



Family Support and Parent Involvement in Head Start: What Do Head Start Program Performance Standards Require?

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May 22, 2003

Head Start is a federal-to-local grant program for the provision of early childhood education, comprehensive services, and family support to more than 900,000 low-income children and their families. Head Start programs must adhere to a set of performance standards regarding what services are to be provided, including health, parental involvement, nutritional, social, and transition to school.¹ This paper describes specific requirements in Head Start Program Performance Standards to involve parents in programs and to provide or link families to support services. The key components of the standards are:

- ✓ Building relationships with parents as early as possible from enrollment, and creating ongoing opportunities for parent involvement throughout the time children are in the program;
- ✓ Helping families work toward their goals and linking families to or providing necessary services;
- ✓ Making programs open to parents at any time, involving parents in the development of program curriculum, and providing parents opportunities to volunteer or become staff;
- ✓ Providing parents with opportunities to enhance their parenting skills;
- ✓ Helping parents become active partners in accessing health care for their children, making community services more responsive to their family needs, and transitioning their children into school; and
- ✓ Involving parents in program decision-making and governance.

Head Start Performance Standards require programs to build relationships with parents as early as possible from the time of child enrollment and to create ongoing opportunities for parent involvement throughout the time children are in Head Start. As soon as possible after a child is enrolled, Head Start staff are required to try to build relationships with their families, while taking into account that families will vary in their willingness to participate.² Staff work with parents to develop family partnership agreements that identify goals, responsibilities, and timetables and strategies for achieving these goals. In addition, teachers in center-based programs must offer to conduct at least two home visits³ (at times convenient for the parent) and two parent-

teacher conferences per program year.⁴ In 2002, 81 percent of Head Start families had developed family partnership agreements.⁵

Head Start Performance Standards require programs to help families access necessary services, either directly or through referrals to community resources.

Based in part on family goals, Head Start programs must help families access services and must follow-up to determine whether the services met family needs.⁶ These services must include:

- Emergency or crisis assistance, such as food, housing, clothing, and transportation;
- Information, counseling, and services specific to family needs;
- Continuing education and employment training;
- Nutrition education;
- Mental health education;
- Family literacy services; and
- Prenatal and postpartum care and health education for pregnant women in Early Head Start programs.

In 2002, programs were asked to report the percentage of services received by families in certain categories, and these were the ones most often received: parenting education (32 percent); health education (27 percent); and adult education, English as a Second Language training, and job training (23 percent); emergency and crisis intervention (15 percent); transportation assistance (11 percent); and housing assistance (10 percent).

Head Start Performance Standards require programs to stay open to parents at any time during operation, to involve parents in the development of program curricula, and to provide parents opportunities to volunteer or become staff. Parents must be welcomed in Head Start facilities during all program hours, although they are not required to participate.⁷ Programs must develop opportunities for parents to learn about program curricula and approaches to child development and education, and federal guidance suggests this is a way to share knowledge with parents and better individualize services for children.⁸ In addition to encouraging them to become volunteers, parents of Head Start children must be given priority for employment in positions for which they are qualified.⁹ In 2002, 29 percent of Head Start staff members were current or former Head Start parents, and 58,870 Head Start parents were volunteers.

Head Start Performance Standards require programs to provide parents with opportunities to enhance their parenting skills. Programs must develop ways for parents to enhance their skills, knowledge, and understanding of educational and developmental needs and activities of their children, as well as for them to share any concerns they may have about child development.¹⁰

Head Start Performance Standards require programs to help parents become active partners in accessing health care for their children, making community services more responsive to their family needs, and transitioning their children into school. Programs must assist parents in enrolling in available health insurance programs,

encourage and facilitate parents to accompany their children to medical and dental exams, and provide parents with opportunities to learn about preventative health care.¹¹ Head Start must work at the community level to provide families with information about local resources and to support parents to influence the character of community services.¹² Programs must assist parents in being their children's advocates in the transition from Head Start into other programs, including elementary school. Staff must hold meetings with parents as the time for transition approaches, and must help parents prepare to participate actively in their children's schooling and to communicate with school teachers in their children's best interests.¹³

Head Start Performance Standards require programs to involve parents in program decision-making and governance. Grantees and delegate agencies must establish and maintain a formal structure of shared governance in the form of a policy council or committee including parents of currently enrolled children and community representatives to allow participation in program policymaking and decisions.¹⁴ At least 51 percent of the policy council or committee must be parents of currently enrolled children.¹⁵ Performance Standards include several specific responsibilities that must be carried out by the policy setting council or committee.¹⁶ In addition, all parents of enrolled children are automatically eligible to participate in required separate parent-only committees that advise staff, develop parent and staff activities, and participate in the recruitment and screening of employees.¹⁷ To enable parents to participate, programs must reimburse reasonable levels of expenses parents may incur, such as for travel or child care costs.¹⁸

¹ 42 USC 9836A Sec. 641A.

² Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(a)(1).

³ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(i)(1)-(3).

⁴ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(e)(5).

⁵ For this and subsequent Head Start Program Information Report data noted herein, see Schumacher, R., & Irish, K. (2003). *What's New in 2002? A Snapshot of Head Start Children, Families, Teachers, and Programs*. Washington, DC: CLASP.

⁶ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(b)(2).

⁷ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(d)(2).

⁸ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(e)(1).

⁹ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.52(b)(3).

¹⁰ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(e)(3).

¹¹ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(f)(2)(i)-(iii).

¹² Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(g)(1).

¹³ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.40(i)(1)-(3).

¹⁴ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.50(a)(1).

¹⁵ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.50(b)(2).

¹⁶ For more detailed information on policy council responsibilities, see Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.50(c) & (d).

¹⁷ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.50(e).

¹⁸ Head Start Performance Standards, 1304.50(f).