the income eligibility guidelines and lived in a “high needs community.”

Nevada’s PDG program partnered with the states’ two largest Head Start programs, Acelero Learning in Las Vegas and Community Services Agency (CSA) in Reno. CSA was a direct PDG subgrantee and Acelero Learning was an indirect subgrantee since PDG funding went through the United Way of Southern Nevada to Acelero. These partnerships enabled the Head Start programs to increase their



half-day preschool programs to full-day and to enroll children whose family incomes were over 100% but under 200% FPL.

Stacey Joyner, the PDG grant manager for Nevada, said the partnerships were “two-way.” The state provided funding through its PDG grant and the Head Start programs provided comprehensive wraparound services for all preschool children and their families. Additionally, the Head Start leadership was instrumental in supporting the state’s request to the legislature for state preschool funding. The state preschool and Head Start program shared professional development opportunities, onsite coaching, and participated jointly in a Community of Practice. Stacey said that in Nevada’s experience, the partnerships with Head Start are “A win-win, for sure.”

VERMONT’S STORY: A History of Collaboration and Partnership

When Vermont enacted universal pre-kindergarten in 2014, Head Start became fully integrated into its state pre-kindergarten (Pre-K) delivery system. Prior to universal access to Pre-K, several local Head Start and school district partnerships flourished. Two of these partnerships serve to illustrate the benefits that can be accrued for children, families, Head Start, and the school district.

In southwestern Vermont, the regional Head Start program partners with several school districts in its catchment area. In one school, the Pre-K program is collaboratively implemented. The school provides the classroom, facilities, and some professional development opportunities. Head Start and the school district staff the preschool classroom which enrolls Head Start eligible and a small number of non-eligible children. This Head Start regional program was a PDG subgrantee and used the funding to also support its partner programs. In this school, it was able to extend Pre-K from part-day to full-day, and offer much needed mental health services to all the preschool children and their families.

At the opposite end of the state, the Burlington School District has enjoyed a long-standing partnership with its regional Head Start program. The school district and Head Start jointly operate two Pre-K classrooms in the school. Head Start funds a teacher and an “early care advocate” whose time is evenly split between supporting children in the classroom and supporting families. The school district provides classroom space, instructional staff, and facilities (e.g., playground). The classes are composed of Head Start eligible and non-eligible children. When the school district became a PDG subgrantee, it supported the collaborative Pre-K classes to expand to a full-day program and to hire a family engagement coordinator. According to the school district’s early childhood coordinator, “communication is key.” The partners meet regularly, every six weeks.

Considerations for Implementing a Partnership

The benefits of partnerships far outweigh their challenges when implemented intentionally, respectfully, and when partners have an awareness of and value for each other’s strengths. Partnerships between state preschool programs and Head Start advance the development of a more cohesive, equitable, and efficient early childhood system at the state and local levels for young children and families. The PDG grant supported these partnerships and helped raise the quality of both partner programs.

The Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) of 2015 recognizes the need for collaboration and coordination among school districts, Head Start, and community early childhood programs.ⁱⁱⁱ It requires Title I schools to coordinate with these programs. Additionally, ESSA requires Title I schools to align their



preschool programs with the Head Start standards.

There are many good reasons for establishing and enhancing Head Start and state preschool partnerships. But where to start? Chances are that most states and communities already have several “partnership building blocks” in place that they can begin with. These include:

- ✓ A commitment to providing quality preschool experiences to young children and their families
- ✓ Shared goals for helping children to be ready for kindergarten and life
- ✓ Informal networks connecting the key stakeholders

Some of the core tasks to consider when building Head Start and state preschool partnerships are as follows:

1. Identify the need for the partnership.
2. Identify who needs to be “at the table” and their willingness to partner.
3. Establish how this “stakeholder group” will be convened and how communication will happen.
4. Create a vision of what the partnership will strive to accomplish.
5. Develop data-informed strategic goals both partners contribute to and support.
6. Create a formal partnership agreement such as a Memorandum of Understanding (MOU).
7. Utilize the PDG TA Center’s *Tools for Building and Sustaining Preschool and Head Start Partnerships* to get started!

Helpful Partnership Resources

The table presented below lists resources and research related to partnerships between Head Start and state and local preschool programs, including PDG supported preschool programs.

Resource	Why is it helpful?	Where to find it
Preschool Development Grants and Head Start: Partners in Realizing the Promise PDG TA Technical Assistance Report	This Technical Assistance report highlights partnership opportunities between publicly funded preschool and Head Start programs in the states that received Preschool Development Grant awards. It provides information on the strategies these states used, and spotlights Maine’s state preschool program’s partnerships with Head Start the PDG grant expanded and supported.	https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED583134.pdf
Beyond the School Yard: Pre-K Collaborations with Community Partners Pre[k]now, The Pew Center on the States	This report provides promising practices and lessons learned from around the country about how to effectively implement partnerships between publicly funded preschools and community-based providers such as Head Start. Recommendations to help policy makers facilitate collaboration are also provided.	https://www.nmefoundation.org/getattachment/Resources/Past-Work/Beyond-the-School-Yard/BeyondtheSchoolYard.pdf



Resource	Why is it helpful?	Where to find it
<p>Partners for Success: Case Studies of Collaboration Between Head Start and Pre-K</p> <p>National Head Start Association</p>	<p>This report provides examples from 11 states (CA, NJ, KS, MN, OR, WA, WV) and communities (Alexandria, VA; Chicago, IL; Harrisburg, PA; Manchester, CT) and explores four different models of collaboration between Head Start programs and preschool partners.</p>	<p>https://www.nhsa.org/files/resources/partners_for_success.pdf</p>
<p>Better Outcomes for All: Promoting Partnerships Between Head Start and State Pre-K</p> <p>Pre[k]now and the Center for Law and Social Policy</p>	<p>This report examines how Head Start and state pre-kindergarten programs can work together to better serve young children and their families. The authors conducted in-depth interviews with state Pre-K program directors, Head Start collaboration coordinators, and providers of both Head Start and state Pre-K programs in five states.</p>	<p>https://www.pewtrusts.org/-/media/legacy/uploadedfiles/pcs_assets/2007/pewpknheadstartprekcollaborationjan2007pdf.pdf</p>
<p>Partner Elements Worksheet</p> <p>Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services</p>	<p>This worksheet can help early education programs raise questions and prioritize critical issues to develop strong partnerships that provide high-quality, full-day, full-year comprehensive services to young children.</p>	<p>https://childcareta.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/public/quilt_partnershipelements_0.pdf</p>
<p>Tip Sheet: Community-Based Organization/Head Start/School District Prekindergarten Collaborations</p> <p>New York State Council on Children and Families</p>	<p>A helpful tool to facilitate partner readiness for Head Start, community-based organizations, and publicly funded Pre-K collaborations entering into a formal partnership agreement.</p>	<p>http://www.p12.nysed.gov/upk/documents/TipSheetforCollaborationsBetweenSEDandHeadStartandOtherPreKProviders.pdf</p>
<p>Sample Memoranda of Understanding Between School Districts and Head Start</p> <p>Maine Department of Education</p>	<p>The Maine Department of Education has posted <i>sample</i> Memoranda of Understanding between school districts and Head Start on their public preschool webpage.</p>	<p>https://www.maine.gov/doe/learning/earlychildhood/publicpreschool/establishaprogram</p> <p>Scroll down to find: District/Head Start sample contract and MOU1 MOU2.</p>



Endnotes

ⁱ Atchison, B. & Diffey, L. *Governance in Early Childhood Education* (Denver: Education Commission of the States, 2018), <https://www.ecs.org/wp-content/uploads/Governance-in-Early-Childhood-Education.pdf>

ⁱⁱ Fonseca, M., *Preschool Development Grants and Head Start: Partners in Realizing the Promise* (PDG TA State Technical Assistance Report, 2017), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED583134.pdf>

ⁱⁱⁱ Non-Regulatory Guidance Early Learning in the Every Student Succeeds Act: Expanding Opportunities to Support Our Youngest Learners (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education), <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/essa/essaelguidance10202016.pdf>

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