



**ADMINISTRATION FOR CHILDREN AND FAMILIES**  
Office of the Assistant Secretary, Suite 600  
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Washington, D.C. 20447

August 6, 2012

The Honorable Kathleen Sebelius  
Secretary  
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services  
200 Independence Avenue, SW  
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Secretary Sebelius:

As Chair of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, I am pleased to submit the Committee's final report for your consideration.

The Committee's charge was to "... review and make recommendations on the design of the study or studies that provide a national analysis of the impact of Head Start programs" and to comment on the research. The Committee was also asked to comment on the state of the evidence in early childhood and its implications for Head Start and other early childhood practice and for future research.

The final report presents the Committee's recommendations and reviews what is known about the effectiveness of Head Start and Early Head Start, given the findings from the Head Start Impact Study, the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, and other studies of Head Start. It presents priorities for implementing the Committee's recommendations in each of four key component areas of Head Start practice and research: quality teaching and learning; parent, family, and community engagement; health and mental health; and cultural and linguistic responsiveness.

### Report Summary

#### *History of Head Start*

The report begins with a discussion of Head Start's history, noting that Head Start has been and continues to be a leader in several areas. These include Head Start's focus on family engagement and comprehensive services, as well as its commitment to serve children with disabilities and children from diverse cultural and linguistic backgrounds. The Committee recognizes Head Start's support for children's health and its recognition of the importance of health to children's well-being and academic performance. The report also notes Head Start's longstanding commitment to accountability for program quality, including its investments in the early childhood workforce and its infrastructure of strong performance standards, on-site monitoring, and technical assistance to promote and support quality programming. The Committee also notes

Head Start’s longstanding commitment to investing in research and evaluation to improve practice in all aspects of the program.

The report also recognizes Head Start’s more recent efforts to improve quality, highlighting the use of the CLASS in monitoring and designation renewal, the creation of the Head Start National Technical Assistance Centers, the development of new Outcomes Frameworks for child outcomes and parent, family, and community engagement and new procedures for accountability and replacement of grantees.

The first chapter states that “In sum, Head Start has a powerful legacy of innovation, and a strong identity as a nationwide program with uniform performance standards and significant cumulative impact on the early childhood field due to its accomplishments, scale, and reach into every state and most local communities. These attributes equip Head Start well to respond to new challenges and opportunities present in today’s policy context for early childhood programs.”

#### *Vision for Head Start*

The report outlines a vision for a Head Start program that is systematically and consistently focused on outcomes (particularly school readiness outcomes and others on which school readiness depends), guided by research and data, and with collective ownership of results for children and families as well as a culture of innovation and improvement for reaching the goals in a variety of locally individualized ways. The report describes roles in implementing this vision for federal agencies, local programs, front-line staff and mid-managers, communities, and families.

#### *Effectiveness of Head Start and Early Head Start*

The report presents and interprets findings from the Head Start Impact Study, Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project, and other studies. Some key points that are discussed include:

- The studies show that Head Start and Early Head Start are improving family well-being and improving school readiness of children at or below the poverty line in the U.S. today. In addition, however, the studies illustrate ways that services for children can be improved.
- The Head Start and Early Head Start programs evaluated were implemented prior to important improvements in both programs.
  - Changes in Head Start have included the widespread use of observational measures of quality that focus on instructional quality as well as emotional support and classroom management, new requirements that establish thresholds of observed quality below which programs will be required to compete for renewal, and the introduction of a new technical assistance system. Early Head Start has also evolved since the evaluation of some of its earliest sites.

- The Committee expresses concerns about the conclusions drawn in some media and policy arenas regarding the effectiveness of Head Start based on evaluations of other early childhood programs. The Committee contends that, particularly when considering the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), there has never been another early childhood program subject to the same level of testing as the Head Start program. Interpretations of the results based on other studies are inappropriate when those studies differ in critical ways in independence of the evaluation, sample size and representativeness of programs, samples of families and children, and nature of comparison groups. Head Start and Early Head Start generally serve a population in poverty, whereas other early childhood programs serve families with a broader range of demographic characteristics. The Committee specifically expresses concerns about comparisons with studies of past interventions, such as the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian programs, as well as more recent studies of public pre-kindergarten programs. The Committee also notes that it is not appropriate to compare the results of the HSIS and the Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSREP), given the differences in both program and study design.

More specific conclusions include:

- Compared to care at home by families and in the other early care and education settings available in communities experienced by control group members at the time of the evaluations, **both Head Start and Early Head Start result in statistically significant short-term (by end of program) improvements** in children's functioning in important areas of cognitive-academic development, social-emotional development, approaches to learning, and health as well as improvements in parenting and – for Early Head Start – in some parent self-sufficiency outcomes.
- **These impacts are in line with the magnitude of findings from other scaled-up programs.** Larger impacts may be possible, e.g., by increasing dosage in Early Head Start and Head Start or improving instructional factors in Head Start.
- **Impacts do not persist into elementary school, but the literature suggests there could still be longer-term effects.** The Committee notes that some early childhood interventions showed impacts into adulthood although impacts faded in childhood, and describes non-experimental studies showing impacts of Head Start in adulthood. The Committee notes that the role of elementary school quality in supporting gains from intervention programs is not well understood.
- **Certain subgroups have stronger short-term impacts and persisting positive effects.** Depending on the outcome domains assessed, some important and substantial impacts persisted for the lowest-academically performing Head Start children, and for African American children both in Head Start and in Early Head Start. In Early Head Start there was also evidence of some sustained effects for Whites and for children and families who enrolled in Early Head Start home visiting models.

### *Committee Recommendations*

The Committee offers three recommendations, which are presented below.

**RECOMMENDATION I. DATA-DRIVEN FOCUS ON SCHOOL READINESS AND OTHER KEY OUTCOMES**

With school readiness and other key outcomes as beacons, strengthen Head Start as a learning organization that: (1) is characterized by a commitment to using data for continuous improvement to further strengthen outcomes; (2) develops appropriate assessments and helps programs use their results to guide practice; and (3) integrates and aligns all practices, policies, and supports toward achieving these outcomes within local programs, across federal components of the program, and from federal to local levels.

*Toward achieving this recommendation, the Committee further recommends that the Secretary:*

1. Develop federal guidance for local programs on how to define and measure:  
(1) children’s progress toward school readiness in all five domains required by the Designation Renewal System—for both English-speaking and Dual-Language Learners—and identify the most appropriate assessment tools for measuring those goals; and (2) other key outcomes that contribute to readiness, including program quality, family health and well-being, and parent, family and community engagement. This guidance should have a prenatal to age 5 focus and consider factors in early elementary school such as the state early learning and K-3 standards. The Secretary could develop this guidance by convening an expert panel, which should also make recommendations for the development of new assessments where gaps are identified, and recommend approaches that programs should use (or avoid) in analyzing progress toward school readiness goals.
2. Following the provision of federal guidance on readiness (see Recommendation I-1), help programs build assessment and data systems to track children’s progress toward school readiness and other key program outcomes and use these data to guide and motivate continuous program improvement. Federal assistance to programs in this area could include training and technical assistance, development of model systems and data elements, and facilitation of peer-to-peer learning.
3. Support and guide each program, considering its own unique population, in selecting effective practices to strengthen children’s school readiness and family well-being (including child and classroom assessments, curricular and family engagement approaches, professional and organizational development, and technical assistance) and then implementing those practices with fidelity and in an integrated way so that there are effective feedback loops (for example, with assessment results guiding practice improvements and targeted professional development).
4. Strengthen and streamline the focus of all components of the national Head Start Program—Performance Standards, technical assistance systems, monitoring, and program data collections—to jointly drive toward the goals of improving children’s school readiness and other key outcomes. Improve use of existing national data such as monitoring and Program Information Report data to inform national policymaking, and develop improved national data systems to provide more comprehensive, timely

information on Head Start children, families, and programs. The Committee recommends that federal data systems be reorganized so that, without additional burden, programs are collecting and reporting the information necessary for the OHS to make effective decisions about how the program is working, who it is serving, and what is needed in monitoring and technical assistance.

5. The Committee recommends a federal cross-agency panel be established to develop a framework for identifying critical components of early childhood workforce preparation aimed at both higher education and non-credit bearing professional development for early education teachers, home visitors, and administrators. The interested agencies should provide funding for implementing and evaluating competency-based models in institutions of higher learning.

## **RECOMMENDATION II. USE OF EVIDENCE-BASED PRACTICES**

Implement the strongest and most current evidence-based practices that either: (1) benefit all children; or (2) are tailored for population subgroups. Continue to develop and test new refinements, particularly for specific subgroups, thereby further building the evidence.

*Toward achieving this second broad Recommendation, the Committee further recommends that the Secretary:*

1. Working with other federal agencies, continually review, disseminate, and update the existing and emerging evidence related to effective practice, using a transparent system of evidence standards and review processes that recognizes the diversity of populations and settings within Head Start and translates the current evidence base in a way that is accessible to practitioners.
2. Focus the technical assistance system on helping programs select and implement the strongest available evidence-based practices in all areas from classrooms and home visiting to health and family engagement practices. Ensure that these are integrated practices, not stand-alone pieces (curriculum, assessment, professional and organizational development; see Recommendation I) and that all technical assistance is provided in an effective manner (e.g., offers up-to-date technology to support practitioners' use of evidence-based practices). Carefully monitor results of these efforts and subsequent information about these practices as they are implemented in the field more broadly.
3. Conduct strong evaluations of major new initiatives (such as the Designation Renewal System and the Birth to Five pilot), and ensure that evaluation results are used for program improvement. Use administrative data to study program quality and effectiveness.
4. Build the research base to address gaps identified in the reviews of evidence-based practices. This research should also address questions of recruitment, engagement and practice for families with greatest risk, Dual-Language Learners, Native Americans, and

other groups where evidence gaps exist.

### **RECOMMENDATION III. CONTINUITY OF SERVICES**

Further improve continuity and coordination of early childhood services beginning during the prenatal period and continuing to age 8.

*Toward achieving this recommendation, the Committee further recommends that the Secretary:*

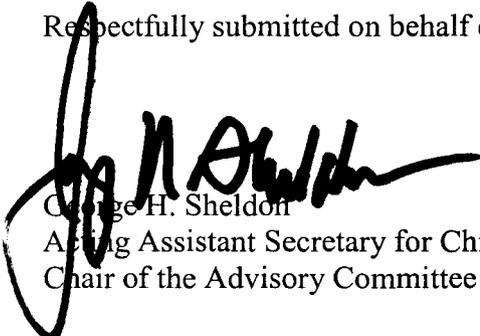
1. Provide guidance to local programs to help them optimize Head Start resources in communities to most efficiently and effectively provide services to children across ages prenatal to 8, including expanding Early Head Start.
2. Guide and support local Early Head Start and Head Start programs to coordinate with each other (e.g., so children do not experience gaps in services), with other early childhood providers (e.g., to minimize and make smooth transitions across the early childhood education day and over time), and with schools (e.g., coordinating with early grades in schools on curricula, assessments, and family engagement).
3. Improve alignment and linkages between Head Start and other early childhood standards, child assessments, program monitoring, data, professional development, and technical assistance initiatives, including efforts to include Head Start children in state data systems. Steps toward improved alignment may include federal collaboration with states as well as federal encouragement for Head Start programs to collaborate with states.
4. Conduct research studies to: (1) better describe family, cultural, and demographic factors related to continuity in quality early care and education for children prenatal to age 8; (2) determine effects of multiple years of high-quality service on children's school readiness and continued school performance; and (3) learn what conditions following Early Head Start, Head Start, or other early childhood care and education—including quantity and types of service and types of instruction, in combination with contextual variables—best support children's continued achievement and adjustment. Working across the government, increase funding for continuity studies and particularly including the less studied prenatal to age 3 program sector. The Committee strongly recommends that Head Start continue its efforts to work closely with the Department of Education to test new developmentally differentiated approaches to coordination between Head Start and elementary schools.
5. Conduct follow-up and further analyses of the HSIS and EHSREP with low-cost, high-yield efforts that will illuminate how children and families have fared in the long run after participating in Head Start.

The Committee believes the implementation of these ambitious recommendations will improve the quality of Head Start and other early childhood programs, and thereby improve the health and

well-being of low-income children and families. The Committee hopes that its work will be of lasting value to the Department and the Head Start community.

I assure you that the Administration for Children and Families is reviewing this report carefully and will incorporate the Committee's recommendations into our ongoing efforts to make Head Start as effective as possible. The Committee offers recommendations for future research and evaluation activities as well as recommendations that have great relevance to our work in technical assistance, monitoring, and other quality improvement efforts. Many of the recommendations validate the program's current priorities in these areas. We intend to use the report recommendations to further those efforts and continue our work of improving the lives of Head Start children and families.

Respectfully submitted on behalf of the Committee,



George H. Sheldon

Acting Assistant Secretary for Children and Families

Chair of the Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation

Enclosure