

What Head Start Can Teach Us About Engaging Families

A former school administrator discovers applicable ideas once on the job leading the organization's national office

BY DEBORAH L. BERGERON

“If you're pointing your finger outside to find blame for student failure, turn that finger back at yourself. Find a solution. No child will be left behind.”

During my time as a school administrator during the height of No Child Left Behind and its emphasis on standardized testing, I uttered the essence of that point (or maybe those exact words) on multiple occasions. My intentions were good. After all, don't we become educators to help every child succeed? I rallied teachers, created data analysis teams, devised personalized learning plans and identified alternate paths to graduation for the students who were struggling the most.

As I reflect on the work from that period, I recognize parents, not just educators, were always part of the solution. I think of Mario, a non-English-speaking newcomer at age 17 who finally graduated high school at almost 22. His mom was with him every step of the way.

Fast forward three decades, and I find myself in the director's chair for the nation's Head Start program. Within weeks of arriving, I discovered how effective Head Start is and learned several

things from its operation that I could have done better when I was leading schools.

Head Start's Basics

First, a little Head Start history to set the stage. Head Start began in 1965 as a summer program supporting school readiness for children living in poverty. It quickly grew and, 55 years later, Head Start and Early Head Start programs serve more than one million children each year, birth to age 5, who live below the federal poverty guidelines.

While its driving purpose is school readiness, Head Start achieves that goal through an intentional, multigenerational approach supporting the growth and development of young children and strengthening families. Well before “family engagement” became a buzz phrase, Head Start fully established parent roles and responsibilities for participation in the program's governance. It also involved parents as classroom volunteers and leaders in supporting parent-sponsored activities and conducted home visits to support home and school learning connections.



For decades, Head Start has embraced the mantra, *Parents are a child's first and most important teacher*, by inviting them into the educational process. Based on families' goals for themselves and their children, Head Start programs provide parents with supports and activities related to parenting, education, work and crisis support. Services like these build confidence, resilience, skills and self-sufficiency, which live long after a child leaves their Head Start program.

The federal Head Start program spent years developing the Parent, Family and Community Engagement Framework as a guide to ensure engagement is baked into every part of program operations and services. The framework identifies the strategies that will best influence family and child outcomes with a targeted emphasis on family well-being, parent-child relationships, family learning and family leadership. It also describes how reciprocal, goal-oriented relationships with families, and relationships that are culturally and linguistically responsive, drive effective engagement.

A Missed Opportunity

In the process of learning about Head Start's intentional parent engagement strategy dating back a half century and realizing the essence of today's Head Start program is based on those same values, I wondered whether I could have been a more effective school leader *had* I pointed outward, if I *had* considered a child's family, if I *had* looked for ways to support parents. Or if I *had* trusted parents to be the first teacher, the most important teacher.

I think again of Mario, a 20-something persevering long after his same-age peers left high school. He would not have been successful if his mother hadn't ensured he showed up to complete his graduation requirements year after year.

I reflect on the meetings I had with teenagers who made the decision to drop out of school. Jason, a bright 17-year-old, sat across from me with his mother when he made the decision to turn his back on earning a diploma. What might



Where Family Engagement Is Lesson 1

I believe everything you need to know about family engagement can be learned at Head Start. The key actions are at the building level, but the school system leadership must set the tone and the standards and provide the support to carry them out.

Flip the school model from “school serves child” to “families collaborate with schools.” Allow the school to be a facilitator for building thriving families. For superintendents, this means creating strong relationships with community-based organizations and other social services throughout the community.

This is not just a referral connection. Perhaps you find space in your district to house, for example, an office for the Women, Infant and Children’s nutrition program. The strength you help to build at the family level will follow students long after they leave your school system.

Trust parents to know their children and what is best for them. This requires a sincere belief that parents want for their children what you want for yours. School boards often consist of parents involved in making important school-related decisions. However, they also usually represent your most advantaged families. Administrators can support school-level parent boards to make decisions about curriculum, hiring and even budgets.

Train teachers, starting with their higher education field work, to be more comfortable with parents. Teachers should see parent support as a way of supporting the children they serve.

Empower parents to be their child’s best example. Parents can be your best advocate and a child’s most significant influence. Think of this as “power with,” not “power over.”

Support parents when they need it, connecting them to community resources that can strengthen their families. Your schools can be a hub for the entire community, providing connections to training, employment and other vital supports.

Accept families for who they are and strive to find common ground. Always start by getting to know the hopes and dreams they hold for their children. This work will happen at the school level, but school system leadership sets the tone for this approach, sending clear messages that the system’s standard is based on parents being a child’s first and most important teacher.

Embrace the belief that parents are a child’s first and most important teacher. That doesn’t change when the child turns 5 or 16.

— DEBORAH BERGERON

have happened had I been more involved with his mother, maybe visiting their home and getting to know the family, bringing her into the process. It was this meeting in my office where I met her for the first and only time.

Through my work at Head Start, I have learned so much about what I was missing when I created silos that separated students from families. What if I had embraced families, invested in them and acted on the belief they were their children’s most important teachers?

Extended Engagement

My experience working in school administration included a variety of efforts to bring parents into the building, increase attendance at Back to School Nights and other events and grow volunteerism among parents. That work was headed in the right direction. But, it wasn’t enough.

The current definition of family engagement in most public school systems means parents are expected to be more involved, to show up and “do for” their child and the school.

By contrast, Head Start’s definition of family engagement starts with an orientation of “doing with” the family. Head Start programs identify multiple ways to invite families to partner in service of children’s learning.

Family engagement is a transaction that is mutually advantageous, reciprocal between schools and families, and beneficial for children, family, school and community. It is not unusual at all for Head Start staff to visit families in their homes many times throughout the school year. When a parent expresses a need — perhaps an interest in graduating from high school — Head Start staff are quick to identify the resources to fill that need, possibly an evening General Education Development program, maybe even offered by the Head Start program.



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Is it reasonable to ask schools to do more when they already are responsible for so many things? What if prioritizing families could make teaching easier? What if addressing family wellness resulted in children showing up eager to learn? What if prioritizing families resulted in a wonderfully broad coalition of parents who trust and support the work of the school, become advocates and collaborate with teachers to ensure their children are successful?

It is on this premise that Head Start bases its prioritization of families. This effort pays off. Research shows Head Start children are more likely to graduate from high school, earn advanced degrees and gain employment. Head Start builds parental efficacy and Early Head Start, in particular, has been shown to reduce reports of child maltreatment.

Of the more than 250,000 Head Start and Early Head Start staff across the country, almost a quarter of them started as Head Start parents. That alone speaks to the program's ability to reach out and show parents opportunity and to provide training and support. These efforts often result in former Head Start parents earning advanced college degrees and managerial roles in the work force.

My favorite story is one from early in my work at Head Start. I encountered someone in front of the Office of Head Start building in downtown Washington, D.C. Cindy asked me for directions to a meeting. We chatted and I quickly learned she had attended the first Head Start program as a youngster in Richmond, Calif., in 1965. And here she was today, handing me her business card showing her title as vice president. But she wanted to focus on her mother's success, not her own. "We were poor," she said. "My mother was a single parent. And my mom is so good now. Head Start saved our lives."

Expanded Engagement

In addition to my role as Head Start director, I also lead the Office of Early Childhood Development in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. This dual role allows me to bring early childhood organizations together to embrace a philosophy grounded in equity that we call Radical Family Engagement. We are connecting with public school systems, creating a natural alignment of these tenets from birth to the graduation stage.

The support to embed Radical Family Engagement into a school and a school system is within reach. By collaborating closely, Head Start and early education programs can connect with



Deborah Bergeron, director of the national Offices of Head Start and Early Childhood Development, hopes to greatly expand collaboration between public schools and Head Start programs.

schools to streamline the process. Starting in the early childhood space, especially Head Start, and extending that kind of parent and family connection through high school graduation is radical in one sense.

In another sense, it is a far more basic way to approach educating children, starting with the family in mind. ■

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Collaborating With Head Start

The Head Start office nationally is seeking to work with local school districts on something it calls the Collaboration Demonstration Projects to redefining family engagement.

The organization wants to hear from superintendents of districts receiving Head Start children.

Collaboration Demonstration Projects connect the work of local Head Start programs to their local school districts, focusing on family engagement, data sharing and professional development.

To learn more about the initial Collaboration Demonstration Projects, check out this video: <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/video/collaboration-demonstration-project> or follow #LeadersinSchoolReadiness on Twitter. To get involved with your local Head Start program, contact Amanda Bryans at Amanda.Bryans@acf.hhs.gov.



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