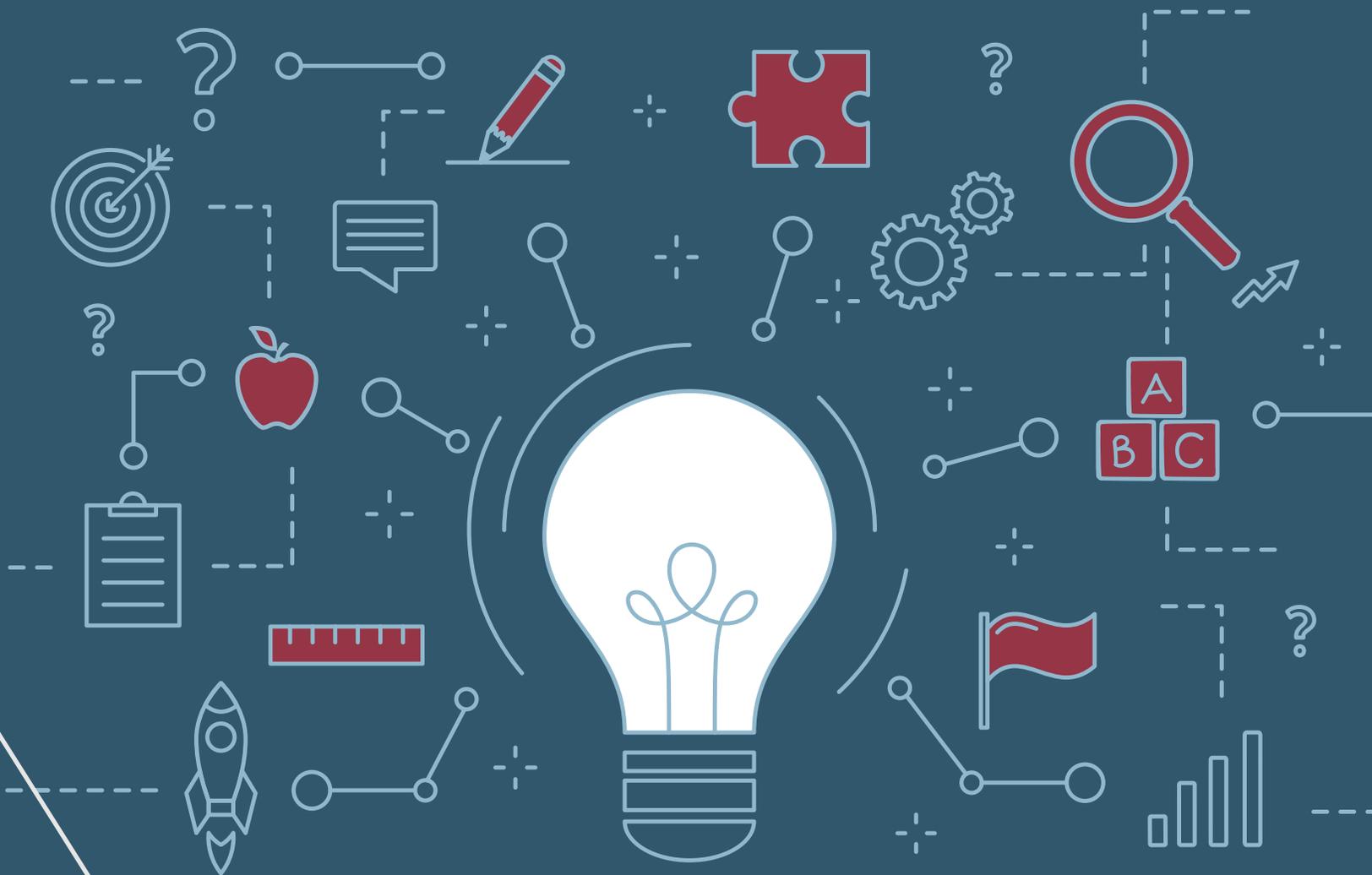


Lessons from Head Start Programs



Ashley LiBetti and Sara Mead

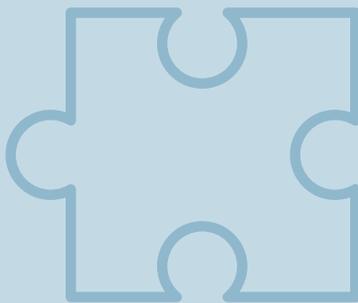
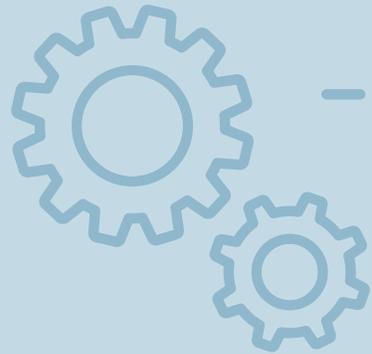
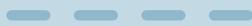
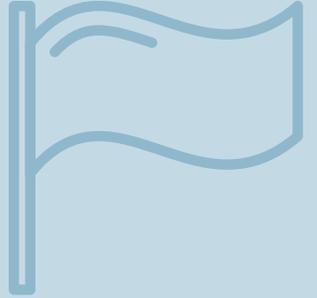


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Introduction

Head Start is our nation's largest early childhood program and a crucial part of the country's early childhood infrastructure.

Head Start, the federally funded comprehensive child development program, is both our nation's largest early childhood program — serving nearly 900,000 children and pregnant mothers in FY2017 — and a crucial part of the country's early childhood infrastructure. Created as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start pre-dates most existing state pre-k programs. As states and local communities have expanded access to publicly funded preschool over the past three decades, many have explicitly modeled their programs after Head Start or incorporated Head Start grantees as preschool providers. Today, Head Start serves more children than state-funded pre-k in nearly half of states,¹ and in the seven states with no state pre-k is often the only publicly funded preschool option available to low-income children. Because Head Start serves almost exclusively children in poverty, including dual language learners and children with disabilities, and prioritizes the children with greatest need, it is also essential to efforts to address educational, economic, and racial inequities before children enter school. Thus, more than 50 years after its founding, Head Start continues to play a crucial role in shaping early childhood opportunities and outcomes — both for the children and families it serves directly and in its influence on broader early childhood and pre-k systems.

Head Start programs are delivered by thousands of local Head Start grantees — there are 1,608 Head Start programs and 1,398 Early Head Start programs in the United States.² In a process that is unique among large-scale early childhood, social service, and educational programs, the federal government funds local Head Start grantees directly, bypassing the states. And all Head Start grantees are subject to a common standard of quality — the

Head Start Performance Standards, which lay out expectations for, among other things, the governance, educational and comprehensive services, operations, and financial and administrative practices of Head Start programs. These standards ensure a common foundation of systems, structures, and practices that all Head Start programs must implement, but also provide substantial space for variation and customization of Head Start services and delivery based on community culture and needs. Head Start grantees are located in every state and congressional district in the country, from the Florida Keys to rural Alaska; range in size from small programs serving fewer than 100 children to large “super-delegates” serving many thousands of children; and include tribal, Alaska Native, and migrant Head Start programs. And as fundamentally community-driven programs, Head Start grantees reflect the diversity of the families, children, and communities they serve.

Identifying the Head Start programs that produce the greatest learning gains could surface ways to improve children’s learning in both Head Start and other early childhood programs.

Research also shows a high level of variation in the outcomes of Head Start programs.³ Even though all Head Start grantees must meet the requirements of the Performance Standards, children in some programs are learning much more than others. Indeed, variation in cognitive learning gains across Head Start centers is larger than variation in learning gains between K–12 public schools.⁴ This research is both troubling and encouraging: It is troubling because it suggests that the extensive requirements in the Head Start Performance Standards, which grantees and the federal government devote tremendous energy to meeting and monitoring, are not in themselves sufficient to guarantee that all Head Start programs produce comparably strong results. And it is encouraging because it shows that many Head Start programs are producing meaningful learning gains for children.

Moreover, this variation creates a powerful opportunity: Identifying the programs that produce the greatest learning gains for Head Start children, and learning from their practices, could bring to the surface ways to improve children’s learning in both Head Start and other early childhood programs. More broadly, Head Start’s combination of national reach and local variation creates a powerful laboratory for innovation. With more than 1,000 Head Start programs across the country struggling with many similar challenges — from providing healthy meals in a cost-effective way to attracting and retaining quality teachers to supporting children’s social-emotional development — it’s inevitable that some Head Start programs have developed innovative solutions to address those challenges. And throughout its history, Head Start has served as a powerful source of innovations and leadership that have shaped the early childhood field far beyond Head Start.

Yet current Head Start policies and practices fail to take full advantage of this opportunity. Researchers used data from the Head Start Impact Study, a national randomized controlled study of Head Start outcomes, to quantify variations in impact between Head Start centers. But it’s not actually possible to tell, from this data, which of the 1,600-plus Head Start programs nationally are producing stronger results. Similarly, through required data

reporting and monitoring systems, the federal government collects a tremendous amount of information about Head Start programs. Head Start programs spend considerable time and effort reporting data and preparing for monitoring reports, and the federal government spends tens of millions of dollars annually on program monitoring. But the information collected through monitoring and Program Information Reports (PIR) is not analyzed or used to identify high-performing programs or support program improvement. Head Start program monitoring does identify programs that are out of compliance with specific Performance Standards, and the 2007 Head Start reauthorization required the Office of Head Start to identify low-performing programs and require them to compete to renew their funding.⁵ But there's no similar mandate to identify programs that are producing particularly strong results, or doing a particularly good job of addressing common challenges, or serving particular populations of children and families.⁶ Moreover, many of the data collected through the PIR and monitoring focus on compliance with standards or descriptive information about children, families, and program practices. This information is useful for monitoring compliance, tracking trends, and understanding populations served, but not necessarily informative about program performance or results for children and families.

It is striking that a program that receives nearly \$9 billion in federal funding annually does not collect the type of data that allows it to identify grantees that are producing exemplary results or performing well in key areas. But it's not unique or surprising. Historically, early childhood programs have taken a largely input- and compliance-based approach to quality. Minimum standards are crucial to ensure that early childhood settings are safe places for children. And that goal — ensuring the health and safety of children — continues to permeate early childhood quality monitoring systems across all sectors.

As states began expanding investment in pre-k programs in the late 1990s and early 2000s, policymakers and advocates also sought to use standards to ensure educational quality in newly funded pre-k programs — mandating, for example, that programs employ teachers with bachelor's degrees and early childhood training or adopt research-based curricula. The National Institute for Early Education Research's 10 quality standards benchmarks played a key role in influencing states to adopt these pre-k policies. Similarly, new requirements for curricula and teacher credentials were included in the 1998 and 2007 Head Start Act reauthorizations. More recent research suggests, however, that these inputs may not be sufficient in themselves to ensure children's learning in early childhood programs. Program practices, such as how curricula are implemented and the quality of interactions between children and adults, may be even more important in determining children's learning.⁷

A 2014 study published by the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation reviewed evidence gleaned from four large-scale state and locally funded pre-k programs, which the report identified as “exemplars,” and found that research shows that these programs produce learning gains for children that are sustained at least through elementary school.⁸ This analysis identified 15 “essential elements” common to the four exemplars that contributed to these results. These essential elements included common policies and structural quality indicators — such as class sizes and adult:child ratios and teachers with bachelor’s degrees and suitable early childhood credentials. But they also include practices common across these programs, such as teachers delivering high-quality instruction and the aggressive use of data. These practices are much more difficult to mandate or measure than traditional pre-k quality standards, but they are a key part of the “special sauce” that enables these pre-k programs to produce strong results.

In 2016, the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded Bellwether Education Partners to undertake a similar analysis identifying and understanding the practice of Head Start exemplars, or Head Start programs with demonstrable evidence of positive effects on children’s learning that are substantially larger than those of typical Head Start or other early childhood programs and, ideally, sustained beyond kindergarten entry.

Head Start exemplars:

Head Start programs with demonstrable evidence of positive effects on children’s learning that are substantially larger than those of typical Head Start or other early childhood programs and, ideally, sustained beyond kindergarten entry.

Why study Head Start exemplars? To a large extent, the goals of this work are similar to those of the previous pre-k exemplars study: to identify programs that are producing powerful results for children, elevate them as proof points of what is possible for the field, and learn from their practices to inform policy and efforts to improve early learning outcomes. But there are several reasons to focus attention specifically on Head Start exemplars: First, as the nation’s largest early childhood program, Head Start offers a powerful leverage point for improving early learning and development outcomes for children across the United States — particularly low-income children and children of color. Head Start programs prioritize low-income children and families with the greatest need, and serve a high percentage of children of color and dual language learners. If a key goal of early childhood programs and advocacy efforts is to advance equity for children of color and those growing up in poverty, Head Start is crucial to these efforts — not just for the children it serves directly, but also because practices that produce results in Head Start settings can inform efforts to improve early learning outcomes for low-income and racial, ethnic, or linguistic minority children in other early childhood settings as well.

This study focuses on Head Start exemplars in order to:

- 1 Demonstrate Head Start's impact and value
- 2 Better understand the factors that drive variability among grantees
- 3 Identify effective practices to share with other early childhood programs
- 4 Advance an equity agenda

Further, Head Start, by virtue of the population it serves, its commitment to supporting comprehensive child and family development, and its unique federal to local structure, is different from state-funded pre-k programs. Because of these differences, understanding the policies, practices, and enabling conditions that produce powerful results in Head Start programs could help to validate or refine understanding of which of the 15 essential elements matter most for success across early childhood settings. Studying exemplar Head Start programs could also define unique factors that are particularly important in Head Start contexts and enhance understanding of the role of comprehensive supports — such as family engagement — that are crucial to Head Start's model but were not common across pre-k exemplars. Finally, recent changes to the Head Start Performance Standards require all Head Start grantees to implement new practices — such as job-embedded professional development, supporting fidelity of curriculum implementation, and data-informed continuous improvement — that were found in exemplar pre-k programs. We hoped that identifying exemplar Head Start programs would reveal examples of how grantees can successfully implement these practices in a Head Start context.

More broadly, this work sought to seize the opportunity offered by variation across Head Start programs: By identifying and learning from programs that produce greater learning gains for Head Start children, we sought to identify opportunities to improve children's learning, both in Head Start and in other early childhood programs. In a 2016 report, Bellwether, the National Head Start Association, Results for America, and the Volcker Alliance called for changes in federal Head Start program oversight that would, among other things, identify, learn from, and disseminate lessons from trends and patterns in performance across Head Start grantees. Because the Head Start data collection and monitoring systems do not currently do this, Bellwether undertook to identify high-performing programs ourselves. We know that the list we developed is imperfect and incomplete, but hope that this work can stimulate innovative thinking about how to better leverage Head Start's reporting and monitoring systems to inform ongoing improvement for the field.

Despite abundant evidence that Head Start programs have made a positive difference in the lives of millions of children and families, policy conversations about Head Start and other early childhood programs often begin with someone asking, “Does Head Start work?” “Does pre-k work?” or “Can high-quality early childhood programs work at scale?” These are the wrong questions. A growing body of research shows that high-quality early childhood programs can produce positive results at scale when implemented well. The programs profiled here — referred to as Head Start exemplars — provide a compelling proof point for what Head Start can accomplish. In doing so, they offer an in-depth, complex, practice-based picture of what it looks like to serve children and families well in a Head Start context. By highlighting their examples, this work seeks to shift the focus of conversations about preschool programs away from “Can it work?” to “How do we make programs like these a reality for more children and families?”

This paper details the methods we used to identify and learn from Head Start exemplars; describes the common policies, practices, and enabling conditions that characterized these programs; highlights common challenges that exemplar programs are grappling with; and identifies lessons for the field. The [accompanying case studies](#) provide in-depth descriptions of each exemplar’s practices and how they were developed. We hope that Head Start grantees and other early childhood providers will find useful lessons that they can adapt to their specific context. Longer term, we hope that this work can inform changes in state and federal policies that enable more programs to replicate practices and results found in these exemplars. We also hope that the limitations of this work and the difficulties we encountered identifying exemplar Head Start programs will stimulate system-level leaders to collect and use data in new ways, measure results, identify what’s working across the programs, and use data on program performance and practices to accelerate ongoing continuous improvement across programs.

In this paper, we:

- **Detail the methods we used to identify and learn from Head Start exemplars**
- **Describe the common policies, practices, and enabling conditions that characterized these programs**
- **Highlight common challenges that exemplar programs are grappling with**
- **Identify lessons for the field**

Methodology

Bellwether conducted this analysis over a period of 30 months, beginning in July 2016. The first and most difficult step of this process was identifying exemplary Head Start programs to profile. As noted above, the goal of this work was to identify Head Start programs with demonstrable evidence of positive effects on children’s learning that were either substantially larger than those of typical Head Start or other early childhood programs or sustained beyond kindergarten entry. This was our only absolute requirement to include programs in this project.

We drew on two sources to identify exemplary Head Start programs: an analysis of publicly available data and recommendations from experts in the field. We collected publicly available data from Program Information Reports (PIR) and Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) scores collected as part of Head Start monitoring, and used these data to build a database of all Head Start grantees. These data, which measure the degree to which programs comply with the Head Start Performance Standards, are the only data that are publicly available for all Head Start grantees. They enabled us, for example, to identify programs with exceptionally high CLASS instructional support scores, consistent with those found in other large-scale early childhood programs with evidence of sustained impacts on children’s learning. They also enabled us to exclude programs that were out of compliance with crucial standards or had other data points — such as teachers and assistant teachers lacking credentials — that were not consistent with high-quality programs. Because the Bill & Melinda Gates Foundation funded this work to focus on Head Start preschool programs,

we also excluded programs that offered only Early Head Start. These data did not, however, provide information on program results or outcomes: Rather, we used the data to identify programs that appeared to be delivering high-quality programs and also suggested they might have evidence of impacts on children’s learning. Our hope was that this approach would enable us to identify “hidden gems,” or programs that are producing great results but are not widely known in the field.

At the same time, we collected recommendations from experts and stakeholders about programs they knew had, or thought might have, evidence of better-than-average impacts on children’s learning outcomes. We collected these recommendations through interviews with researchers, state and national Head Start associations, state agency staff, philanthropic funders, and other experts with deep knowledge of early childhood program practices and broad connections with providers nationally or in specific states. We also convened a group of these experts from practice, research, and policy in Washington, DC, in the summer of 2016 to review and provide input on our methods and recommend potential exemplars. (A list of individuals who participated in these interviews and convenings is included in the Appendix.)

From these two approaches, we identified 84 programs as potential exemplars out of more than 1,600 Head Start programs nationally. We reached out to staff from each program to determine if they had outcomes data or research that met our criteria for demonstrating positive impacts on children’s learning. Ultimately, we were able to identify only five programs with data or research that met our criteria. These five programs demonstrated evidence of impact in two ways: 1) through independent evaluations of children’s learning outcomes, or 2) through internal analysis of longitudinal data on post-kindergarten outcomes for a representative subset of children after they enter the public school system.

That’s not to say that there are only five exemplary programs nationally. We believe, and other research in the field suggests, that many other programs are producing similarly compelling outcomes. Many programs we contacted had compelling internal data that suggested that the children they serve are making progress in key learning and developmental domains and meeting widely held expectations. But to be included in this study, programs needed to conduct evaluative impact analyses that enabled them to rigorously demonstrate either their long-term impacts on children’s outcomes or their greater effectiveness relative to other Head Start or early childhood programs. The vast majority of Head Start programs do not have the capacity to conduct such analyses internally or the funding to engage external partners to do so. This does not mean that the programs excluded from our final analysis are ineffective; they just do not have the type of data we were looking for.

These five programs demonstrated evidence of impact either through independent evaluations of children’s learning outcomes or through internal analysis of longitudinal data on post-kindergarten outcomes for a representative subset of children.

Once we identified programs with evidence of impact, we researched them to understand their practices. Our goal in this research was twofold: First, we wanted to confirm that these programs are actually delivering quality early childhood programs consistent with the evidence of effectiveness gathered from data and evaluations. Second, we wanted to document their practices and glean lessons for the field. To guide our research and documentation of program practices, we developed a rubric that focused on five facets of program practice related to both children’s experiences in classrooms and overall program operations:

- Curriculum, Assessment, and Instruction
- Meeting the Needs of All Children
- Ensuring High-Quality Teaching
- Family Engagement
- Data Utilization

Once we identified programs with evidence of impact, we researched them to understand their practices. We conducted research over three stages:

1 What does the program do?	Review data and documents (e.g., human capital handbooks, curriculum maps, coaching summary forms, family engagement protocols, child assessment data)
2 Why does the program operate the way it does?	Intensive interviews with program leadership
3 How does the program operate and implement its various components in real time?	On-site visit (classroom observations of internal data review meeting, in-person interviews from all departments, teacher and coach focus groups, and teacher survey)

Our research on each program had three steps: an initial review of data and documents, phone interviews with program staff, and an on-site visit. The first stage of the process, the initial document and data review, answered the “what” of the program: What does the program do? This stage provided a sense of what the program looked like on paper; we reviewed, among other things, human capital handbooks, screenshots of the data system, curriculum maps, performance evaluation rubrics, coaching summary forms, family engagement protocols, and child assessment data.

The second stage of the process — the initial interviews with program staff focused on the “why” of the program: Why does the program operate the way it does? These interviews added color, depth, and detail to information gleaned through the document review and provided background information on the evolution of the program, the program’s decision-making process, and what factors went into those decisions.

The third stage of this process, an on-site visit, focused on the “how” of the program: How does the program operate and implement its various components in real time? The on-site visits included five components: classroom observations (conducted by a validated CLASS observer), observation of an internal data-review meeting, additional in-person interviews, focus groups with teachers and coaches, and a teacher survey.

This process provided a wealth of information on the design and practices of these programs. We synthesized and analyzed the information to identify patterns and themes, including common strengths, enabling conditions, and challenges, as well as lessons for the field and other programs. The following sections summarize this analysis.

Overview of Head Start Exemplars

The accompanying case studies provide a detailed picture of how these high-performing programs operate, and are intended to highlight variations in programs' approaches, practices, and strategies.

The programs profiled here all effectively serve children, but they do so in very different ways. They represent a variety of circumstances and missions. They range in size, student population, preferred curricula, approach to program design, and priorities. They each have their own story, a “secret sauce” that drives their effectiveness. But despite these differences, these programs exhibit common strengths and challenges, offering lessons for other early childhood programs and the field at large. The [accompanying case studies](#) provide a detailed picture of how these high-performing programs operate, and are intended to highlight variations in programs’ approaches, practices, and strategies that may be of use to other Head Start or early childhood operators. This report highlights cross-cutting themes and patterns that emerged across all the exemplars and offers implications for the broader field.

The five exemplary programs profiled here are:

- Acelero Learning
- Community Action Program of Tulsa (CAP Tulsa)
- Educare Miami-Dade
- Fairfax County Public Schools (FCPS)
- Utah Community Action (UCA)

Head Start Exemplars

For in-depth information on each of these exemplary programs, see the accompanying case studies.



Acelero Learning
Camden/Philadelphia



CAP Tulsa



Educare
Miami-Dade



Fairfax County
Public Schools



Utah Community
Action

Location	Camden, N.J./ Philadelphia, Pa.	Tulsa, Okla.	Miami, Fla.	Fairfax County, Va.	Salt Lake City, Utah
Number of children served annually	1,446*	1,368	116	1,843	1,758
Child demographics					
Hispanic/ Latinx	34%	38%	87%	60%	54%
Black	66%	31%	10%	22%	5%
Native American	N/A	4%	N/A	N/A	1%
Asian or Pacific Islander	N/A	5%	N/A	10%	9%
White, non- Hispanic	N/A	13%	N/A	8%	31%
Multiracial	N/A	4%	N/A	N/A	1%
Other	N/A	5%	N/A	N/A	N/A

* Nationally, Acelero Learning serves more than 5,000 children across Nevada, Wisconsin, New Jersey, and Pennsylvania.

Factors Contributing to Quality

This work identified trends and patterns in exemplar programs across three areas:

- *policies*
- *program practices*
- *enabling conditions*

As noted above, a key goal of this work is to identify the practices and characteristics that are common across exemplary Head Start programs and that contribute to their strong positive impacts on children’s learning outcomes. This work identified trends and patterns in exemplar programs across three areas: policies, program practices, and enabling conditions. **Policies** reflect features commonly associated with quality early childhood programs (e.g. class sizes, teacher qualifications) that can be mandated and easily measured at a policy or programmatic level. **Program practices**, by contrast, focus on the way a program does its work on a day-to-day basis and how those program practices affect the experiences of children, families, teachers, and other staff working in the program. **Enabling conditions** are organizational characteristics or external circumstances (e.g. leadership, funding, scale) that enable programs to successfully implement the practices that contribute to their quality.

Policies

As Head Start grantees, all the exemplars profiled here are subject to the requirements of the Head Start Act and the Head Start Performance Standards, as well as to a variety of state laws and regulations. But current Head Start requirements do not reflect all the policies that researchers and advocates often recommend for quality pre-k programs.⁹ Because these exemplars are providers delivering early childhood services within an existing state and federal policy context, their policies and practices are not directly comparable with those of state and local preschool programs that establish policies to govern the work of providers delivering publicly funded preschool. It is still informative,

It is crucial to understand the extent to which these exemplar Head Start providers do – and do not – reflect policies commonly associated with quality in state pre-k or other publicly funded programs.

however, to understand the extent to which these exemplar Head Start providers do — and do not — reflect policies commonly associated with quality in state pre-k or other publicly funded programs.

As Head Start grantees, all the exemplars profiled in this study reflect the following policies typically associated with quality early childhood programs:

- Class sizes of no more than 17 for 3-year-olds and 20 for 4-year-olds, with at least two educators (teachers or a teacher and an instructional assistant) in each classroom
- Use of the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework and State Early Learning Standards
- Use of developmentally appropriate and research-based early childhood curricula
- Inclusion of students with disabilities

Other policies typically associated with quality early childhood programs are not uniformly found in these exemplars. All of these policies are reflected to some degree across some of the exemplars, but are absent or only partially present in at least some programs:

- **Dosage:** All but one of the programs profiled here offer full-day Head Start preschool programs. The exception, Utah Community Action, currently offers single-session, half-day programming to about two-thirds of its Head Start preschool children, but is in the process of transitioning to a full-day program. The data used to identify Utah Community Action’s program as an exemplar were collected when the program operated primarily half-day programming, however, suggesting that it is possible for some programs to produce superior results with a half-day dosage.
- **Teacher credentials:** The 2007 Head Start Act required at least 50 percent of Head Start preschool lead teachers to have bachelor’s degrees by 2013, but this requirement applied to the program as a whole, not individual grantees.¹⁰ Most of the Head Start exemplars identified here go beyond that requirement, requiring all Head Start teachers to have bachelor’s degrees. Acelero Learning, however, employs a mix of teachers with bachelor’s degrees and associate’s degrees, and other exemplars may hire teachers with less than a bachelor’s degree whose experience and other qualifications are strong.
- **Teacher compensation:** Some research suggests that paying pre-k teachers on par with teachers in public elementary schools is an essential feature of high-quality pre-k programs, and this policy was included in requirements for the federal Preschool Development Grants program.¹¹ As discussed in greater detail below, only one of the exemplars profiled here, Fairfax County Public Schools, offers teacher compensation that is fully comparable to pay for elementary school teachers in K-12 public schools.

Program Practices and Characteristics

All of these providers demonstrate commitment to a core set of practices that support and ensure consistent delivery of high-quality learning experiences for children in Head Start. There is substantial variation in how exemplar providers implement these practices, but their presence is a common theme across all the organizations profiled here.

Intentional Decision-Making That Ensures Instruction Is Seamlessly Integrated Across All Program Components

Each of these exemplary providers demonstrates a high degree of intentionality around quality instruction that is systemic and integrated at all levels of the organization. As a result, curriculum, assessment, and professional development are indistinguishably intertwined in a coherent approach to teaching and learning. It is this intentional integration that differentiates these programs: All Head Start programs are required to use a research-based curriculum, assess children's learning, and provide professional development to teachers. The Head Start Performance Standards define a baseline level of quality for each of these components, and all good Head Start programs integrate these components to a degree. But these exemplary programs take that work one step further, seamlessly integrating curriculum (what to teach), a clear vision of and support for high-quality instructional practice (how to teach), and assessment (how to know what children are learning) to define a coherent approach to high-quality instruction that is shared across the program. Moreover, each of these programs has built a rich network of tools, resources, supports, and professional development to ensure that this instructional approach is delivered consistently and with quality across all program classrooms. Each decision the program makes is intentionally focused on supporting instructional quality. (See the accompanying policy brief on these programs' [instructional models](#) for further details.)

Curriculum, assessment, and professional development are indistinguishably intertwined in a coherent approach to teaching and learning in these exemplary programs.

Obsessive Attention to Curriculum, Ensuring That It Is Tailored to Children's Specific Needs

As part of their intentional focus on instructional quality, these providers devote intensive attention to ensuring the quality and integration of their curricula. None of these exemplary programs rely on just one curriculum to drive instruction, nor do they take any curriculum as it exists off the shelf. Some programs make minor adjustments to a foundational curriculum, then supplement it with additional curricula that target specific areas of need, such as math or social-emotional development. Other programs developed their own curricula from scratch to meet their specific needs. Regardless of the approach, these programs do not assume that the available curricula are good enough for their children simply because they meet Head Start requirements or are research-based. Rather, these programs were supplementing existing curricula to enrich children's learning experiences and providing support for teachers to implement curricula with fidelity before recent changes to the Head Start Performance Standards required it.¹²

Clear Vision for Quality Teaching Aligned to Professional Development and Supports

In each of these programs, teacher decision-making drives the quality and content of the model. Programs provide teachers with resources and materials to drive instructional content, but teachers exercise a high level of professional discretion in choosing how to teach the curriculum and differentiate instruction to meet the needs, interests, and stage of development of the individual children within their classrooms. Programs support teachers to deliver high-quality instruction and hold them accountable for doing so, but they also trust teachers with full autonomy over classroom practice.

These programs invest substantial resources in supporting teachers to develop their skills to deliver high-quality instruction.

Given the centrality of teacher decision-making to each of these programs' models, they invest substantial resources in supporting teachers to develop their skills to deliver high-quality instruction. Each of these programs uses individualized coaching as its primary professional development vehicle. Each has developed its own coaching model, but they all follow a similar cycle: Coaches build a body of evidence about the teacher's performance using observations and child data and meet with teachers to help them understand their strengths and growth areas, set specific goals targeted to growth areas, and identify possible strategies for achieving those goals. Then they start the cycle all over again with observations and performance data. This cycle happens regularly, though at different intervals depending on the program.

Programs also choose to structure coaches' roles and responsibilities in different ways. FCPS calls its coaches resource teachers, explicitly framing their role as a peer support network for teachers, and the level of support that teachers receive from resource teachers is tiered based on teachers' experience and needs. At Acelero Learning, on the other hand, center directors serve as both supervisors and coaches for teachers. UCA differentiates two distinct roles — program specialists who supervise teachers and provide feedback on their implementation of curricula and systems, and coaches who support teachers in improving instructional practices — who work together to support teachers in building their ability to deliver quality instruction. Some of these approaches look different from existing evidence-based coaching models or the recommendations of coaching experts, who emphasize differentiating the roles of supervisors and peer supports from those of coaches. But these approaches are working in each program's unique context to support teachers and help them improve their teaching quality. As other Head Start programs seek to meet new Head Start requirements for coaching systems, these exemplars' practices model a variety of ways to deliver coaching sustainably and at scale in a Head Start context. The important thing is that each of these exemplars customizes its coaching approach to match its own context, teacher population, curriculum, and budget.

These programs also demonstrate that coaching, when implemented well and as part of an integrated approach to quality teaching, often produces other substantive and structural changes in program practice. These programs, for example, use information

gathered from coaching sessions to inform teachers' performance evaluations and design other professional development content to supplement coaching cycles. Larger group trainings, for example, are based on shared challenges identified in coaching sessions, and professional learning communities mirror the coaching structure with peers providing guidance. Programs also rely on coaches as the liaisons between teachers and leadership. Through these connections, coaching is not just an add-on to these exemplars' existing programs and practices, but a fundamental part of their systems that integrates with and informs their approaches to curriculum, data usage, and ongoing program improvement.

Commitment to Data-Informed Continuous Quality Improvement

Data-informed continuous quality improvement is an integral, well-developed part of each of these programs' operations. These exemplary programs have built systems and processes to authentically and constantly use data to improve their program practices and design. They do this in three ways:

- **Teachers and coaches use data to improve instructional quality.** Teachers implement their own data-informed instructional loops: They monitor children's performance using observational assessments, revise their instructional plans to support children's learning and mastery of objectives, observe children's performance in response to these changes, and then revise again. Coaches follow a similar model with teachers, using observational data, anecdotal data from teachers, and children's performance data to inform the content of coaching sessions.
- **Programs assess the degree to which specific components of their design and practice are producing expected results.** Program leaders also use data to make changes in the way the program operates. Several exemplars, for example, assessed the effects of specific curricula on teacher practice and student learning, piloted new curricula to supplement gaps in the existing curriculum, and made changes to their curriculum offerings in response to the data. Site- and center-level leadership conducts these analyses, which are largely done internally.
- **Programs use data to assess the program's overall effectiveness.** Senior program leadership collects, reviews, and uses a variety of data points to provide frequent pulse checks on the organization's overall health and impact. These findings inform efforts to improve program practice, such as piloting a new curriculum or providing specific professional development sessions. All of these programs are deeply committed to understanding and measuring whether their work advances their ultimate goals for improving children's and families' lives. To this end, programs may also partner with external researchers to collect and analyze data on the program's impact on child and family outcomes. Several also developed relationships with local public school districts that enable them to track information on children's learning and other outcomes after they leave the program.

Each of these programs has a well-developed infrastructure and the supporting systems, practices, and culture in place to support data utilization at all these levels, and has intentionally developed a data culture that is focused on improvement.

Each of these programs has a well-developed infrastructure and the supporting systems, practices, and culture in place to support data utilization at all these levels. All but one of these programs have invested in internal staff roles whose primary responsibility is to analyze program data. People in these roles are not data entry staff; they have the capacity to understand the “story” the data are telling and translate those data into implications for program operations. But they are not the only holders or users of data. Indeed, a key part of their role is to build the capacity of other staff in the organization – teachers, coaches, leaders – to use data in their own roles and use data to answer questions that other program staff are asking. Educare Miami-Dade is the one program that does not have an internal data person, which is also the smallest of the exemplars, but partners with an academic researcher to fulfill the same functions.

Additionally, each of these programs has intentionally developed a data culture that is focused on improvement. Programs use data from many sources for a variety of purposes. But everyone involved in collecting or using data knows why the data are being collected and what they are used for. Data are never used as a “gotcha” but a tool for improvement. Coaches develop deep relationships with teachers and continually emphasize that their role is as a support system, not a compliance officer. Center directors are responsible for the performance of their centers, but performance conversations use data as an opportunity for insight and focus on strategies rather than consequences. As a result, program staff learn to approach data with curiosity, rather than fear. These programs have cultivated a data culture in which all staff can vulnerably assess their performance to truly drive their own improvement without fear of punishment.

This culture is reflected in regular meetings where leaders, coaches, teachers, and program data staff share and reflect on data. Leadership team meetings focus on the implications of the data, allowing program leaders to understand what the data are telling them and strategize opportunities for improvement. Academic leadership teams, which include coaches, supervisors, center directors, and department leads, have similar meetings. And program performance data are shared with all staff in a transparent and accessible way, making it clear that the program is committed to improvement and willing to hold itself publicly accountable.

While some features of these providers’ approaches to data utilization may not be replicable in all Head Start programs, many of the practices they use offer models for other Head Start grantees seeking to strengthen their use of data to support ongoing continuous improvement, as required by the Head Start Performance Standards. These practices may also provide insight for federal officials responsible for monitoring programs’ compliance with these standards.¹³ (See the accompanying policy brief on these programs’ data utilization practices for further details.)

These programs believe that teachers are the primary driver of quality, and treat them as such.

Deep Value and Substantial Investment in Teachers

As noted above, all of these programs believe that teachers are the primary driver of quality, and treat them as such. In addition to providing professional development that builds teachers' skills and capacity in the how of teaching, these programs are highly intentional about who can become teachers in their classrooms. Each of these programs has designed a thoughtful hiring and selection process that looks far beyond credentials to ensure that teachers have the skills to be effective in their roles and are a good fit for the organizations' culture. These programs have intentionally invested in providing a level of compensation higher than that of other early childhood programs in their areas, and they actively strive to make working conditions and support systems better for teachers. And they offer opportunities for staff to advance in their careers by taking on additional responsibilities or leadership roles within their organizations. These practices reflect how programs have responded creatively to local workforce conditions and constraints imposed by program budgets. Even when they cannot pay teachers on par with other employment opportunities available to them, they use the assets they have strategically to attract and retain quality staff. They also offer lessons for the broader field: degrees and compensation, which dominate contemporary efforts to strengthen the early childhood workforce, are clearly important, but other factors, such as organizational culture, working conditions, and opportunities for advancement are also necessary to make the early childhood profession attractive to talented people.

Across these programs, there is a tight connection between what happens in the classroom and how programs engage families to support children's learning outside the classroom.

Family Engagement Tightly Linked to Children's Learning

As Head Start grantees, all of these exemplars implement a two-generation approach that seeks to improve long-term outcomes for children by fostering families' economic well-being and ability to support their children's learning. These programs' approaches to and staffing for family engagement vary, based on their philosophies and the populations of children and families they serve. Some have developed innovative approaches to supporting families' economic advancement, including CAP Tulsa's Career Advance program and Utah Community Action's Sauté training. A common theme across these programs, however, is a tight connection between what happens in the classroom and how programs engage families to support children's learning outside the classroom. Rather than operating in separate silos, family engagement and children's learning in these programs are closely linked. Each program has created structures to build relationships and facilitate information-sharing between classroom teachers and family support staff. Acelero Learning's Shine On, Families curriculum provides parents specific activities that they can do with their children after the school day ends, and also builds a common language and goals shared between classroom teachers and family advocates. Family engagement staff in Acelero Learning, Fairfax County, and Educare Miami-Dade programs spend substantial time in classrooms, observing children and building relationships with parents and teachers. And Utah Community Action eliminated the divide between education and family support entirely by restructuring teachers' roles to also serve

as family advocates. These structures and practices don't just improve communication, they also build teachers' skills and sense of responsibility for engaging with families and family engagement staff members' confidence and competence in discussing children's learning and development. By tightly linking family engagement with teaching and learning, these programs are not only improving their ability to serve children today, but building parents' capacity to advocate for their children after they enter the public education system.

Enabling Conditions

In addition to looking at specific program practices, this analysis identified several enabling conditions that are common across all or most of these exemplar providers and make it possible for them to implement the practices that support strong child outcomes.

Strength of Leadership Team

The exemplary programs profiled here all have incredibly strong leadership teams who are deeply invested in the organization's mission. Although the details of their leadership team structures vary, each has a leadership team structure that enables them to carefully monitor and improve program quality from a macro and a micro level. At the macro level, one person — usually the chief executive officer, executive director, or vice president — guides the overall direction of the program and is ultimately accountable for its performance.

But this program leader is largely separated from the micro-level, day-to-day operations of the program. Instead, that work is led by a leadership team of senior program staff who have responsibility for a specific discipline (e.g., academics, human capital) and execute the high-level vision of the program.

This structure contributes to program quality in a number of ways. Foremost, it allows each member to specialize in their discipline area, developing deep expertise on that topic generally and the program's operations in it, which enables them to identify opportunities for improvement and innovation. The leadership team's combined expertise allows a comprehensive approach to program improvement that benefits from collaboration and deep expertise across all areas of program operations. This structure also makes each leadership team role, particularly that of the program director, more sustainable by limiting the range of responsibilities and, consequently, the workload, and sets up the program to develop a clear succession plan, which limits — or prevents — the disruption that can occur with a change in leadership.

The structure alone, however, is not sufficient to drive program quality. The individuals who make up each organization's Head Start leadership team are exceptional leaders who are fully invested in the performance of their discipline. These programs have particularly strong people in academic leadership roles, who drive the program practices that are crucial for ensuring high-quality instruction.

Each program has a leadership team structure that enables them to carefully monitor and improve program quality from a macro and a micro level.

None of these programs operates with Head Start funding alone; each receives additional dollars from a variety of sources.

Access to Additional Funds

None of these programs operates with Head Start funding alone; each receives additional dollars from a variety of sources. All of the programs except for Utah Community Action participate in state-funded pre-k programs and receive funding from them. All of them also receive funding from childcare subsidies and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. As a school district, Fairfax County Public Schools receives local tax funding. CAP Tulsa, Utah Community Action, and Educare Miami-Dade all receive philanthropic funding.

Many Head Start programs blend and braid funding, but these programs have more dollars than most, thanks to additional funding streams. These additional dollars allow programs to provide higher levels of compensation for teachers, develop internal cycles of data-informed continuous quality improvement, and integrate their instructional models.

The creativity, entrepreneurialism, and resourcefulness that these programs demonstrate in other areas of their practice also help them to identify and access additional funding sources and, once they do, leverage them in ways that extend their impact. Even with additional funding, programs must still make difficult, strategic tradeoffs about how to spend their money. Fairfax County Public Schools and Acelero Learning, for example, invested heavily in upfront costs to develop curriculum and instructional tools in house to avoid the recurring costs of externally developed materials. And although all of these programs have prioritized investments in teacher compensation and professional support, budget constraints and other spending priorities make it difficult to pay their teachers at levels that are competitive with other employment options.

Programs have also identified ways to maximize the impact of the funds they have. Innovative staffing approaches provide important functions without incurring additional staffing costs. Utah Community Action, for example, has a small family engagement staff, in part because teachers lead classrooms and serve as family service advocates. By having center directors serve as instructional coaches for teachers, Acelero Learning avoids needing to hire additional staff in coaching roles, making universal coaching more sustainable on a Head Start budget.

These exemplars also leverage resources by partnering with local organizations — such as local universities, chambers of commerce, other early childhood programs, and local governmental agencies — to provide services to families, extend their research capacity, leverage economies of scale, and provide additional professional development. They also join early childhood networks that allow them to access resources and ideas from other programs. For example, Educare Miami-Dade joined the Educare network in 2007, giving it access to national resources, such as Educare's family engagement tools and opportunities to connect with and learn from the practices of peer organizations in the network.

Policymakers who oppose funding increases for early childhood programs often argue that it's possible to serve more children, or improve program results, by better coordinating multiple fragmented funding streams or using existing resources more effectively and

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efficiently. These programs illustrate the fallacy of that choice, however. They are already coordinating multiple fragmented funding streams at a provider level to serve more children or offer better-quality services. And combining funding from multiple programs and funding streams is essential to their ability to deliver high-quality programs and results. These programs demonstrate that it's possible to improve quality in cost-efficient ways by being thoughtful and strategic about how funds are used and by accessing and combining funds from multiple funding streams. But they also show that delivering a high-quality Head Start program requires more funding than typical early childhood programs, including many Head Start grantees and state-funded pre-k programs, receive per child.

Operating at a Certain Level of Scale

The exemplar programs in this study also illustrate the relationship between scale and quality in early childhood programs. Four of the five exemplars profiled here serve more than 1,000 children across multiple sites. This level of scale provides a clear advantage, allowing programs to achieve efficiencies of scale and invest in central capacity and supports that smaller programs cannot. Acelero Learning's and Fairfax County's investments in developing their own curricula, for example, would not be possible in a smaller program, nor would CAP Tulsa's dedicated four-person research team.

To be sure, there is an element of selection bias at play here as well: Programs were identified as exemplars based on evidence that they produce stronger-than-average child learning outcomes. Smaller programs are far less likely to have the resources or opportunities to engage in the kinds of research partnerships or internal data collection and analysis that enabled these programs to demonstrate their impact. And very small programs may not be of sufficient size to support such analyses.

Thus, the findings of this analysis shouldn't be interpreted as indicating that smaller programs are inherently lower in quality, or that they cannot meet the same levels of quality and results found in these exemplar programs. It is clear, however, that it is harder, and likely more expensive, for small programs to implement the kinds of practices that produce the results achieved by these exemplar providers. Research in the childcare sector shows that it is very difficult to operate a financially viable, high-quality early childhood program below a certain level of scale¹⁴ — and Head Start programs face some of the same cost drivers, as well as the additional costs of providing comprehensive services.

Because of Head Start's unique mission and the breadth and diversity of communities it serves, there will likely always be a need for smaller Head Start programs. And small programs may offer other values, such as forging tight-knit communities or responding to unique local or cultural needs. If small programs are going to continue to be a part of Head Start, however, the field needs to explore innovative structures and options — such as shared services and purchasing cooperatives — to enable smaller grantees to access some of the benefits of scale.

Common Challenges or Areas for Improvement

One of the reasons these programs have demonstrated such strong impact on children’s learning outcomes is that they share a commitment to continuous improvement. Each of these programs carefully assesses and addresses their own areas for growth, and they shared their challenge areas during the exemplar review process. Three areas of challenge that were common across exemplar programs highlight needs facing the field more broadly: supporting English and home language development for dual language learners; preventing, responding to, and mitigating the impacts of challenging behaviors in early childhood classrooms; and improving teacher retention.

Supporting English and Home Language Development for Dual Language Learners

Nationally, 23 million children speak a language other than English at home, and that number is growing.¹⁵ Within Head Start, these children, known as dual language learners, make up 28 percent of the enrolled population.¹⁶ Across the five programs profiled here, the percentage of children who speak a language other than English at home ranges from 27 percent to 80 percent.

Research shows that early childhood programs such as Head Start are particularly valuable for dual language learners.¹⁷ Research also shows that maintaining and building their home language skills while they are young children improves long-term outcomes for dual language learners.

All these exemplar programs have strategies in place to support dual language learner students' development in both English and their home languages.

In recognition of this, the 2007 Head Start Act reauthorization and recent revisions to the Head Start Performance Standards both place a strong emphasis on supporting dual language learners' development in both their home languages and English. All these exemplar programs have strategies in place to support dual language learners' development in both English and their home languages. And the programs' internal data suggest that dual language learners are making English language progress on par with other children in the program. But interviews and further exploration of the programs' practices also highlight challenges and areas where program staff see opportunities to improve supports for dual language learners and their teachers.

A variety of models can support dual language learners' development in both English and their home languages: English-only with home language acquisition, dual language, home language as a foundation for English development, and English only.¹⁸ All but one of these exemplary programs use an English-only model with home language acquisition. Under this model, teachers provide instruction entirely in English, but also employ practices to support and emphasize children's home language development, such as visuals with words and objects named in English and the home language. Programs also emphasize the importance of home language development to parents through parent meetings and communications that are sent home.

When well implemented, as it is in these programs, English-only with home language acquisition is effective in supporting the development of dual language learners. But some of these programs were forced to choose this approach because of the difficulty of recruiting staff to implement the other, home language-heavy models. Specifically, programs have difficulty recruiting staff who are proficient in home languages, particularly lead teachers. Nationally, only 16 percent of Head Start teachers are proficient in a language other than English,¹⁹ half the percentage of children who speak a language other than English. Growing the supply of qualified early childhood teachers who speak children's home languages will be necessary to enable grantees to meet Head Start Performance Standards, which require that classrooms in which more than half of the children speak a language other than English have a teacher or teaching assistant who speaks the children's native language.

The exemplar programs in this study seek to ensure that, in classrooms with high concentrations of students who speak a language other than English, at least one classroom educator speaks the children's primary home language. In many cases, this means hiring an assistant teacher who speaks the children's home language. This practice complies with the Head Start Performance Standards, but it also creates a dynamic where dual language learners primarily interact with assistant teachers, while English speakers interact with both teachers, which may lead to fewer opportunities for interaction or flexible groupings of dual language learners.

Another complicating factor that undergirds these challenges is that most of these programs serve dual language learners who do not all speak the same home language. Twenty percent of children enrolled in the Fairfax County Public Schools' early childhood program, for example, speak a language other than English or Spanish at home. Most available resources and program designs assume that all dual language learners speak the same language (most commonly Spanish), and so focus their attention on initiatives, strategies, and practices to better serve Spanish-speaking children and families. This assumption has basis in fact: Spanish is often the primary home language and, after English, the language spoken by the largest number of people in the United States. And many Head Start and early childhood programs do serve primarily Spanish-speaking students. But the challenges that programs face serving dual language learners are exacerbated when there are multiple home languages. Developmentally appropriate instructional materials, home language assessments, and other resources are not always available in many less common home languages.

Preventing, Responding To, and Mitigating the Impact of Disruptive Behaviors

Most of the exemplar providers indicated that they are struggling with strategies to deal with disruptive behaviors that children exhibit in Head Start classrooms.

Disruptive behaviors are those that go beyond what can be addressed through traditional classroom management techniques.

Disruptive behaviors are those that go beyond what can be addressed through traditional classroom management techniques. Such behaviors are difficult to define because children exhibit them in their own ways, and there is no common definition or standard for tracking such behaviors across programs. But common manifestations include acting out; aggression; defiance; and behaviors that threaten harm to the child, to others, or to program property. These behaviors are not unexpected, particularly in young children, but become problematic when children continue to demonstrate them past when it is developmentally appropriate.

These behaviors are harmful for both the child exhibiting them and the class, and without effective support and interventions they can lead to further educational challenges, difficulty in relationships with others, and negative adult outcomes. Disruptive behaviors also require much of the teacher's attention and interfere with other children's instruction. And the difficulties of responding to and managing such behaviors create stress for teachers, which may contribute to teacher turnover.

Disruptive behaviors are difficult for programs to respond to because they can have a variety of causes, including children's individual temperaments or past experiences with trauma. To effectively support each child, program staff must first understand the source of the behavior, then identify and implement strategies to address it.

Each of these exemplar programs utilizes a variety of approaches to prevent, respond to, or mitigate the impact of disruptive behaviors at both the individual child and program-wide level. But none of the exemplars in this study has yet found a program-wide approach that is fully producing the results they hope for.

Each of these exemplar programs utilizes a variety of approaches to prevent, respond to, or mitigate the impact of disruptive behaviors at both the individual child and program-wide level. All have developed formal processes to flag instances of children persistently manifesting challenging behaviors and work with their parents and teachers to develop individualized support plans. This process provides resources and strategies to support teachers, but simultaneously executing several different plans in one classroom can be challenging. Further, many children who exhibit disruptive behaviors require additional, sometimes intensive, supports and interventions, but do not qualify for special education services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA). In these cases, programs must cover the costs of this support out of their existing budgets.

These programs recognize that program-wide supports for behavior management, executive function, and social-emotional development can also help to prevent or mitigate the impacts of challenging behaviors, and have experimented with a variety of program-wide interventions. Utah Community Action, for example, uses the Pyramid Model for Supporting Social Emotional Competence in Infants and Young Children as a program-wide strategy to support children's behavior and social-emotional development. Educare Miami-Dade uses data from the Devereux Early Childhood Assessment, which includes items related to aggression, attention problems, and emotional control, to identify common challenge areas for children and works with a mental health consultant to design strategies to address those challenge areas. But none of the exemplars in this study has yet found a program-wide approach that is fully producing the results they hope for.

Program leaders report a need for more research on effective supports and interventions, particularly supports for teachers and whole-group instructional approaches that mitigate or prevent behaviors and supports for teachers.

Retaining High-Quality Teachers

Retaining high-quality lead and assistant teachers is the primary human capital challenge for these programs. This is not an uncommon challenge for early childhood programs: Nationally, nearly 30 percent of early childhood educators leave the classroom each year,²⁰ compared to only 8 percent of K-12 teachers.²¹ The programs profiled here reported turnover rates ranging from 9 percent to 100 percent.

Using their additional dollars and making difficult tradeoffs, the exemplar programs profiled here are the highest-paying early childhood programs in their areas. Most have not, however, managed to compensate teachers on par with kindergarten teachers in local school districts. Teachers working in these programs often have the same credentials as kindergarten teachers in local public schools, but kindergarten teachers can make more money and have summers off. As a result, many of the teachers who leave these programs do so to accept positions in school districts.

Data collected through the review process suggest that pay is a factor in teacher turnover for these programs. In a survey of 41 teachers working in these five programs, nearly 60 percent of teachers cited compensation in responding to the question, “If you left your current organization, what would be the reasons?”²² Other evidence from this project, however, suggests that compensation is not the only driver of turnover. Teachers in Fairfax County Public Schools’ early childhood program, for example, are compensated according to the school district’s salary schedule and receive the same compensation and benefits as all other teachers in the district, but leave at rates similar to those in the other early childhood programs in this sample.

Recognizing this, exemplar programs use a variety of non-salary strategies to mitigate teacher attrition. Programs intentionally create environments, for example, that are high-functioning, mission-driven workplaces that deeply value their staff. When asked to identify the benefits of being high-performing teachers at their organizations, teachers in these programs answered, “more agency,” “knowledge that I helped children succeed,” and “opportunity to mentor new teachers.” CAP Tulsa and Acelero Learning also seek to retain staff by offering opportunities for career advancement and helping them explore potential career pathways within the organization and what it takes to pursue them. Programs also offer more tangible benefits: Utah Community Action provides childcare for its teachers, and Educare Miami-Dade provides funding for teachers to pursue additional college credits and/or degrees. CAP Tulsa offers “perks,” financial and otherwise, and accolades to high-performing teachers as retention mechanisms.

Lessons for the Field

In addition to documenting practices and strategies that can help other Head Start and early childhood programs seeking to strengthen their impact, this work highlights lessons and implications for policymakers and the broader field.

Head Start is a crucial source of quality early learning for children in poverty and innovation for the broader field.

This research underscores the fundamental value proposition of Head Start: The programs identified in this analysis are delivering exemplary results for children in poverty, working with families to support children's development and learning, and helping to narrow achievement gaps before children enter school. In some cases, they are the only high-quality early childhood program available to the children they serve; in others, they are a crucial partner in larger state pre-k or early childhood systems, combining resources from Head Start, pre-k, childcare, and local or philanthropic sources to address the comprehensive needs of children growing up in poverty. In all cases, they demonstrate what is possible, both in Head Start and other early childhood settings, when driven, highly skilled adults act with intentionality to meet children's and families' needs. In doing so, they continue Head Start's long legacy of fostering innovations that advance the larger early childhood field and demonstrate why the program remains crucially important to any vision for early childhood that seeks to advance equity and improve outcomes for children in poverty and their families.

This research underscores the fundamental value proposition of Head Start.

Intentional implementation of quality teaching and program practices, rather than policies alone, are crucial to results.

These programs' "secret sauce" is not in those more easily measured inputs and practices.

Efforts to improve the quality of early childhood programs have historically focused on policies and inputs, such as teacher credentials, class sizes, and length of the school day. As Head Start grantees, the programs in this analysis reflect many features commonly associated with quality in early childhood programs. Their "secret sauce," however, is not in those more easily measured inputs and practices, but in the ways programs implement them and the intentionality with which they integrate all program elements to ensure delivery of high-quality, developmentally appropriate instruction for young children. Across all exemplar providers, leadership plays a crucial role in creating an organizational culture and conditions that enable quality teaching and ongoing improvement.

This finding mirrors other research that found practices related to supporting quality teaching are essential to the success of pre-k programs that produce lasting results for children. This suggests that efforts to improve outcomes for children in both Head Start and other early childhood programs must complement policy advocacy with strategies that build systemic capacity and supports for quality teaching. This finding has particular implications for federal investments in training, technical assistance, and other systems that build Head Start grantees' capacity to support quality teaching practices.

Progress in what matters most requires better information about program quality and outcomes.

One surprising lesson of this work was how difficult it is to identify Head Start grantees with evidence of exemplary outcomes. The federal government spends a great deal of time and money conducting monitoring reviews of Head Start grantees and collecting data from them. These requirements also consume considerable time and energy from grantee staff. But federal policymakers and grantees aren't getting as much value out of these efforts as they could, because much of the information collected isn't used in ways that help individual grantees or the field as a whole to improve performance.

It should be possible to change reporting and monitoring requirements so they produce more information that is useful for improvement (and less that isn't).

Measuring the results of a comprehensive early childhood intervention like Head Start is inherently complex, and Head Start programs should not be judged using simplistic measures or a single indicator of classroom practice or children's learning. But it should be possible to get more value out of the information the federal government already collects from grantees, and to change reporting and monitoring requirements so they produce more information that is useful for improvement (and less that isn't).

These efforts must begin by building program-level capacity to collect, analyze, and use data to monitor program performance, inform ongoing continuous improvement, and track impacts on child and family outcomes. Recent changes to the Head Start Performance

Standards related to data and continuous improvement already provide a foundation for doing so, but maximizing their impact will require intentional investments in building grantee and systemic capacity. Federal officials can then identify ways to leverage data collection and monitoring systems to flow this information up to identify high-performing programs, promising practices, and trends, patterns, and lessons that can inform policy and practice.

At the same time, the Office of Head Start should work with researchers and the Head Start community to identify opportunities to use existing or additional data and information to identify grantees that are demonstrating strong performance or positive outliers in key performance areas. Any new measures or new uses of existing data should be carefully piloted to test their validity and usefulness prior to program-wide applications. And federal policymakers should also work with the field to identify opportunities to reduce or streamline data reporting and monitoring requirements that do not contribute to improving quality and results at a grantee- or program-wide level.

Doing this well will take time. In the meantime, philanthropic funders and federal policymakers should invest in building Head Start grantees' data capacity and fund research partnerships that enable additional Head Start grantees with high-quality programs and strong internal data to formally evaluate the impacts of their work. One simple strategy that can be implemented today is creation of a centralized registry where Head Start grantees, school districts, or other early childhood providers and programs that have rigorously evaluated their outcomes can share those evaluations and their results. This registry could provide a "one stop shop" for practitioners and policymakers seeking to learn from high-performing programs, assess and validate the quality and rigor of different program evaluations, and establish standards for inclusion that provide guidance for early childhood programs seeking to evaluate their impacts. Crucially, this registry should not be used as an accountability tool for Head Start programs; instead, it is intended to serve as a starting point for researchers and practitioners seeking to conduct analyses to drive their own continuous improvement.

Following children beyond Head Start is valuable.

Measuring children's progress in Head Start and other early childhood programs is crucial to inform quality teaching and program improvement efforts. What we ultimately care about, however, is the extent to which programs set children up for success after school. For several exemplar programs, tracking data on children's kindergarten readiness and elementary outcomes also proved to be a powerful tool for catalyzing action to improve curriculum and teaching practices and informing programs' improvement efforts. Enabling more Head Start and other early childhood programs to access information about what happens to children after they enter public schools could help improve early childhood and elementary outcomes for low-income students.

As more states build longitudinal data systems that include Head Start children, such longitudinal analyses should be more feasible. But programs and policymakers must take action to realize the potential of these systems. Federal, state, and local policymakers must address the barriers that prevent Head Start programs from being included in state longitudinal data systems or entering into data-sharing agreements with local school districts. Head Start grantees will need to pursue the data, ask the right questions, and devote resources to analyzing data. School districts that are Head Start grantees should follow Fairfax County's lead and leverage their own internal data to measure longitudinal results for children over time.

The field needs to get real about the costs of quality.

All of the programs in this study are able to deliver high-quality programs in part because they access funding above and beyond what Head Start provides, whether through state-funded pre-k programs, childcare subsidies, philanthropy, school district funding, or all of the above. The experience of these exemplar providers suggests that getting the kind of results they produce, particularly for children in poverty, takes greater resources than Head Start and other publicly funded pre-k programs typically provide. For too long, policymakers have tried to stretch early childhood dollars thin and serve more children with less money. It's time for an honest conversation about the true costs of early childhood programs that improve results for low-income children and for public funding levels that match the actual costs of quality programs.

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Teachers and programs need tailored tools and materials.

Several of the programs in this study have developed their own curricula and assessments, while others have substantially supplemented or made adjustments to commercially available curricula and tools in order to better support teachers or boost students' learning in specific domains and skill areas. Whatever their approach, programs in this study devote substantial time and energy to developing, customizing, supplementing, piloting, and testing curricula and instructional materials, and to integrating their curricula, assessments, and professional development practices to create coherent instructional models. But it's not feasible or efficient for all Head Start grantees, particularly those with small programs or fewer resources, to devote the same time and resources to developing, adapting, and integrating curricula and instructional tools. Nor should it be necessary. The level of energy these programs devote indicates that the field needs better curricular resources, assessments, instructional models, and other tools that can easily be adapted and customized to meet programs' particular contexts and needs, as well as support implementing the few tools that already exist. Such resources, assessments, and tools could be developed by the private market, researchers, or the programs themselves, but must be informed by programs' specific needs. In cases where the market is not responding to providers' needs, government or philanthropic funders could fund prize competitions to stimulate innovation to address specific needs and gaps.

Meeting the needs of dual language learners is a core element of quality teaching that requires increased attention and support.

Head Start has a long history of serving dual language learners. But as our nation's demographics change, supporting the development of dual language learners must become a core part of what it means to deliver quality teaching in all Head Start and other early childhood programs. The 2016 Head Start Performance Standards, which clarify expectations for how programs serve dual language learners and support home language development, are an important recognition of this fact, but will be challenging for many Head Start grantees to meet. Even these exemplary programs are struggling to hire teachers who reflect the linguistic diversity of the children they serve; support native English-speaking teachers in working effectively with dual language learners and their families; and provide tools and effective strategies for classrooms where children speak a variety of home languages. Addressing these needs will require building the pipeline of early childhood educators who are proficient in children's home languages. Preparation programs must also integrate content on supporting language and literacy development of dual language learners and working with culturally and linguistically diverse families throughout their curricula for all early childhood teachers. The field also needs new curricular materials, assessments, and other tools and approaches designed specifically to support quality teaching in settings with linguistically diverse populations of dual language learners.

Programs and teachers need support and innovation to help them prevent, respond to, and mitigate the impacts of disruptive behaviors.

All of the programs in our study are experimenting with different strategies for managing disruptive behaviors in the classroom and supporting children who manifest these behaviors and their families. None of them claim to have the answers, however. Head Start is intended to serve the most at-risk children — including those whose behavior may present challenges to teachers and other students — and places strict limits on exclusionary discipline. But to serve children well, programs and teachers also need menus of effective strategies, tools, and resources, both for individual interventions and for classroom or programmatic practices that support children's behavior, teachers, and families. There is an opportunity and a need for collaborative problem-solving and sharing among providers grappling with this challenge, as well as partnerships between researchers and practitioners to develop new strategies and tools. Federal research agencies and philanthropic funders can support these efforts by funding clinical research, research-practice partnerships, and collaboration amongst providers working on innovative strategies to address difficult behaviors.

Conclusion

From its founding, Head Start has served as a laboratory of innovation for the early childhood field, and the exemplar providers profiled here demonstrate how Head Start continues to enable innovations that improve child and family outcomes and generate models for the broader field. The trends and patterns that emerge from the work of these Head Start exemplars, as well as their specific practices, described in the accompanying case studies, offer lessons that other Head Start and early childhood providers, leaders overseeing state pre-k and other public early childhood programs, philanthropic funders, and federal policymakers can draw on to inform efforts to improve early learning outcomes and advance equity for low-income children across a variety of programs and settings.



Appendix

Interviewees

Maralyn Akiyama
Steve Barnett
Melissa Beard
Rebecca Berlin
Laura Bornfreund
Jennifer Brooks
Adia Brown
Amanda Bryans
Donna Bryant
Miriam Calderon
Jeffrey Capizzano
Lydia Carlis
Erin Carroll
Jenna Conway
Amy Cabbage
Marquita Davis
Libby Doggett
Steven Dow
Linda Espinosa
Danielle Ewen
John Fantuzzo
RB Fast
Ellen Frede
Yvette Sanchez Fuentes
Cathy Garland
Jackie Govan
Sharon Huang
Stephanie Jones
Victoria Jones
Myra Jones-Taylor

Gayle Kelly
Joan Lombardi
Amy Madigan
David Mandell
Jana Martella
Kelly Maxwell
Jim Minervino
Rick Mockler
Barbara Montero
Pamela Morris
Jennifer Park
John Pruette
Craig Ramey
Colleen Rathgab
Monica Roers
Joel Ryan
Aaliyah Samuel
Tom Schultz
Kathy Stack
Lisa Stewart
Cynthia Stringfellow
Abby Thurman
Eric Vaughn
Albert Wat
Sarah Weber
Christina Weiland
Elizabeth Weingartner

Endnotes

- 1 Author calculations based on data from “The State of Preschool 2017,” National Institute for Early Education Research, Rutgers Graduate School of Education, <http://nieer.org/wp-content/uploads/2018/05/State-of-Preschool-2017-Full.5.15.pdf>, and Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2017, Head Start Early Learning & Knowledge Center, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/about-us/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2017>.
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- 6 The 2007 Head Start reauthorization did authorize the Centers of Excellence program, which allowed the Office of Head Start to designate Head Start grantees nominated by their governors as Centers of Excellence. Ten Head Start grantees were designated Centers of Excellence and received grants to identify, develop, and refine their approaches to promoting positive outcomes for children, families, and communities, but this program has not been funded for several years. For more information see the Head Start Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center Archive, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/archive/professional-development/article/centers-excellence>, and Head Start Policy and Regulations, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/head-start-act/sec-657b-centers-excellence-early-childhood>.
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- 22 Survey conducted during the on-site visit. All questions were optional. 100 percent response rate to this question.

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Bellwether Education Partners is a national nonprofit focused on dramatically changing education and life outcomes for underserved children. We do this by helping education organizations accelerate their impact and by working to improve policy and practice.

Bellwether envisions a world in which race, ethnicity, and income no longer predict opportunities for students, and the American education system affords all individuals the ability to determine their own path and lead a productive and fulfilling life.

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