What's Ahead for Head Start?

A seven-part blog series about the federal government's 44-year-old preschool program for children from poor families.

September 2009

THE EARLY ED WATCH BLOG

NEW AMERICA FOUNDATION

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Note: The "What's Ahead for Head Start?" series generated many thoughtful questions and comments from our readers. To view them, go to the original Head Start posts at the Early Ed Watch blog, published by the New America Foundation.

Head Start and State Pre-K: Competing, Collaborating and Evolving

Christina Satkowski -
September 8, 2009 - 9:17am

Today we begin a multi-week blog series, reported by Lisa Guernsey and Christina Satkowski, on the future of Head Start. Join us here at Early Ed Watch for a Web chat about the series on September 22nd at 12:30 p.m., hosted in partnership with Politico.com.

Head Start, the largest federally funded program for children under 5, has been offering free preschool and health services to poor children and their families for nearly 45 years. It has seen growth and stagnation, controversy and quiet. Today, with the Obama Administration signaling its intent to increase federal funding to support young children, one might think that Head Start was poised to enter one of its most expansive periods ever.

But there are several huge unanswered questions about Head Start's future. In recent years, parents and politicians have found themselves drawn instead to state-funded pre-K programs. Indeed, by 2008, more children at ages 3 and 4 were enrolled in state-funded pre-K programs than in Head Start. State programs enroll about 1.1 million preschoolers, while Head Start serves about 920,000 in that age range.* As Georgetown University researcher William Gormley wrote last year, "A silent revolution in early childhood has occurred."

Some may assume that these two types of publicly funded preschool programs are on a collision course. But are they really? Think of them as trains whose purpose is to deliver children to elementary school ready and eager to learn. Are they on different tracks that eventually arrive at the same place? Or are they trying to share the same track? Could one rail system become better integrated with the other?

It's impossible to arrive at good answers without a better understanding of how Head Start has evolved and how it compares and interoperates with current state-funded pre-K programs today. That is the mission of *Early Ed Watch* for the next two weeks. Based on interviews and research, six upcoming posts will

- explore how new rules in the program's 2007 reauthorization are affecting Head Start;
- check assumptions about the program's effectiveness;
- provide updates on how Head Start approaches the teaching of pre-literacy;
- explain how "comprehensive" services fit into the picture;
- highlight trends that show Head Start getting "younger" and;
- provide some guideposts for what's ahead.

This first post is designed to serve as a starting point, providing basic information about Head Start's mission and enrollment compared to state-funded programs. It's important to remember, for example, that Head Start is for the poorest of the poor, while families of many different income levels are eligible

for state-funded pre-K. Some states, like Oklahoma and Georgia, offer it to everyone regardless of income. Others, like Illinois, have opened their programs first to low-income children with the intention of adding more families as funding becomes available.

Head Start's origins are also different from those of state-funded pre-K. Head Start was envisioned as a preschool-like environment that offered health and nutrition services, not to mention new ways for parents to get engaged. In contrast, states' pre-K programs often grew out of an emphasis on cognitive development, particularly the teaching of early literacy skills. Yet in recent years, as we'll describe in forthcoming blog posts, the gulf between these two objectives has narrowed and the missions of these two approaches are starting to sound more and more alike.

Fluctuations in funding at both the state and federal level will play a big role in determining the future of both types of programs. The full impact of the recession is yet to be known, but one possibility is that fiscal year 2009 will come to look like a high-water mark for state pre-K investment. In budgeting for 2010, for example, Illinois made cuts to its pre-K budget. In Ohio, the recession pushed legislators to eliminate the Early Learning Initiative. Meanwhile, the federal stimulus bill passed in February provided Head Start with a $2.1 billion boost, half of which goes toward a massive expansion of the Early Head Start program serving pregnant women and children up to 3. The federal stimulus is also paying for quality improvements and pay raises for Head Start staff, as well as shortening waiting lists for 3- and 4-year-olds.

Lastly, tighter collaboration between Head Start and state-funded pre-K programs -- urged for years -- is now happening in many cities and states. Some pre-K programs blend state and federal funding to expand access and services. In fact, about 14,000 children, according to NIEER, attend Head Start programs that double as state-funded pre-K programs. (A 2007 report from the Center for Law and Social Policy and PreK Now provides some examples of how collaboration can work.) Some states rely on Head Start to take on one task, such as reaching the most impoverished or enrolling 3-year-olds, while states do another, such as paying pre-K teachers to cover the morning hours.

For those of you still scratching your heads over the similarities and differences between the two, consider the comparison below as your primer. (An easier-to-read PDF is available here.) Please feel free to add your own perspective and insights in our blog comments. And tune in tomorrow for the next installment in our series on how - and if -- recent changes in the laws governing Head Start law have had an impact on the program.

*A few notes about enrollment data: The enrollment of state Pre-K -- 1.1 million -- comes from the National Institute for Early Education Research's 2008 State of Preschool Yearbook and includes the 50 states and DC. The number we cite for Head Start -- 920,000 -- is from Head Start's Program Information Report for 2007-2008 and includes the U.S. territories as well. If you were to look solely at federally funded Head Start enrollees in the 50 states and DC, the number is about 750,000, according to NIEER.

Same and Different: An Overview of Head Start and State-Funded Pre-K

Head Start

History: Launched in 1965 when it served more than 100,000 5- and 6-year-olds through an eight-week, summer program.

Mission: To "promot[e] school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children and families."

Enrollment: In 2007-08, more than 1 million children and pregnant women were enrolled in 2,599 Head Start and Early Head Start Programs; 921,501 of Head Start enrollees were 3- and 4-year olds. (27,699 were 5-year-olds.)

Eligibility: Available only to families at or below the poverty line. As of December 2007, up to 30 percent of enrollees may be from families with incomes up to 130 percent of the poverty line. Foster children and children with special needs are also eligible, and eligibility waivers are available for some family circumstances.

Funding: The federal government provides grants to local agencies which administer Head Start centers; in 2008 these grants totaled $6.8 billion. Agencies must fund 20 percent of their budgets with non-federal dollars, which can be raised through donations, state and local funds, or other sources, and can be provided in-kind. The federal government spends, on average, $7,326 per child in Head Start.

State Pre-K

History: States have a long history of investing in pre-K programs: California's State Preschool Program, for example, began in 1965, the same year as the federal Head Start program, and Wisconsin has included state-funded preschool in its constitutions since 1848. The national movement to provide state-funded preschool didn't really take off until the 1990s, however. Now 39 states and the District of Columbia have pre-K programs, with Florida, Georgia and Oklahoma offering access regardless of family income. Illinois, Massachusetts, Missouri, New Jersey, New York and West Virginia have initiatives aimed at universal access. One state, Illinois, has a goal of universal access for 3-year-olds as well.

Mission: Varies according to each state, though typically includes school readiness as a major goal.

Enrollment: In 2007-08, more than 1.1 million children aged 3 and 4 attended state-funded preschool education, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research, with vast disparities by state. Oklahoma, for example, enrolls more than 70 percent of its 4-year-old population. But 11 states have no public pre-K program at all.

Funding: $4.6 billion in 2008. Annual per-pupil spending ranges widely from $1,686 in Maine to $10,989 in New Jersey. Averaged together, states spend $4,061 per pupil.

SOURCES: Head Start Program Fact Sheet; Head Start Program Information Report 2007-08; The State of Preschool 2008 Yearbook from the National Institute for Early Education Research.

Seeking Signs of Change Since Head Start's 2007 Reauthorization

Lisa Guernsey -
September 9, 2009 - 9:00am

This is the second post in our seven-part series, "What's Ahead for Head Start?" Join us here for a web chat on this topic on Sept. 22, 2009 at 12:30 p.m. EDT.

More than 18 months have passed since the laws governing Head Start got their most recent make-over. The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, which President Bush signed into law in December 2007, includes several major reforms to the Head Start program, most of them designed to improve the program's quality and accountability.

What is the impact of these changes? Agencies are hiring more teachers with post-secondary degrees, as required by the law. But data does not yet exist to help us detect other signs of quality and accountability improvement. Some of the law's deadlines are still years away and some requirements went unfunded until this year. At least one initiative is already months behind schedule.

Here's a progress report on the law's impact so far:

Goodbye, NRS

The most immediate impact of the 2007 law was the cancellation, after only three years in use, of the National Reporting System, an assessment of children's early reading and math skills that was criticized from the get-go for being too narrow and unreliable when used with children at such young ages. The 2007 reauthorization called for the development of new measures that would be fairer and more appropriate for 3- and 4-year-olds than the hastily-designed NRS. The National Academies of Science, in response to a separate request from Congress, published guidance in 2008 on how to create fair assessments for preschoolers. The report stressed the inappropriateness of high-stakes tests for children in this age group and suggested that "extreme caution" be exercised in using assessments to evaluate programs that serve special-needs children and those in language-minority homes. Today, if a new assessment system is under development, it has not yet been made public. Most observers do not expect to see a standardized system for testing Head Start children anytime soon.

The law does require the use of trained observers to measure and rate the richness of interactions between teachers and their students. Throughout 2009, Head Start representatives have been attending training sessions for the use of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System, a popular measurement system known as CLASS. As the use of CLASS becomes more ubiquitous, better information should follow on which Head Start programs are meeting a high bar for quality.

Slow movement on accountability

Meanwhile, the Department of Health and Human Services has missed deadlines on another provision, often referred to as the "re-compete" clause, that was designed to foster more accountability and change the way that HHS distributes its funds. In the past, once a school district or organization was designated to receive a Head Start grant, that grantee was guaranteed to receive federal dollars every year virtually in perpetuity except in cases of severe mismanagement. The 2007 law discarded that guarantee and stipulated that agencies must show evidence every five years that their programs are "comprehensive and high quality." Otherwise, the law says, they must "re-compete" for the money against other community organizations that want to provide Head Start services in their place. The Government Accountability Office praised this provision in a 2008 report for improving the ability of the Administration for Children and Families "to remove severely underperforming grantees from the program, on a regular basis."

The "re-compete" rule was not intended to be invoked right away. Congress provided time for advisers to draft a proposal that could be hashed out in public and instructed HHS to institute the rule in spring of 2010. In December 2008, an HHS committee met its deadline to submit recommendations to then Secretary Michael Leavitt, but not much has happened since. According to the law, the department was supposed to have published its proposal in the *Federal Register* by March 12, 2009, and to start building a new system and informing agencies of how it would work at the close of a 90-day comment period. Nearly six months after the March deadline, nothing has appeared in the *Federal Register*. Even if the department published a notice tomorrow, there is little chance of establishing a new renewal system by the March 12, 2010 deadline set by Congress.

It's only fair, of course, to note that HHS has been slowed by the late confirmation of its department head, Secretary Kathleen Sebelius, which in turn slowed the process of filling key subcabinet positions that oversee Head Start. As of September, the Office of Head Start was still operating under an interim director.

"The bill wasn't signed until December ‘07 and then you moved into a time with a lack of leadership and lack of money," said Helen Blank, director of leadership and public policy at the National Women's Law Center, referring to the last year of President Bush's term. "It's hard to expect that much in a year and a half."

The Office of Head Start also has been distracted by new work. It is responsible for reviewing applications from Head Start programs that want a piece of the $2.1 billion now available through the federal stimulus package. The funds will be used to nearly double Early Head Start's enrollment and allow for a smaller expansion and enhancement of Head Start.

New momentum for better collaboration

Positive signs of momentum are cropping up around the 2007 law's call for the creation of state advisory councils. These councils -- one in each of the 50 states, the District of Columbia and U.S. territories - are supposed to bring together early education stakeholders at the state and local levels so that they can eliminate redundancies and integrate services. These councils went unfunded until this year, when they received a $100 million slice of the stimulus pie.

In most cases, the new funding will provide a big boost for existing efforts at statewide collaboration; in other states it will pay for the start-up of a new council. In interviews *Early Ed Watch* this summer, people involved with the councils have expressed optimism for what they will finally be able to accomplish. With new levels of funding and an emphasis on high-level integration into state governments, these councils may finally have some teeth. But because the grants have not even been distributed yet, (ACF announced the competition for the funds in June) it's wise to hold applause until we see exactly how effective these councils will be.

Another intent of the 2007 law is to spur more collaboration between Head Start agencies and other early childhood or pre-K programs at the local level. But we don't yet have data to determine whether this is happening. The law requires Head Start grantees, for example, to sign memoranda of understanding with the entity or agency responsible for publicly funded preschool in their area. The agreements are supposed to foster better communication between Head Start and public schools that run preschool. But because states or localities don't always require their public preschools to sign such memos, Head Start experts say it isn't always easy to get both parties to the table, and we haven't found any nationwide source of data on how many of these agreements exist so far.

Improvements in teacher quality

The 2007 law pushes Head Start agencies to be careful who they hire. The law's first due date is a year from now -- September 10, 2010 -- when all teachers in Early Head Start must have earned a child development associate, or CDA, credential. In 2011, all Head Start teachers must have at least an associate's degree in early childhood or a related field. And in 2013, half of them must have at least a bachelor's degree in early childhood. (If their degree isn't specifically for early childhood, it must be in a related field and they must have experience teaching preschoolers.)

We don't know yet whether the requirements passed in late 2007 have had any real impact, because data from Head Start's program information reports is not yet available for the 2008-09 school year.

But we do know that even before the recent changes, Head Start agencies were already hiring more and more teachers with post-secondary degrees, a trend that dates to stricter standards put in place during the 1990s. About 46 percent of teachers have already hit that bar -- up from 40 percent in 2005. (See chart at right.)

SOURCE:Head Start PIR reports

Opening up enrollment

Over the next few years, the law may change the composition of children in some Head Start centers. The 2007 law relaxed the rules so that a broader pool of children would be eligible for its programs. Originally, the program was designed for children in families at or below the poverty line - at "100 percent of poverty," according to the lingo. At least 90 percent of Head Start enrollees needed to meet that standard, although waivers were available. Now, about a third of enrolled children may come from families at or below 130 percent of poverty, as long as waiting lists for lower-income children have been depleted.

The new law also requires that at least 10 percent of an agency's enrollment must include children with disabilities unless a waiver has been granted.

Are Head Start enrollments changing as a result of these requirements? It's hard to know. The new eligibility rules took effect in late December 2007, but practically speaking, rosters didn't open up until the 2008-09 school year, and data has not yet been culled on how this has changed things on the ground.

In short, it's too early in the game to know if the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start has made a big impact. Over the next year, as more funds make their way to Head Start agencies and the federal offices within HHS become more settled, more data should emerge to tell policymakers whether Head Start agencies are steadily making the improvements that the reauthorization intended to drive.

Ultimately, the best sign of improvement would be an increase in the number of children who are entering kindergarten with the academic and social skills they need to succeed. On Friday, we will look at what the research tells us about how Head Start is faring on that end -- and how to best compare its record to that of state-funded pre-K programs.

Checking Assumptions About School Readiness

Lisa Guernsey -
September 11, 2009 - 8:45am

This is the third in a seven-part series on the future of Head Start. Please join us for a web chat on this topic on Tuesday, Sept. 22 at 12:30 p.m. EDT here at EarlyEdWatch.org. We invite you to email us questions to get the chat rolling.

Head Start children have been the subject of hundreds of studies over the program's 44 years in existence. So you might expect policymakers to have a solid understanding of whether the program is good at preparing kids for school. Not so.

Lately, when one asks about school readiness, the answer depends on who is doing the answering. In general, most people assume that Head Start helps poor kids get ready for school. After all, the program has survived for decades, so they figure it must be doing something right. But conventional wisdom among conservatives and school reformers is altogether different. They question the program's effectiveness and wonder if money is being well spent.

Dig deeper with questions on how Head Start compares to state-funded pre-K programs, and the situation gets worse. Misinformation is repeated in opinion pieces and policy forums. In one recent forum in Washington, D.C., Head Start was disparaged for not being a "pre-K" program, when in fact many states (Ohio and Delaware, among others) consider it a model of what a pre-K program should look like. A February op-ed said that Head Start was "failing" children despite the author's acknowledgement that children's scores on several pre-literacy tests went up after enrolling.

It's time to check our assumptions, zoom in on exactly what the data says, and isolate what we still need to learn. In the process, we'll take a look at some new research hot off the presses that should help to untangle the confusion.

First, the Cliffs Notes version: Nationally, Head Start is making a positive, though modest, impact on children's ability to do well in school. Neither state-funded pre-K programs nor Head Start are doing enough to match the life-changing gains that come from the oft-cited programs like the Perry Preschool Project, which was smaller, more comprehensive, and of higher quality than most of today's preschool programs. But in some states and communities (such as Tulsa, Oklahoma, and New Jersey's Abbott districts), Head Start programs have conformed to such high standards that the gains made by their participants are more comparable to those of Perry Preschool and other high-quality model programs.

Let's wade into the national data for more context. There are two main sources of nationwide data on what, and how much, children learn from Head Start. One is the Family and Child Experiences Survey -- FACES for short -- that tracks a sample of 2,400 children through their first year of Head Start up to kindergarten. It provides a snapshot of the gains children have made in learning to identify letters, show awareness of their sounds, acquire new vocabulary and develop their social skills. Its most recent findings showed that kids are making progress each of these fronts.

The other is called the Impact Study, which tracks about 5,000 kids. It is a more valid source for evaluating Head Start because it compares the outcomes of Head Start children to non-Head Start children. In fact, to conduct a truly scientific and controlled experiment, the researchers randomly assigned these children to either a Head Start or a non-Head Start program. In either case, the children's parents had qualified for and expressed an interest in Head Start.

First-year results, released in June 2005, showed that Head Start children were making more progress than the other group. The study's authors described the size of Head Start's impact as "small to moderate" - a couple of words that, as we'll discuss below, have special meaning in the language of educational statistics.

Specifically, the Impact Study has shown so far that children who entered Head Start at age 4 made significant gains compared to the control group on 5 of 15 indicators of cognitive and social-emotional development after a year of Head Start. Their parents also reported reading to their children more often. Participating children were better than their non-Head Start counterparts at identifying letters and naming letters, and they performed better on one of two tests of pre-writing skills. No evidence emerged of the program causing any negative outcomes, such as behavior problems or worsening literacy skills.

But Head Start children didn't differ significantly from the others on one of their two pre-writing assessments, two tests of vocabulary, an assessment of oral comprehension and a test of early math skills. No differences emerged on measures of problem behavior or socialization either.

Three-year-olds felt the first-year effects of Head Start more broadly. According to the study, they made significant improvement on 11 of 15 tests, including a few of the social-emotional assessments. And their parents, too, reported more instances of reading to them.

In some cases, Head Start propelled children to a moderately higher level than children who didn't enroll. In other cases, children took smaller steps forward.

Statistical significance isn't all we're looking for here, however. We need to consider how big the differences are between Head Start students and their peers. That's where the descriptors "small" and "moderate" come in. In some cases, Head Start propelled children to a moderately higher level than children who didn't enroll. In other cases, children took smaller steps forward. The magnitude of these differences - known as the "effect size" -- is important because it can help researchers determine whether the benefits of a program are worth its costs in the long run

Does Head Start pass such a cost-benefit analysis? Are dollars recouped because of these small to modest effects? In 2007, two researchers -- Jens Ludwig at the University of Chicago and Deborah Phillips at Georgetown -- studied that question. They analyzed the Impact Study data in light of Head Start's estimated cost of about $9,000 per child per year. (The official cost per child in 2006-07 was $7,087 per year but that includes only federal funding, not the 20-percent match of in-kind or cash donations that Head Start centers are required to pull in.)

They concluded that the benefits in the long run -- such as school districts expending less on special education -- could outweigh the costs. But the long-term benefits wouldn't tip the scales anywhere near as dramatically as has been shown with programs like Perry Preschool, Abecedarian or the Child-Parent Centers of Chicago, which have much larger effect sizes than those of Head Start. This is a disparity that we've highlighted before. There is a big difference between the $10-to-$1 cost-benefit ratios of the small and high-quality early childhood programs touted by the Obama administration and the much smaller ratios associated with Head Start. Ludwig and Philip didn't publish a dollar-to-dollar ratio, but their study implies that for every $1 invested just a little more than a $1 is recouped.

More analysis is surely to come. The next installment of the Impact Study -- one that examines what happens after Head Start children finish first grade -- is due out on September 30.

Now, what about the second part of the Head Start question -- is Head Start any better or worse at preparing children for school than state-funded pre-K? Until recently we didn't have much to go on, primarily due to the wide variation in state pre-K programs. It has been nearly impossible to truly compare apples to apples. One exception is a small study from Georgia in 2006 that showed that children in the state's pre-K program achieved similar, and in many cases greater, gains on academic tests than those who attended Head Start.

A different and more up-to-date way to look at Head Start comes in a soon-to-be-released study on the pre-K and Head Start programs in Tulsa, Okla. In Oklahoma, state-funded pre-K is available free to every 4-year-old, and ever since the program began, researchers at Georgetown University -- Deborah Phillips, William T. Gormley and Amy E. Lowenstein -- have been studying its impact. Tulsa is a particularly interesting city to study because its Head Start program decided to ramp up its standards, making them equal to the unusually high standards required by Oklahoma's state program. Its teachers, for example, must have bachelor's degrees and, just as in the state's pre-K program, must be paid at the same rate as public school teachers.

The latest study out of Georgetown, which appears in the *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, shows that this equalization of standards made a difference. No matter which program the children attended -- whether it was the state's pre-K program or Head Start -- Tulsa's 4-year-olds experienced better instruction and more appropriate classroom activities than their national counterparts in either pre-K or Head Start.

What mattered was that teachers were adept at engaging children in academic concepts and had a close relationship with them.

Interestingly, some common indicators of quality -- staff ratios, length of program or whether the staff held bachelor's degrees -- didn't appear to matter in determining children's learning gains. What mattered was that teachers were adept at engaging children in academic concepts and had a close relationship with them.

Were there any distinctions within Tulsa, between programs? Yes and no. The children in Tulsa Head Start spent less time on math and more time on social studies than the children in state-funded pre-K. But other than that, no significant differences emerged in evaluations of teaching quality.

The new research, mind you, can't provide a perfect comparison of Head Start to state-funded pre-K because, no matter how many characteristics the two Tulsa programs may share, it is still likely that Head Start children are coming with hard-to-measure traits that derive from their level of poverty and may require different teaching techniques. But the study is important because previous research by the Georgetown team showed that 4-year-olds in both the Tulsa pre-K program and the Head Start programs make very large academic gains by the end of the year - the kind of steep inclines that are associated with Perry Preschool.

It's not clear yet what has spurred such achievement. But Phillips, the lead author of the study, has some theories. Public school teachers in Tulsa, she said, make a very good salary -- on par with the average salary of city residents -- compared to teachers elsewhere. And as noted earlier, pre-K and Head Start teachers also receive that high level of pay.

"If you are in Tulsa, there is no reason not to be a teacher," Phillips said. "You will earn a very good wage. And if want to be a pre-K teacher, you don't have to cut your salary in half in order to teach 4 year olds and not 5 year olds."

The Tulsa findings suggest that it's possible for Head Start and state-funded pre-K programs around the country to pull themselves up to relatively high levels of quality. But they may need to raise teacher salaries to match what is offered by the public school system -- a tall order in the midst of recession and at a time when waiting lists can, understandably, lead policymakers to want to open more slots instead of bumping up paychecks. The predicament calls to mind an earlier study by economist Janet Currie and health policy expert Matthew Neidell. They scoured a larger national dataset to determine if children's school performance was significantly associated with attendance in Head Start. They found that the answer was yes -- if the child went to a Head Start that was funded at a higher level than average.

How to address this funding quandary is the puzzle of the decade. At the very least, smart policymakers will want to make sure that funds are used wisely and services are distributed without redundancy. Given the similarities between Head Start and pre-K systems in many places, it's worth taking a long look at where they come together. Two potential areas of overlap -- pre-literacy instruction and comprehensive services -- will be the subject of our next two posts.

A Tilt Toward Literacy

Lisa Guernsey -
September 15, 2009 - 5:08pm

This is the fourth in a seven-part series on the future of Head Start. Please join us for a web chat on this topic on Tuesday, Sept. 22 at 12:30 p.m. EDT here at EarlyEdWatch.org. We invite you to email us questions to get the chat rolling.

What a difference a decade makes. Ask experienced Head Start teachers and administrators about how things have changed over the past 10 to 15 years, and many of them will talk about differences in how, or whether, they taught the A, B, Cs or even posted the letters on their classroom walls. "I was forbidden to teach letters," wrote teacher J.M. Holland just this week in an *Early Ed Watch* post reflecting on his experience in 1995.

Leery of putting undue attention on literacy instruction, Head Start's proponents have always argued that a comprehensive approach to supporting young children's development is the strategy most likely to yield long-term learning gains for the impoverished youngsters Head Start serves. Head Start was designed at the outset to promote the development of the whole child, mentally, socially, cognitively and physically. It is a program that offers health services -- including dental screening, nutrition, and other services that alleviate the effects of poverty -- as well as education.

But to some critics, Head Start's emphasis on comprehensive services is a sign the program has little interest in preparing children to read. That's the argument Douglas J. Besharov, a scholar at the American Enterprise Institute, made last February in an op-ed against investing stimulus funds in Head Start. Chester E. Finn, Jr., president of the Thomas B. Fordham Institute, devotes an entire chapter in his book *Reroute the Preschool Juggernaut* to "The Problem of Head Start," arguing that Head Start does too little to prepare poor youngsters for success in school. Finn spends a large part of the chapter describing how Head Start's founders worried, several decades ago, about placing too much importance on children's cognitive development. But he ignores more recent policy decisions -- most noticeably improvements to Head Start's early literacy standards in 1998 and 2000 -- that increased the program's focus on early literacy. He also glides over several findings from the 2005 Impact Study that do show participants making improvement on several, albeit not all, indicators of early literacy skills.

The truth is that a lot has changed since the days that Finn writes about. Head Start continues to be a comprehensive program (the case for continuing this comprehensive focus will come in tomorrow's post), but Head Start has taken a 180-degree turn on teaching pre-literacy skills. Alphabet letters are allowed -- indeed encouraged -- not just on the walls but throughout Head Start classrooms. Teachers are required to more directly introduce early reading skills, including the identification of letters and the singling out of printed words on signs and in books.

Today, more and more early childhood experts -- including many in Head Start programs -- agree that 4-year-olds should have exposure to some kind of pre-literacy instruction. New research published

throughout this decade is persuasive, and some of it is based on gains made by Head Start children. (Watch for a helpful summary of this research in the forthcoming report titled "America's Early Childhood Literacy Gap," to be released on Thursday by the non-profit organization, Jumpstart.) Those who criticize Head Start for not being interested in early literacy haven't been paying much attention to the program lately.

Instead, the more pressing question today is not whether literacy should be taught in Head Start classrooms, but how. What are the most effective and developmentally appropriate approaches? For example, Susan Neuman, an early literacy expert and professor of education at the University of Michigan, worries that Head Start programs are relying on rote memorization strategies. "There is this false sense of satisfaction that we may be doing the right thing now," Neuman said. "But I worry that we may not be doing the right things, that we aren't focusing on the things that bring achievement."

The tilt toward literacy dates to the 1990s. Throughout the administrations of the Presidents George H.W. Bush and William Clinton, when efforts to improve Head Start quality gathered steam, new research began to emerge on the importance of foundational literacy skills. As early as 1992, one of Head Start's first directors reflected on the tension between the program's comprehensive approach and the desire to prepare children for academic work in school. Edward Zigler, professor emeritus at Yale University, described it this way in *Head Start: The Inside Story of America's Most Successful Educational Experiment*: "In an effort to ensure that Head Start was a comprehensive program, particularly one that downplayed cognitive development, we may have paid too little attention to the educational component," Zigler wrote.

In the 1998 reauthorization, Congress mandated that the Head Start Performance Standards be expanded to include "print and numeracy awareness." To measure this, the law required "that children know that letters of the alphabet are a special category of visual graphics that can be individually named, recognize a word as a unit of print, identify at least 10 letters of the alphabet, and associate sounds with written words."

Helen Traylor, associate commissioner of the Head Start Bureau at the time, laid out these requirements in Head Start Bulletin on curriculum in 2000. But she maintained that Head Start teachers should not veer from developmentally appropriate teaching. "This does not mean," she wrote, "that we drill children on the alphabet or enforce rote learning!"

Also in 2000, the federal government established the Child Outcomes Framework, which defines a set of skills and developmental milestones that children should reach to be prepared for school. Literacy is named as one of eight top-level domains. For example, a child should show "a growing awareness of beginning and ending sounds of words" and "recognize a word as a unit of print."

"We've seen some real progress in the last decade," said Susan H. Landry, founder and director of the Children's Learning Institute at the University of Texas Health Science Center in Houston. Landry has led efforts nationwide to include more literacy instruction in the early years. "It took a lot of work over the years to convince both the federal Head Start folks and the Head Start Association to make this adjustment in their philosophy, " she said, "And it slowly but surely happened, in some places more quickly than others."

In 2003, during President George W. Bush's first term, the administration rolled out a National Reporting System (NRS) that was designed to test young children's ability to recognize letters, among other things. The system was criticized for being hastily designed and inappropriate for young children and was scrapped three years later as part of the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start. But some of its data remains available in the Department of Health and Human Services performance reports. In NRS's last year, 95 percent of Head Start children could identify at least 10 letters.

Other data, from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), show improvements in children's letter identification even earlier than 2007. One of its studies compares sample groups of children who attended Head Start in 1997-98, 2000-01 and 2003-04. The children surveyed in 2003-04 were able to name more letters after a year in Head Start than those who attended four years before them. (See chart below.)

It would be wrong, of course, to rely entirely on letter identification as a measure of pre-literacy. Head Start observers want to see more growth in vocabulary and language use, for example. Equally important is an examination of which early literacy skills are most helpful to children in the long run, up to and beyond third grade, when comprehension becomes more important than simple decoding of words. We need more independent research projects that help to answer these questions.

One area for improvement, urged by many literacy experts and championed here at *Early Ed Watch*, is the teaching of actual content instead of word and letter drilling. An important report, Preschool Curriculum: What's In it For Children and Teachers, published by the Albert Shanker Institute earlier this year, showed the dearth of rich content provided for 3- and 4-year olds.

Timothy Shanahan, the chair of the National Early Literacy Panel, a group that has come under criticism of its own for focusing too narrowly on decoding skills and letter naming, agrees that there is room for improvement - not just in Head Start but in early education generally. "I do think right now we're at a stage where there is a lot more literacy instruction going on in preschools than there was five years ago, but that also means there is a lot more bad instruction than was going on five years ago as well," he said.

The root of the problem, he said, is that "you have a work force that hasn't had a lot of training."

In other words, how do we ensure that teachers are using the most appropriate methods when many of them do not have post-secondary degrees related to early childhood development, do not have time or money to get these degrees, or do not have strong communication skills of their own, in part because they never went to college? As we reported in an earlier post in this series, changes in Head Start laws have upped the ante for teacher credentialing, with half of all Head Start teachers required to have a bachelor's degree by 2013. Will this help to improve pre-literacy instruction? Is it enough?

As we contemplate the next steps for Head Start, these issues of *how* to help children gain early literacy skills need to become an important part of the discussion. They are wrapped up in many of the sticky issues surrounding teacher training, credentialing, professional development, curricular choices, early learning standards and developmentally appropriate assessment. Many of these same issues are shared by state-funded pre-K programs. If we are to build a system of early education that provides pre-literacy instruction - a goal that the research shows us to be essential - we have to think about how to move both state pre-K and Head Start onto stronger, more effective pre-literacy tracks.

The Case for 'Comprehensive Services'

Christina Satkowski -
September 17, 2009 - 9:09am

This is the fifth post in a seven-part series on the future of Head Start. Please join us for a web chat on this topic on Tuesday, Sept. 22 at 12:30 p.m. EDT here at EarlyEdWatch.org. We invite you to email us questions to get the chat rolling.

Last year Rhode Island Governor Donald Carcieri stirred up a storm of criticism when he said that Head Start "has been the biggest waste of money" and needs to "get into the early education business" instead.

His comment said a lot -- not only about his own misunderstandings of the program, but about how Head Start is perceived in the outside world. Many mistakenly believe that Head Start isn't doing a good enough job of preparing children to succeed in school because it has devoted too much energy to providing health, nutrition and parent-involvement services.

Among Head Start's advocates, these "comprehensive services"- medical screenings, parenting classes, tooth brushing after every meal -- have become almost sacrosanct. But, as discussed in yesterday's post, Head Start also provides instruction in literacy and other school-readiness skills. In fact, just 9.3 percent of Head Start's total $6.8 billion annual budget in 2006 was for health and nutritional services, with a comparable amount going to family support services, according to data provided by the Administration for Children and Families to *Early Ed Watch*. By contrast, 43 percent went to education. This is not a case of Head Start offering comprehensive services to the exclusion of preschool instruction.

The more relevant questions today are: How exactly should Head Start balance these two responsibilities? Should state-funded pre-K programs be performing the same balancing act? And how should the services offered by states, localities and Head Start interoperate?

First, let's consider how well Head Start's comprehensive services have been working.

Head Start providers are required by law to evaluate the medical history and needs of every enrolled child and to arrange for a dental exam within 90 calendar days of the child's entry into the program. Decades of research show that these screenings have a positive impact. A 2007 study in *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* on mortality rates showed that, compared to Head Start attendees, elementary school children without Head Start are more likely to die of causes addressed by Head Start's services. In addition, Head Start children at ages 3 and 4 have much greater access to dental care than those who didn't attend, according to the 2005 Impact Study. The study also showed that 3-year-olds enrolled in Head Start were healthier in general than their peers, but no effect showed up for 4-year-olds. And a 1995 study in *The American Economic Review* showed that immunization rates go up when children attend Head Start. No study exists, as far as we know, showing Head Start having a negative impact on children's health.

Early Head Start comes with good news, too. More than 90 percent of babies in Early Head Start received complete medical screenings in 2007 - exceeding HHS's target, according to data in the budget submission for 2009 from the Administration for Children and Families.

"One of things that has disappointed me is that Head Start never gets the credit it deserves for what it has done with kids' health," says Edward Zigler, one of the early directors of Head Start and a professor emeritus in child psychology at Yale University."

Do these health findings play a role in the cognitive and social growth of children in Head Start? Academic researchers haven't arrived at an answer to this question yet. But experts in child development have long theorized that children's health and mental well-being are inextricably linked to later academic success, not to mention the general ability to become active citizens who can cope with life's challenges. This idea has anchored Head Start's identity as a child development program since the appointment of Urie Bronfenbrenner, a Cornell psychologist famous for his ecological approach, to the planning committee for Head Start more than 44 years ago.

Given the solid data that we have on health outcomes alone, it's clearly worthwhile to continue Head Start's work in ensuring, at the very least, that children receive proper medical attention.

Another aspect of Head Start that comes under the "comprehensive services" umbrella is parent involvement, an approach that grew out of the 1960s Great Society agenda and War on Poverty. Since the beginning, Head Start parents have been volunteering in classrooms, taking parenting classes, and participating on the Parent Policy Councils that are unique to the Head Start model. These councils have decision-making authority over curriculum and staff, and in many cases, they allow parents to take leadership roles in their community for the first time. Many other parents use volunteering as a first step towards getting a higher degree, becoming a teacher, or perhaps a program director.

In 2008, more than 890,000 Head Start parents -- roughly one per child - volunteered with the program, according to the Head Start Program Information Report. But beyond that, there is little data to examine on how, if and in what ways parental involvement makes a difference to Head Start children in particular. It's an area ripe for more research.

Head Start also delivers nutrition services, provides healthy meals to children each day, and offers lessons for parents on how to limit high-fat, high-sugar foods. But, again, little is understood about the impact of these services. Few if any peer-reviewed articles appear in keyword searches of nutrition and Head Start.

Still, most early childhood advocates consider comprehensive services well worth protecting -- and they have worried that changes to Head Start might lead to weak funding for such programs. In 2001, for example, the Bush administration proposed turning Head Start into a block grant to states, rather than making grants directly to local school districts and non-profits. At the time, many advocates for the program worried that giving states more control would lead to a diminished emphasis on children's

health and social well-being, turning Head Start programs into little more than literacy-based preschools instead.

But that shift in funding didn't happen and worries have subsided since. Today, policymakers at the federal level and in many states are focused on building bridges between Head Start and other organizations that provide health and well-being services for young children. States are facing the happy prospect of new money from the Early Learning Challenge Fund -- a federal grant system that is written into legislation now being debated in Congress. But whether states can win these new grants will depend in part on well their early childhood programs work together. As Head Start evolves to find its place in this new paradigm, we need to examine what states are doing to build a family-friendly system of early childhood services to connect *all* children to local resources that already exist if and when they need them.

One model -- exemplified, in fact, by Head Start -- is to think of early learning centers of all kinds as the starting point, not the end point, for health and other social services. Teachers and program directors in Head Start don't don a white coat and do the health check-ups themselves. Instead, they serve as brokers, connecting children and their families to existing Medicaid-eligible services as well as those offered by community organizations. (Given how difficult it can be in some communities to find a doctor that accepts Medicaid, this assistance is invaluable for many families.)

The North Carolina Smart Start program, for example, has adopted a similar strategy that involves its state pre-K program. Smart Start funds county-level partnerships that work to connect families, regardless of income, to local health services. Those funds are combined with money for More at Four, the state pre-kindergarten program, to allow children who qualify to receive the highest level of services offered by both state pre-k and Head Start.

Arizona is another interesting case. It is one of many states where the state pre-K program originally focused primarily on education and has not required providers to give medical referrals. But things are changing with First Things First, a three-year-old initiative, funded by a tobacco tax, that works to build community connections for families in the state. The program will serve middle-income children as well as the low-income children served by Head Start. "Our focus is to create a support bubble around children and their families," said Karen Woodhouse, First Things First's deputy director.

Could it be that state pre-k programs are actually starting to look a little more like Head Start when it comes to offering comprehensive services? And in doing so, could they also pave the way for further expansion of comprehensive services into the early elementary grades -- as the "community schools" movement advocates? If so, it becomes even more critical to find the most effective ways for Head Start and state systems to collaborate or divvy up the job. For some insights on that front, stay tuned for our next post.

The Benjamin Buttonization of Head Start

Lisa Guernsey -
September 18, 2009 - 7:52am

This is the sixth post in a seven-part series on the future of Head Start. Please join us for a web chat on this topic on Tuesday, Sept. 22 at 12:30 p.m. EDT here at EarlyEdWatch.org. We invite you to email us questions to get the chat rolling.

Head Start may be about to turn 45. But you could argue that it's younger than ever.

Though many people think of Head Start as a program aimed at 4-year-olds, it actually enrolls children at 3 and 4 in the hopes of immersing them in two full years of early childhood services before their arrival in kindergarten. Lately, Head Start's enrollment has started to shift, serving an increasing proportion of 3-year-olds and a decreasing proportion of 4-year-olds. In 2008, 3-year-olds comprised 36 percent of Head Start's enrollment, up from 28 percent in 2006. At the same time, enrollment of 4-year-olds dropped to 50 percent from 56 percent over those two years.

In 1995, when Early Head Start was introduced, the program started to reach for even younger children -- targeting infants, toddlers and pregnant mothers. With the influx of stimulus money, the number of children and pregnant mothers served by Early Head Start programs is set to nearly double in size -- with money available to serve 117,000 babies and pregnant mothers instead of the 62,000 participating last year.

Could these new growth areas lead Head Start to become known as the program for pre-preschoolers? Are we witnessing the Benjamin Buttonization of Head Start, a program getting younger with each passing year?

It seems likely, especially in places where state-funded pre-K programs are serving children at age 4 but not age 3.

The shift in age demographics shouldn't be taken to mean, however, that Head Start agencies across the country are having a hard time finding 4-year-olds. In places of high poverty or without many other options for affordable or free pre-K, demand for Head Start at age 4 continues to be very high. "We haven't had any problem filling our 4-year-old slots," says YaTonya Abdullah, disability coordinator and head teacher for the Head Start program in Morris County, N.J. "We always have a waiting list."

Neither is there a stampede of Head Start programs rushing to convert themselves into Early Head Start programs, even though the law was amended in 2007 to allow them to do so. The Department of Health and Human Services will not disclose how many applications it has received from Head Start agencies wanting to make this transformation, but given that conversions require agencies to stop serving 3- and

4-year-olds, most agencies do not consider it an appealing option. They are loathe to eliminate services for older children just to be able to serve infants and toddlers.

It is the case, however, that with so much money suddenly available to expand Early Head Start slots -- $1.1 billion in stimulus funds -- Head Start administrators are now chomping at the bit to *supplement* their preschool offerings with birth-to-three programs. At the annual Birth to Three Institute in Washington, D.C., a June gathering that typically draws people who work with infants and toddlers, sessions were packed to standing-room-only. And unlike past years, representatives from Head Start were everywhere. Many of them said they had come to find out exactly what Early Head Start looks like and how their programs might be able to get a little younger themselves. (They learned, for example, that caring for children this young is not cheap. Providing care for infants and toddlers typically costs 15 percent more than regular Head Start, primarily because more staff members are required to keep adult-to-child ratios low.)

Federal officials are now processing the abundance of applications that arrived by the July 9th deadline for agencies to apply for the expansion money. An HHS spokesman said that an announcement will be coming this month or next on how many Head Start agencies will be given money to expand.

Early Head Start has received good press for its effectiveness. Since its genesis, a national study has tracked the progress of its participants and compared them to a group of similar children who were not assigned to be part of it. Results published in 2002 showed that Early Head Start had significantly increased children's scores on measures of cognitive and social-emotional development by the time they were 3.

Of course, Early Head Start should not be considered a magic pill. "You cannot expect one program to bear the responsibility" for pulling children out of entrenched poverty, said Tammy Mann, deputy executive director of Zero to Three, in a talk at the Birth to Three Institute. But one aspect of recent research on Early Head Start's impact has been particularly heartening: It showed that children with the most risk factors - those born to poor mothers without much education and high levels of depression, for example - are most helped by Early Head Start when it is connected to Head Start. "When you look across the age spectrum, children did better when they had the opportunity to experience the *continuity*," Mann said. "If they had Early Head Start to Head Start, we began to see positive outcomes."

And what about continuity in a shorter time span, as children grow from 3 to 4 years old?

Here is where the shift among regular Head Start programs toward serving a greater proportion of 3-year-olds could be good or bad. The positive side is that if more Head Start children are reached at younger ages, they will presumably be in preschool for two full years before entering kindergarten. That's a plus, given that studies have shown two years of preschool to be better than one.

But if the shift to 3-year-old services is occurring because Head Start centers are losing 4-year-olds to other pre-K providers, children may be bopping from one program to another each year, and then to yet another setting when they enter kindergarten. Research shows that with each such transition, something may be lost.

For a peek into the future, it's helpful to look at states where Head Start operates alongside state-run pre-K programs with large enrollments. In Georgia, the first state in the country to offer universal pre-K, the state pays for 6.5 hours of pre-K instruction for any 4-year-old whose family wants it. Over 50 percent of all 4-year-olds are enrolled. It does not provide services for 3s.

When the program started, some people worried that this would siphon children away from Head Start. But enrollment has remained steady in both programs over the past few years, with about 76,000 4-year-olds in state-funded pre-K and 22,000 3- and 4-year-olds in Head Start in 07-08, according to the National Institute for Early Education Research. And lately, the two programs have started to work together more closely. In a sign of their collaboration, both Janice Haker, Georgia's Head Start Collaboration Director and Susan Adams, program manager for Georgia Pre-K, spoke with *Early Ed Watch* together on a conference call to explain how they work.

One strategy on the table, they said, is for Head Start to focus on 3-year-olds in poverty, while the state's Pre-K program covers the 4s, no matter what their income. Already, Georgia's Head Start programs serve more 3-year-olds than 4-year olds; most recent data show that approximately 12,000 3-year-olds are in the state's Head Start programs versus just 9,000 4-year-olds. That enrollment inbalance could increase if Head Start focused even more of its energies on enrolling 3-year-olds. (And as the Pre-K program stands now, 4-year-olds who qualify for Head Start typically get state-funded pre-K for 6.5 hours with Head Start funding paying for their "wrap-around services" including after-hours care and health and parental involvement programs that the state program doesn't cover.)

The Head Start program in Tulsa, Oklahoma has a similar vision. In Oklahoma, every 4-year-old in the state has the option of attending the state's free pre-K program, which is administered by the public schools. One might think that this would pull so many children away from Head Start that it wouldn't survive, but that isn't what happened. Because the law was written to ensure that public schools could contract out for preschool services, Head Start has had a place at the table. In Tulsa, where the Community Action Project (CAP) runs Head Start, this opened up an opportunity for the Head Start agency to make stronger connections with the schools and build new Head Start facilities on school grounds. Tulsa's Head Start also decided to make sure its standards lined up with those of the pre-K program, requiring every teacher to have a bachelor's degree and paying them the same as a public school teacher. New research out of Georgetown University (described in an earlier post in this series) shows that classroom quality is high and nearly identical to the preschool classrooms in the public schools.

It used to be that Tulsa's Head Start program had more 4-year-olds than 3-year-olds, but lately the proportion has dropped to about 50-50. Steven Dow, executive director for CAP, envisions a day when the public schools get all the 4-year-olds and Head Start retains the 3-year-olds.

"Head Start ideally shouldn't have 4-year-olds at all," Dow said. "If the school district could get more money from the state, that would let them do more 4-year-olds and let us do the 3s." But he added that this would only work "as long as schools are committed to reaching the at-risk 4s." His concern is that Head Start's emphasis on serving the neediest families - who often need to be recruited and made aware of the importance of early education - would fall away under the state-funded program, since it takes in all families regardless of income. Another worry is whether Head Start's comprehensive services could

be fully replicated by the state program. Oklahoma already provides medical screenings and meals in pre-K - would commensurate health and parental involvement services be offered too?

If Dow's vision does come to pass - and if Early Head Start continues its rise -- the result would be an interesting division in state and federal funding, with the federal government essentially paying for children's education up until age 4 and the state taking over from there.

Whether that is a fruitful dynamic is up in the air. But it shows how important it will be to think through exactly how early education should be funded, especially as we see it extending to younger and younger ages. And it will be crucial to make transitions as seamless as possible as children move through infancy to preschool and on through elementary school. As *Early Ed Watch* has stressed before, these PreK-3rd transitions are a key element in making sure that children have the best opportunities for educational success.

Before we brainstorm what future tracks that Head Start might pursue (the topic of the final post in this series), we will leave you with this statistic from the executive summary of NIEER's 2008 yearbook: "At current growth rates, it will take 150 years for the United States to achieve universal access for 3-year-olds." That's right, 150 years. With Head Start expansion, maybe there is at least a chance for more of the poorest 3 year olds to gain access before then.

Where is Head Start Heading? Three Potential Tracks

Lisa Guernsey -
September 21, 2009 - 12:06pm

This is the final post in a seven-part series on the future of Head Start. Please join us for a web chat on this topic tomorrow at 12:30 p.m. EDT here at EarlyEdWatch.org in partnership with Politico.com. We invite you to email us questions to get the chat rolling.

We started this series with a train metaphor, describing early education programs as trains moving down various tracks to deliver children to elementary school ready and eager to learn. More than a decade ago, when a few states started developing new paths for publicly funded preschool, the tracks already laid by Head Start seemed outdated and distant from what states were constructing. The unspoken, yet as it turns out, overstated, assumption was that state pre-K was aiming for literacy and kindergarten readiness, while Head Start was pointed toward children's health and social well-being.

But changes in Head Start standards and a tilt toward literacy instruction have brought the program closer to what many states have envisioned for their public pre-K programs. Studies have shown that the program has had a modest positive impact on several, though not all, indicators of children's readiness for school. While state-funded pre-K programs have more teachers with bachelor's degrees, independent ratings of the quality of preschool classrooms put Head Start ahead of state-based programs.

Meanwhile, early childhood specialists have renewed their call for a broader definition of kindergarten readiness, beyond preparing children to identify and sound out letters. A growing number of pre-K programs are expanding their mission to include children's social development, parent involvement and health -- echoing an approach that Head Start has taken since its genesis.

Ideally this might mean more choices for low-income parents and more cohesion in today's fledgling systems of early education. But it also raises the prospect of confusion and collision. Except in a few select places -- such as Tulsa, Oklahoma, which we described in our previous post -- Head Start and state pre-K programs run according to entirely different sets of standards for everything from teacher credentialing to how many hours their doors are open. Head Start is designed to be available only to very poor families, while the pre-K programs in the states vary widely in how they determine which families can participate. And Head Start and state-funded pre-K aren't the only trains at the junction. Child care programs that rely on state and federal subsidies are chugging along too, many of which have standards in only the barest sense of the word.

How these programs connect to the public schools is critical too. A coherent, high-quality system would never allow trains to simply deposit children on the platform, assuming that elementary school educators will know where to pick up each individual child and where to take them next. Ultimately, the future of

early education in this country will depend on how well state and federal policymakers build the infrastructure to connect all these different routes into an integrated system that transports children seamlessly from preschool (or even the infant and toddler years) through early elementary school.

Imagine, for example, a day when parents can make smart decisions about childcare and preschool with a full array of information at their fingertips, as if they were perusing a transit map with multiple and intersecting options for enrolling their children in affordable preschool and flexible wraparound care. To make this happen, the broader early education system - all the way up to 3rd grade -- will need to become better connected to Head Start, and vice versa.

Both the Early Learning Challenge Fund, passed by the House of Representatives last week, and the 2007 changes to the Head Start law call for better collaboration between all the different stakeholders in early childhood circles, not to mention the public schools. But many questions remain on how to knit everything together. Based on what this blog series has considered so far, we see at least three paths that Head Start could take over the coming years -- each of which have both positive points and pitfalls.

More possibilities are out there too, and we're eager to get perspectives from our trusty *Early Ed Watch* readers. Consider this a brainstorming exercise, help us list out more pros and cons in the comment field below, and join us tomorrow for a web chat on this series.

Brainstorming: 3 Tracks Head Start Could Take

1. Divvy Up the Day, Serving Children Under Different Programs at Different Times

In this scenario, Head Start classrooms could become state pre-K classrooms in the morning and revert to Head Start classrooms in the afternoon. Or vice versa. The point is that part of the day is paid for with state funds and part of it is paid for with federal Head Start dollars.

PROS:

Head Start programs in some states, like Georgia, are already doing this.

Students from a broader spectrum of economic circumstances -- Head Start and non-Head Start children -- arrive in kindergarten with a similar set of skills because at least part of their day has been taught by pre-K teachers according to the state's curriculum standards.

CONS:

Funding instability in one program could lead to a mismatch in quality and expectations between portions of the day. What happens when a state cuts early education programs to survive a severe budget crunch? (Funding imbalances are, of course, a problem inherent in any system that relies on both state and federal money.)

Eligibility criteria may differ between time periods in the day. Many working families, for example, aren't "poor enough" to qualify for Head Start. Parents who work full-time would have

to find alternatives for afternoon childcare - and figure out how their children would be transported to different facilities or classrooms.

2. Put Everyone in One Train Car by Blending Funds at the Classroom Level

Children of different economic circumstances would be taught in one room instead of being separated, based on their parents' income levels, into different classrooms, buildings and facilities, as they are today. At the level of classroom instruction, no one would be able to tell which children have their tuition covered by Head Start dollars.

PROS:

Children would no longer be segregated by economic status; the stigma of poverty associated with Head Start could subside.

Because children would be all mixed together, as they are in the K-12 public schools, there are more chances to promote continuity from pre-K up through the early elementary grades. This is already happening in pockets around the country, including in parts of South Dakota and Chicago.

CONS:

Without a common set of standards for both programs, whose standards for classroom quality take precedence? Who would be "in charge' on issues like teacher credentialing and children-to-teacher ratios -- the state or the federal government? Would standards be based on the lowest common denominator?

3. Let Head Start Get Younger, While Schools and States Take Care of 4-Year-Olds

The federal government, via Head Start, would pay for early learning programs for parents of babies and children up to age 4. States -- and by extension, local school districts -- would pay for education services for children at age 4 and up.

PROS:

Trends show that Head Start is already taking on a higher proportion of very young children than it used to, while state-funded pre-K programs typically aim only at 4-year-olds or children one year before entering kindergarten. Head Start officials in Tulsa, Okla. -- where there are already strong ties to the state's pre-K program -- are seriously considering this approach.

Since Head Start is aimed at families with very low-incomes, and research has shown that cognitive gaps between the poor and the middle-class start as early as nine months old, this could give poor children several years of support so they aren't too far behind before they start pre-K.

CONS:

But there is the risk of yet more disconnection. Would we simply be shifting the already problematic division between K-12 and early childhood systems down by one year, creating an artificial divide at age 4 instead of age 5, where it sits today?

Live Chat: The Future of Head Start

Lisa Guernsey -
September 22, 2009 - 12:15pm

In this week's New America/Politico live web chat, **Lisa Guernsey** and **Christina Satkowski** are taking questions on the future of Head Start.

Ms. Guernsey, director of New America's Early Education Initiative, and Ms. Satkowski, a former program associate, are the authors of "**What's Ahead for Head Start?**" This seven-part blog series tackles critical questions about the federal government's 44-year-old preschool program for children from poor families.

As the Obama Administration turns its attention to improved programs for young children, where does Head Start fit? As states develop their own pre-K programs while struggling to balance budgets, what role can Head Start play?

UPDATE: This chat has concluded, but a full transcript is available below.

Head Start and Early Ed with New America Foundation:

11:54	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Hello all. Lisa Guernsey and Christina Satkowsi of the New America Foundation will join us at 12:30 EDT to talk about developments in early education--Head Start, Early Start, Jump Start and all the rest of the starts.... We invite you to submit questions in advance. For background, take a look at this.
11:55	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Lisa writes: "In 1995, when Early Head Start was introduced, the program started to reach for even younger children -- targeting infants, toddlers and pregnant mothers. With the influx of stimulus money, the number of children and pregnant mothers served by Early Head Start programs is set to nearly double in size -- with money available to serve 117,000 babies and pregnant mothers instead of the 62,000 participating last year. Could these new growth areas lead Head Start to become known as the program for pre-preschoolers? Are we witnessing the Benjamin Buttonization of Head Start, a program getting younger with each passing year?"
12:29	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Good afternoon (or morning, as the case may be.) Welcome to another joint POLITICO-New America Foundation live reader chat. (Better live readers than the alternative) With healthcare, the economy and all the rest, critical issues are getting little or no attention in the media. That's why we're so pleased to have Lisa Guernsey and

	Christina Satkowski from NAF with us to talk about one of those--early education. Let me begin, Christina, by asking you to briefly describe the interesting work you've been doing there on this subject--and then we have a bunch of questions from readers.
12:30	**Lisa Guernsey:** Thanks Fred. We've been doing a series of blog posts here to ask the question: What is the Future of Head Start?
12:30	**Lisa Guernsey:** Obama has made promises about investing more in the earliest years of children's lives. The question is: Where does Head Start fit in this vision?
12:31	**Lisa Guernsey:** Many people wonder whether we can make those investments and improve quality and build on what Head Start has already provided ...
12:31	**Lisa Guernsey:** This will take a lot of collaboration and some creativity. Right now HS is only available to the very poorest of families
12:32	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Here's a question/comment sent in early from: Shira Nahmias, M.A.Special Educator Cooke Center for Learning and Development --Head Start teachers, directors and especially social workers are a wealth of information for families and care givers. As states start to develop pre-k programs, are they planning on consulting with Head Start teachers or directors? As some one who has served as a special educator at a specific Head Start Program (Harlem Children's Zone), I can speak to the fact that the families served by Head Start feel valued, listened to and that they have a safe place to go as soon as they walk in the door of Head Start. --I think it is critical not to lose the family centered piece of the puzzle that Head Start so excellently serves.
12:32	**Lisa Guernsey:** yes, family involvement is a big part of Head Start. And the question is: Would other early childhood programs -- like those being developed by states with state (and not federal) money -- have the same emphasis?
12:32	**[Comment From Wangui Njuguna]** Is there a conflict between early learning and early care? In other words, what is the correct balance of kindergarten preparation (emergent reading and math skills) and focusing on the social/emotional?
12:33	**Lisa Guernsey:** that's a looming question these day s-- you've hit right on it... the thing is that

	early learning shouldn't be considered as just the ABCs... learning also means social and emotional learning
12:34	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Here's a question from: Dick Swift of Rezoom in LaCrosse, Wi. Can you discuss the extent to which Early Head Starts attempt to connect with parents and teach parenting techniques? Is parenting methodology an important part of the Early HeadStart policy and program?
12:34	**Lisa Guernsey:** Early Head Start uses a variety of methods to connect to parents. Either home-visits (like those also envisioned in the home visitation programs) and/or meetings at Head start centers.
12:35	**Lisa Guernsey:** in either case, the focus is on giving parents better info and better resources to watch their children's development
12:36	**[Comment From Gordon MacInnes]** To continue with apologies for hitting the wrong button, in your last post cited a Westat study that said that HS quality was slightly better than that in state-sponsored prek. The evidence cited was from 1997; is there more recent evidence that supports what I thought was a surprising finding? Thanks,
12:36	**Lisa Guernsey:** i've wondered that myself...
12:36	**Lisa Guernsey:** there have been later studies using ECERS data ...
12:37	**Lisa Guernsey:** for those of you who don't know what ECERS is -- it's an observational rating tool for judging classrooms
12:37	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Here's a question from: Geri Mohler, Ed.D.Education Programs Consultant Reading/Language Arts Leadership Office California Department of Education Many states do not require much education beyond high school for preschool teachers. Community colleges are usually the route these teachers go to get the required units or A.A., if that is the requirement; however, community college instructors are usually not teacher educators and know very little about "teaching," per se, they know about children. Is there anything being considered to upgrade

	the credentials of these college instructors?
12:37	**Lisa Guernsey:** the good news is that observations of preschool classrooms -- whether HS or others -- are being done now.
12:38	**Lisa Guernsey:** We'd like to look more closely at credentialling to get at that very point -- what are community colleges able to provide in the way of training? some are very good, others not so much
12:38	**[Comment From Beth Menninga]** I think we need to avoid setting up false dichotomies- it is not either academics/or social emotional but both /and. Pitting one against the other does a disservice to children and families and does not represent what we know abouthow children (and adults) learn.
12:39	**Lisa Guernsey:** Thanks Beth. I think that's right. The problem has been that we have good measures for cognitive development (or at least decent ones) but...
12:39	**Lisa Guernsey:** we don't have such good ways of measuring whether children are making social gains...
12:40	**Lisa Guernsey:** though there are some interesting approaches being tested in a variety of settings these days that observe how children play and interact with each other.
12:40	**[Comment From Wangui Njuguna]** Does Head Start have a focus on improving the literacy levels of the adults in the children's lives?
	Christina Satowski: Head Start is probably in the lead on this one because unlike many prek programs, it has a strong parental involvement program that emphasizes reading to children and can also put parents in touch with ways that they can improve their own literacy.
12:42	**Lisa Guernsey:** Also it should be noted that Even Start -- another federal program -- makes more of an effort to work with parents' literacy... but...
12:42	**Lisa Guernsey:** ... Even Start might be cut in the next round of budget bills
12:42	**Christina Satowski:** But I wouldnt call adult literacy a strong focus, because it is sort of indirect through this parental involvement piece, and not a specific program of Head Start. But it is definitely important!
12:42	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Questions from: Edward Condon

	Managing Director, National Child Care Programs Low Income Investment Fund 1) what has happened in the poorest communities (this important, not just the state by state) in terms of access to centers during the most recent state budget problems? 2) In the field, Head Start is delivered by agencies that draw funds from state sources, education sources, health and other resource supports. How is OHS being positioned to support this complicated delivery system and what steps are being taken in national/regional offices to support this evolution and program design?
12:43	**Lisa Guernsey:** To Ed's first qu -- i think we're only getting early signs at the moment and it's hard to know. I've heard stories of much longer waiting lists for Head Start this year compared to last year in cities that are hard hit by unemployment
12:44	**Lisa Guernsey:** and yet Head Start doesn't have a big burst of funding to open new slots
12:44	**Lisa Guernsey:** ... though it has received some help from teh stimulus bill.
12:44	**Christina Satowski:** On Q 2: OHS gives grants to local agencies, some of which contract out to other providers to provide the Head Start program. In a handful of states, the state government chips in a bit too. But this is first and foremost a federal program.
12:45	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: A question sent along from: Helen Wheelock Early Learning Through the Arts New York City Our organization's Early Learning program has had a long history not just with Head Start, but with other Early Childhood Centers.

	One of the on-going challenges we've heard from Education Directors is that, as they develop the professional skills of their staff, they cannot match their growth with financial compensation. Simply put - the better trained they are, the more likely the are to move out of the CBOs and into public schools (a trend that happened with the first push to UPK.) because they're offered better salaries and more time off. So, I've got to ask -- what can be done about the salaries of Head Start teachers and assistants? If we're honest, they're often paid less than a babysitter might be. Thanks in advance for your time on this important subject.
12:45	**Lisa Guernsey:** Helen -- the salary question is a huge one... thanks for pointing this out...
12:46	**Lisa Guernsey:** One study showed that Head Start teacher's average salary was 21K per year... The disconnect between public school teachers and preschool teachers in terms of pay is huge
12:47	**Lisa Guernsey:** but the larger qu you're asking -- about what can be done -- that one requires additional funding, of course... and we need to think about ways of providing more incentives too...
12:47	**Christina Satowski:** Encouraging teachers to get higher credentials is also an avenue to get higher salaries, because the more specializaiton they have in early ed, the more they can command in pay -- and the more they are likely to really enjoy their jobs
12:49	**[Comment From Kelly Medora, MS.ed]** Hello. I was wondering more about your training approaches for Head Start educators. I know that you currently have the Path to Positive Child Outcomes with learning domains: Are these standards made available to educators and administrators in Head Start programs, and, if so, how? Lastly, Is there any system in place for Head Start curricula to meet these standards, particularly the math standards which are not legislatively mandated.
12:49	**Lisa Guernsey:** Kelly, your questions are probably best answered by someone in the Office of Head Start... they've got a web site where they provide clarifications... i'll get the URL
12:50	**[Comment From Rodd Monts]** Is there any data you would recommend reviewing that speaks to the issue of

	whether parents who need adult literacy help actually access those resources when provided to them?
12:50	**Lisa Guernsey:** http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc ...
12:50	**Christina Satowski:** We didnt really focus on parental literacy, but we didnt see any research about it either ...
12:51	**Christina Satowski:** Doesn't mean it's not out there though, but not anything that we know of on a big scale
12:51	**[Comment From Jennifer]** Given the Obama Administration's stated interest in ECE, what is the current pulse of public opinion on Head Start expansion. Does anyone know of recent public opinion studies? What about public campaigns?
12:52	**Lisa Guernsey:** Jennifer, I think we've come to a new era, where the general public has a better appreciation of why it may be important to help young chidlren and their families. That said...
12:52	**Lisa Guernsey:** ... I don't know of a specific recent survey that can provide a snapshot of people's attitudes today.
12:52	**Christina Satowski:** One thing that has been really interesting in the early ed politics field is how business has stepped up to get the public excited about the importance of early ed.
12:53	**Christina Satowski:** Their perspective is one of costs-benefits -- and in an era of penny-pinching, saying that early ed has a dollar-payoff resonates with people
12:53	**Lisa Guernsey:** I think jennifer's comment about Head Start expansion hits on a core question: If HS is expanded, how should it be done and is there the political will to make that happen?
12:54	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Lisa or Christina: For those of us not up-to-date on these programs, can you explain the difference between Early Start, Head Start, and there was a program mentioned called Even Start, not to mention Jump Start.
12:54	**Lisa Guernsey:** I think that we would ideally want to see much higher quality in Head Start, state preK and early childhood
12:54	**Lisa Guernsey:** Yes -- so many starts!! Ok, Head Start is for children 3 to 4...
12:55	**Lisa Guernsey:** Early Head start is a HS program for babies and pregnant mothers... it covers

	children up to age 3
12:55	**Lisa Guernsey:** And Even Start is a program that provides parents with literacy help to be able to help their own children (so that they can read them bedtime stories, etc)
12:55	**Christina Satowski:** The federal govt also puts lots of $$ into Child Care (CCDF) and TANF (temoporary assistance for needy families, which can also be used for childcare)
12:56	**[Comment From Dr. Robert Gundling]** It seems to me as policies and performance standards are revised the expectations seems to be increasing, which is undestandable. However, I believe, more often than not, little is done to connect funding necessary to meet stronger performance standards. I am interested to know if anyone has done and/or continues to connect program standards, expectations to funding necessary to meet and maintain standards over time?
12:56	**Lisa Guernsey:** Jumpstart is a non-profit organization that provides one-on-one reading to youngsters
12:57	**Lisa Guernsey:** Head Start centers have to abide by over 1600 regulations -- and is reviewed every three years by a team of federal officials... so yes, there are a lot of expecttations...
12:57	**Lisa Guernsey:** ... and over the past several years, the agency has been essentially flat-funded...
12:58	**Lisa Guernsey:** ... the stimulus bill provided an infusion of money that may help a little but it wasn't intended to help with filing paper work on regulations per se... and it's only for the next 2 years...
12:58	**Christina Satowski:** So far about 18 states are in the process of developing Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) which tie funding to higher quality standards. (bigger reimbursement or reward for better performance) Right now a lot of these standards are structural (safety, class size, teacher credential) but people are starting to talk about teacher quality and finding ways to incorporate higher standards too.
12:59	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Hold on a second. Did you say 1600 different regulations...Isn't that a little much?
12:59	**Lisa Guernsey:** Yes 1600. There is a monitoring protocol that all Head Start centers have to follow... and then for 3 days a team of inspectors arrives and makes sure that all 1600 regulations are being followed and documented
1:00	**Lisa Guernsey:** this happens every 3 years. it's a tense moment for many Head Start centers

1:00	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Are these mandated by Congress or by the agency?
1:01	**Lisa Guernsey:** both.... there have been many additions over the years to try to improve the quality of teachers, classrooms and to make sure that federal money is being used appropriately
1:01	**[Comment From Beth Menninga]** One question will have an impact on policy-does money get targeted (say to those determined most "at risk" for----) or is it universal? In other words, what are the assumptions about investing in early childhood? What do we most want to accomplish?
1:02	**Lisa Guernsey:** Beth, your question goes to the heart of why we wanted to explore Head Start... it is only for the poorest....
1:02	**Lisa Guernsey:** ... while other programs, like Oklahoma's state-funded pre-K program, are open to all children regardless of family income....
1:03	**Lisa Guernsey:** we need to come to some kind of consensus in this country about the best way to reach the greatest number of chidlren. here at Early Ed Initiative we see universal pre-K as being the best way of doing that in the long run
1:03	**Christina Satowski:** Still, it is really important to start programs small (and here we usually mean the poorest kids, or in a geographically defined area) and then scale up to universal. Some states that tried to roll out universal all at once (eg Florida) encountered big questions of quality when they did so
1:04	**Lisa Guernsey:** Ultimately the goal is to open access AND improve quality. But it can be hard to do both at the same time when money is tight....
1:05	**Lisa Guernsey:** Right now Congress is working on the quality part of this. Legislation is being formed this month that zooms in on creating better systems of care and education for children birth to 5. The Early Learning Challenge Fund – which would give states grant money to improve their birth-to-5 programs IF those states do a good job and build out a smart system
1:05	**Christina Satowski:** This also raises the issue of community based providers (the local New Horizons center, neighborhood church program or even the home-based center down the block). They are providing early education for these same kids too -- so we need to include them in discussions about quality and what funding we provide to help them achieve higher quality
1:06	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Lisa, Christina: Is there a question that hasn't been asked that ought to have been asked?

1:06	**Lisa Guernsey:** One last thing is to think about how to collaborate... how to bring all these disparate pieces together...
1:07	**Lisa Guernsey:** we've got a hodgepodge of programs, many of them underfunded, and a hodepodge of standards, few of which are as high as they need to be
1:07	**Lisa Guernsey:** We've got work to do!
1:07	**Christina Satowski:** States are grappling with this question right now ... The stimulus provided $100 million for states to set up state advisory councils for early education.
1:08	**Christina Satowski:** The good news is that a lot of states already have some sort of collaboration mechanism in place (eg PA early learning council) and this funding will be a big boost ...
1:08	**Christina Satowski:** unfortunately a lot of states have very little going on, or have tried over and over again to get a collaboration effort underway
1:09	**Christina Satowski:** This money is really pushing states to get their act together, and more importantly, to develop a vision for what their entire early childhood system will look like
1:10	**Christina Satowski:** Thanks, ben for pointing that out!
1:11	**[Comment From Ben Allen]** The average teacher with a BA in head Start is $27,000 according to the latest PIR census of Head Start programs.
1:12	**[Comment From Ben allen]** Thank you for covering Head Start. Do you expect to do more stories about Head Start? How about doing a story about parental involvement in Head Start and how it provides some lessons for primary schools?
1:12	**Christina Satowski:** This question of push-up into elementary school is a good one.
1:13	**Christina Satowski:** Right now a lot of kids and parents experience a shock when they get to kindergarten because the parents are expected to drop their kids off ... and then leave ...
1:14	**Christina Satowski:** There is some anecdotal evidence that elementary schools -- esp those that have good relationships with their local early ed programs -- are starting to adopt a more parent-friendly approach. But this is just starting. The other good news is that a lot of prek programs are starting to look to Head Start for guidance on how

	to boost their parental involvement
1:14	**Fred Barbash-Moderator**: Lisa, Christina..thanks for being here...This is eye opening....keep up the great work. I can't think of anything more important. And thanks to all the readers with apologies to the questioners we did not get to. Join us every day here in POLITICO's Arena--at www.politico.com/arena. We have live chats and commentary almost every day. So long for now.
1:15	**Lisa Guernsey:** Thanks to POLITICO for hosting this!
1:16	