



CHILD CARE AND HEAD START PARTNERSHIPS ISSUE BRIEF

Head Start and child care assistance programs developed over time under different mandates, administrations, demographic conditions, and philosophical approaches. With the implementation of welfare reform, partnership benefits accrued as the result of direct agreements forged among Head Start and child care providers. Driven by the needs of low-income working families, their aim was to provide families with better child care options and opportunities for their children.

Over the past 20 years, partnerships were encouraged by the funding of Head Start State Collaboration Offices and technical assistance provided through the Quality in Linking Together (QUILT) project.¹ Current collaboration efforts are driven increasingly by the need to provide coordinated services to children and families through responsive Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) policies, professional development, and quality improvement efforts that facilitate collaboration and allow programs to work together more effectively. With the proliferation of State prekindergarten programs, community, State, and Federal partners are challenged to identify partnership strategies that enable them to provide the most seamless, effective, and efficient early care and education services to young children and their families. While Head Start and CCDF programs can benefit greatly from partnering at the State and local levels, the expansion and sustainability of these efforts largely lies in resolving a myriad of policy and procedural issues at the Federal level.

Rationale

The need for partnerships and the types of partnerships connecting Head Start and child care have developed over time, but always with the same aim—to increase access to high-quality, full-day, full-year comprehensive services that meet the needs of children and their families. Combining the elements of the two programs provides greater access to higher quality early care and education services for low-income families, thereby supporting their ability to be self-sufficient and help their children to succeed in school and life.

Partnerships Defined

At the Program Level

At the local level, child care programs that partner with Head Start grantees benefit from the higher program standards and staff qualifications that support enriched developmental experiences for children and more comprehensive services for children and families. In addition, Head Start provides stable funding and educational and developmental resources that can improve child care quality and provide more dependable sources of program income than child care fees (which fluctuate daily or weekly).

By partnering with child care programs, Head Start grantees benefit from the full-day, full-year programs which often serve children of all ages. Child care programs increase Head Start-eligible families' choices by providing greater access for working families, especially those with multiple children. Child care programs are often located closer to where low-income families live or work, and

¹ The QUILT project was funded by the Child Care Bureau (now the Office of Child Care) and the Head Start Bureau (now the Office of Head Start), but was discontinued in August 2006.

employ caregivers that parents know and trust as their neighbors. Partnerships also allow children to receive high-quality care from the same providers, thus reducing the number of transitions.

For many years, Head Start/child care partnerships have been established as collaborative agreements and memoranda of understanding among programs. The work of coordination falls primarily to program administrators with the assistance of teaching and support staff. Federal technical assistance has also been available in the past through programs such as QUILT to inform, guide, and help sustain these efforts.

The following are types of Head Start/child care partnerships at the local level:

- Those that use non-Head Start funds to lengthen the Head Start day and year;
- Partnerships that link with child care or other programs to provide full-day, full-year comprehensive services to Head Start-eligible children already enrolled in other programs;
- Those that link with child care or other programs to provide full-day, full-year comprehensive services to Head Start-eligible children not already enrolled in other programs; and
- Partnerships that link with a family child care provider or family child care networks to provide Early Head Start or comprehensive services to Head Start-eligible children.

For many programs, Head Start/child care services are combined as a result of program management and budgeting practices that secure funding from multiple sources. Services are provided by a nonprofit or public organization that is both a Head Start grantee and has a contract with the CCDF Lead Agency or accepts vouchers for children receiving CCDF subsidies. In these cases, while no formal agreement may be necessary, program administrators nevertheless need to ensure that internal processes and accountability mechanisms are aligned for compliance purposes.

At the State and County Levels

With the rapid expansion of State prekindergarten programs and a growing demand for publicly supported high-quality prekindergarten opportunities for all children, partnerships have also developed among Head Start grantees, CCDF Lead Agencies, and the State departments of education. Implementation of these partnerships occurs at the State/county/local agency levels, and the work of coordination falls primarily to the State agency administrators working with the State Head Start Association and/or to multiple or individual grantees with the assistance of the Head Start State Collaboration Office, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) Regional Offices, and local agency administrators.

State-level partnerships differ from local-level partnerships in that they typically focus on aligning regulatory and administrative requirements, contract provisions, and grant conditions to help achieve greater coordination among Head Start, prekindergarten, and child care at the local level, regardless of whether individual agreements among programs exist. State-level partnerships have also arisen from national and State priorities that can be promoted more effectively from the top down. For example, a State's desire to quickly expand its prekindergarten program may promote greater partnerships between Head Start and child care to ensure eligible children are identified and referred to the program most appropriate for their needs. Partnerships that use non-Head Start funds to offer full-day, full-year services to Head Start-eligible children may be funded by the State CCDF Lead Agency. These partnerships tend to be in the form of contracts for child care assistance from the CCDF Lead Agency or designee with either child care or Head Start programs.

This coordination may occur among the CCDF Lead Agency and its designees, the department of education, the Head Start State Collaboration Office, and other child and family agencies. State-level Head Start/child care/prekindergarten partnerships typically provide one or more of the following benefits:

- They encourage the use of multiple funding streams to offer comprehensive full-day, full-year services to more children and families. Many States have strategies that promote collaboration among child care providers, school districts, and Head Start programs to provide full-day/full-year services.
- They develop recruitment, application, renewal, and eligibility policies and procedures that support Head Start/child care/prekindergarten partnerships to maximize continuity of care. For example, a State may require collaborative recruitment and enrollment processes among early childhood partners and a prescribed referral process for those families who meet the eligibility criteria for the partnering programs.
- They also support coordinated efforts to increase quality through joint professional development and training, cross-sector quality rating and improvement systems (QRIS), pooled purchasing of comprehensive services, and parent education activities. In many States, the CCDF Lead Agency, Head Start State Collaboration Office, and State department of education collaborate to develop and sustain cross-sector professional development systems built on core knowledge areas that align with early learning guidelines and provide the foundation for training and college courses.

In addition, in many States, the Head Start State Collaboration Office works at both the State and program levels to foster partnerships and identify and address the early care and education and family support needs of low-income families and their children. In some States, more formalized coordination of early childhood services occurs within a single or combined State agency which oversees all State and Federal pass-through funding for early care and education services and is able to work more directly with Head Start organizations and grantees.

Partnerships and collaboration are further supported at the State level via early childhood advisory, coordinating, or learning councils that include representation from the CCDF Lead Agency, Head Start State Collaboration Office, State department of education, and service providers.

Partnerships and Opportunities for Systems Integration

As States work to build more comprehensive early care and education systems for children and families, the focus of partnerships is shifting from operational agreements among providers at the local level to long-term structural agreements among administrative agencies at the State and ACF Regional levels. The latest partnerships attempt to build a more systemic approach to addressing the needs of children and families at the State and local levels. They expand beyond Head Start and child care to include State prekindergarten programs, coordinated governance structures, and strategic planning across multiple agencies, such as the Early Childhood Comprehensive Systems (ECCS) work. Like local-level partnerships, the aim is still to bridge the differences between Head Start and CCDF to provide greater access to higher quality early care and education services for low-income families that support their ability to be self-sufficient and for their children to succeed in school and life. However, the approach is through administrative streamlining of oversight agencies that, in turn, can offer more provider-friendly opportunities for sustaining long-term partnerships at the local level. These partnerships are born out of the need to address structural issues that cannot be resolved at the local level.

Benefits of these integrated efforts can include the following:

- Establishing effective contractual and payment processes to enable providers to secure more reliable and sustainable cash flow;
- Consolidating and prioritizing recruitment, eligibility, and enrollment procedures to maximize funding streams and program capacity, and ensure greater access to high-quality programs;
- Aligning the expectations and requirements of different State funding streams aimed at common goals for children, and requiring the inclusion of Head Start and child care programs as a condition of expansion;
- Creating comprehensive professional development systems with articulated agreements and credentials that align across settings;
- Developing statewide QRIS that align standards across settings; and
- Achieving economic efficiencies by using limited administrative and quality resources more strategically and avoiding duplication of effort.

Conclusion

The stakes are higher than ever for Head Start, child care, and prekindergarten programs as standards and expectations increase and funding sources remain static or decrease. The rationale for Head Start/child care assistance partnerships has evolved over time, but continues to be grounded in reconciling multiple Federal funding streams toward common goals. As more programs face challenges and more families seek high-quality early care and education opportunities for their children, it is essential to understand the differences between the two programs and how they can be administered more collaboratively to achieve the best outcomes for children and families

Additional Resources

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