

Evaluation of the Head Start Designation Renewal System (DRS), 2012-2015

Project Overview

In the fall of 2011, the Office of Head Start (OHS) significantly expanded its accountability provisions with the establishment of the Head Start Designation Renewal System (DRS). In response to requirements in the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, the DRS is designed to determine whether Head Start and Early Head Start grantees are providing high quality comprehensive services to the children and families in their communities. Where they are not, grantees are denied automatic renewal of their grant and must apply for funding renewal through an open competition process. Determinations are based on seven conditions falling under three broader categories: service quality, licensing and operations, and fiscal and internal controls. In 2012, ACF awarded a contract to the Urban Institute (with subcontractor Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute at the University of North Carolina-Chapel Hill) to conduct an evaluation of the DRS and examine how the system is meeting its goals of transparency, validity, reliability and, ultimately, overall program quality improvement. This contract will design and execute a study that will (1) examine the validity of the DRS and its sensitivity in differentiating lower performing programs from higher performing programs; and (2) examine the role of the DRS in improving quality in Head Start and Early Head Start, such as through competition for renewed funding (e.g., replacing lower performing grantees with higher performing grantees) and incentivizing quality improvement for all grantees, regardless of their participation in competitions for funding.

In particular, this contract will design and conduct a study to address the following research questions of interest:

- How effective is the DRS at identifying the lowest performing grantees? How effective are the DRS conditions in measuring program performance in different domains (i.e., program quality, licensing and operations, and fiscal and internal controls)? What is the relationship between quality as measured by the conditions of the DRS and other independent measures of quality?
- How does the DRS incentivize quality improvement for all programs, regardless of their participation in competitions? How have local programs understood and responded to the provisions of the DRS? What kinds of changes have programs made related to program management and structure, staffing, professional development and technical assistance planning, partnerships with other agencies, etc.?
- To what extent is program quality improved through competition? To what extent does the selection for competition of lower performing programs result in grant awards to higher quality programs? Are there differences in program performance before and after competition?

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