

Policy Actions Needed to Support Access to Ideal Learning Programs Through Head Start

Lessons Learned from
the Ideal Learning
Head Start Network



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Introduction

Head Start is the most significant funding source in the U.S. for providing children from low-income families with early learning opportunities. A federal program established in 1965, Head Start promotes school readiness for children in low-income families by offering educational, nutritional, health, social, and other services. Head Start providers work with families to ensure they have the means to obtain health insurance, services for children with disabilities, adequate housing, job training, and more. Head Start providers also establish relationships with other programs that serve families in their communities, such as health care providers, schools, childcare providers, libraries and museums, housing agencies, and other social service agencies. In 2018, Congress funded Head Start to serve nearly 1 million children and pregnant women in centers, family homes, and in family childcare homes in urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the US. Head Start programs employed and contracted with 265,000 staff. Parents of current or former Head Start children made up 22 percent of Head Start staff.

Program quality in Head Start and Early Head Start programs is defined by the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), which include provisions related to teaching and the learning environment, curricula, child screenings and assessment, oral health practices, child nutrition, child mental health and social-emotional well-being, and family engagement. There are also standards for special populations, including tribal communities, dual-language learners (DLLs), children with disabilities, and pregnant women. Programs are assessed on a regular basis through the Designation Renewal System; if deficiencies are found, programs are required to re compete for their federal grant.

Access to Head Start funding therefore plays a critical role in helping quality early learning providers reach children in high-stress and disadvantaged communities. However, for many quality programs that use innovative structures, curricula, and evaluation models to serve children's holistic needs, navigating the requirements of Head Start can be daunting. Of particular note are Ideal Learning programs.

While Ideal Learning programs vary in their approaches, models, and contexts, they have identified threads that link them, called the Principles of Ideal Learning, which include a commitment to play; relationship-based interactions; an ecologically-focused, child-centered perspective; equity; and a strengths-based and inquiry-based approach with children, adults and families. Ideal Learning programs balance principles of attachment and independence that are meaningful for young children's development. Several Ideal Learning curriculum approaches have been evaluated through research and demonstrate effectiveness across key outcome domains (e.g., literacy/language, math, executive functions/self-regulation, social/emotional/behavioral outcomes, physical activity, motor skills, science, and self-concept).

Considering the complex nature of child development and evidence indicating the need for high quality early learning for children from low-resourced and disadvantaged communities, there is a need to create opportunities for the expansion of Ideal Learning models within Head Start. This

Ideal Learning is a term coined by Trust for Learning to represent aspects of early learning that support whole child development and are supported by evidence from research. Approaches that are included under the Ideal Learning framework include Montessori, Reggio Emilia, Friends Center for Children, Tools of the Mind, Bank Street College of Education, Waldorf, HighScope, All Our Kin, Educare Learning Network, EL Education, and AVANCE.



An Ideal Learning environment is one in which:

- Each child receives a personalized approach to education.
- Each child is known and appreciated for their unique abilities, interests, and potential.
- Children develop all facets of intelligence—academic, social, and emotional—and learn how to work with ideas, tasks, and people.
- Children have high standards without standardization—they are challenged to reach their developmental milestones and given the support needed to actualize their unique potential.
- Teachers guide children to carry out their own learning; this self-directed learning is supported by an intentional, structured curriculum that has been proven to be effective.
- Classroom environments are designed to develop students' ability to concentrate, grow their collaboration skills, and build a sense of community.
- The entire school teaches, not just the teacher.
- Children are learning partners with educators, families, and peers—Ideal Learning educates with children, not to children.
- Children work at the bigger goal of developing into well-rounded, intelligent, and constructive individuals.
- Programs are an integral part of the community: they support children, thereby advancing community progress.

would ensure that children (and their families), especially those in low-resource and high-stress environments, are accessing and receiving innovative, holistic and high-quality early learning experiences.

In order to support the expansion of Ideal Learning models within Head Start, a community of practice called the Ideal Learning Head Start Network was formed in 2019. The purpose of this community of practice is to provide logistical and moral support for Head Start providers that use Ideal Learning approaches, helping them strengthen their practice, learn from each other's successes, and navigate the regulatory requirements of Head Start. This brief provides lessons learned from the first year of convening the Ideal Learning Head Start Network.

Method

A group of 7-10 Head Start providers who used Ideal Learning approaches (the Ideal Learning Head Start Network) convened in a series of monthly 1.25-hour facilitated conversations; this brief is based on eight monthly meetings. These conversations were recorded to capture main aspects of the conversations and action steps. These conversations built on each other, as later meetings were based on requests or needs articulated in prior meetings. The meetings focused on many issues, including funding, child assessments, program quality, teacher and administration training, and guidance and support from outside community organizations. Below we present the lessons learned and policy

strategies to strengthen the inclusion of Ideal Learning approaches in Head Start programming.

Lessons Learned

Ideal Learning Head Start providers are deeply committed to providing high quality care, but are challenged by the complexity and bureaucracy of Head Start regulation.

Ideal Learning Head Start providers want to ensure that children, especially children from low-resourced, high-stress, and disadvantaged communities, are provided with the highest quality early learning experiences. The programs that make up the Ideal Learning Head Start Network are diverse in geographic location, age group served, type of services provided, and educational approach. They use innovative approaches such as Tools of the Mind, Montessori, and Reggio-inspired. Many collaborate with community partners, including mental health organizations.

Although these providers are committed to providing the highest quality of services to children (and their families) most in need, they experience various challenges in aligning their approaches with Head Start mandates. This is made especially difficult when there is a lack of leadership at various levels that supports this innovation, whether at the program, the state office of early learning, or the Office of Head Start. For example, when trying to show that an innovative approach aligns with Head Start's standards regarding research-based approach/curriculum or assessment, there is a need for leaders at all levels to be inclusive about what constitutes research-based and appropriate assessment. Other challenges with alignment include braiding funding from different entities with varied expectations; recruiting and retaining experienced and credentialed staff; and allocating staff and program time to manage Head Start performance standards and reporting.

Ideal Learning Head Start providers seek to provide individualized learning experiences for children through authentic observations and assessment, but there are concerns with current child assessment tools.

The majority of providers in the Ideal Learning Head Start Network assess children's progress using Teaching Strategies Gold (TSG), which is used by 63% of Head Start programs and is viewed as an accepted tool to meet the Head Start standard for child assessment. While Head Start does not mandate a particular assessment, some states do mandate a particular assessment tool (often TSG) as part of receiving funding. However, many programs find TSG to be time-consuming and not aligned to their teaching practices. Providers note a lack of integration of this assessment with their curriculum and approaches. It uses resources, including teaching and staff time, adult-child interaction, and coaching and professional learning time, that could be better spent in other ways. Some programs view it as a "checklist" that does not provide authentic assessment of children's learning and find that its reporting tools do not help to shape teachers' practices or provide clear information on next steps for improving practices and supporting children. In addition, some providers question the reliability and validity of the data, especially when it generally shows the same patterns (children growing over time)-- there is a concern that users are completing it with a bias that they must show growth of children to prove the effectiveness of their teaching.



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Additionally, for some Ideal Learning Head Start providers who use a pedagogical approach with its own aligned assessment and documentation, the use of Teaching Strategies Gold feels redundant. For example, there is no mechanism within TSG to capitalize on the documentation process in Reggio-inspired classrooms or the observation process in Montessori classrooms, which are rich and informative, helping to guide teachers' practices and inform how the environment is prepared to support individual children's learning.

Teachers are overwhelmed when they have to use more than one assessment – one to meet Head Start and another that is aligned with their Ideal Learning approach. Overall, there is a concern that there is a lot of time spent focused on assessment, leaving considerably less time for planning and engaging with and instructing children, especially when there is a lack of congruency between curriculum, assessment, and practice.

The use of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System to assess program quality is valuable to some Ideal Learning Head Start providers but not to all; more inclusive frameworks are needed. The Classroom Assessment System (CLASS) is mandated as part of Head Start performance standards. Some Ideal Learning Head Start providers find the CLASS tool helpful in setting program and staff goals. However, others find CLASS to be contrary to what is best practice for children as it is limited in what is considered “effective instructional support.” For example, the CLASS is focused on direct instruction and teacher language input rather than the context of how language is used throughout the day and in the environment. This may cause Ideal Learning environments such as Reggio-inspired and Montessori classrooms to be rated as less effective. CLASS is not well aligned with these educators' expertise about what a high quality classroom and an effective teacher is within their pedagogical models, calling into questions the validity and utility of the CLASS for certain Ideal Learning Head Start programs and schools. In addition, providers are concerned that given the high-stakes nature of the test within the Designation Renewal System, people may be “training to the test” and may “perform” a particular way when the federal monitors are around. Providers expressed concern about the use of the CLASS as an accountability measure when it was developed as a professional development tool.

Ideal Learning Head Start providers seek measures that can work for all teachers and across different approaches and capture program level and child-level information that is actionable, valid, reliable, and easy to comprehend. One example being examined is the Developmental Environment Rating Scale (DERS). The DERS is currently in use as an environment rating tool for preschool and elementary programs, with an infant/toddler version under development. Some Ideal Learning programs





find the DERS to provide more relevant and actionable information than the CLASS, and to support teachers in a way that is thoughtful and aligned with their mission, vision, and pedagogy. However, participating in Head Start currently requires that they use the CLASS instead. Some programs hope that as the DERS undergoes more extensive validation, it could provide an alternative to the use of CLASS as a tool for measuring early learning environments.

Meeting the many professional development requirements of overlapping agencies can be a challenge.

Ensuring aligned and individualized professional learning is an important facet of Ideal Learning programs; connecting this to the Head Start standards is sometimes a challenge.

There is a need for clear coaching models to guide teachers' professional development and learning, as well as learning opportunities for those professionals who support teachers and staff (e.g., education leaders, coaches, master teachers). Ideal Learning Head Start providers are

intentional in ensuring that coaching is aligned with the needs of teachers, supports the assessment and quality data being collected, and provides uninterrupted time for teachers to reflect and plan as a learning community. However, at times they find it a challenge to align Head Start requirements with state and local requirements, such as licensing standards. There is a need to ensure that federal, state, and local mandates are consistent and aligned. Programs find themselves using the most restrictive and burdensome requirements to ensure they are not penalized. Furthermore, there is a sense that some of these indirect requirements are frustrating for administrators and teachers as they sometimes supersede the professional development needed by teachers to provide the most enriching and individualized educational experiences for children and families.

Braided funding is critical to making Head Start work in an Ideal Learning setting. Ideal Learning Head Start programs use a variety of innovative and complex ways to fund their program and schools.

This includes seeking funds from national, state, and local sources, as well as foundations. While federal and state funds often pay for operations (e.g., teacher or staff salary, services), foundation funding helps programs to innovate further and meet the needs of children and their families. For example, foundation funds are often sought for things such as supporting the professional learning of the workforce (e.g., integrating art or music into teaching practices and classrooms), conducting rigorous research and evaluation of an approach, or conducting home visiting. Braiding funding requires skilled budgeting and bookkeeping to ensure the funds are used responsibly and in a way that meets the expectations of the funders, but many programs do successfully braid funding to provide all children and families with a seamless educational experience.

Policy Strategies to Address Barriers

The strategies listed in the table below address some of the barriers experienced by Ideal Learning Head Start providers.

Policy Solutions to Issues Affecting Ideal Learning Head Start Providers

Issue	Responsible Party	Current status	Proposed solution
Child assessment tool	State agencies	Some states require the use of the Teaching Strategies Gold child assessment, either for Quality Rating or for state PreK participation	State-by-state advocacy to allow the use of alternative child assessments more aligned with Ideal Learning approaches
Child assessment tool	Head Start reviewers and staff	Head Start does not require the use of any specific child assessment tool; however, it specifies that the tool used must be valid, reliable, and aligned to the Head Start Child Outcomes Framework	Educate Head Start reviewers, regional staff and TAs about alternative child assessments more aligned with Ideal Learning approaches
Use of CLASS tool for program assessment	Office of Head Start	The CLASS tool, currently required by the Office of Head Start, doesn't appropriately reflect the quality of classrooms using certain Ideal Learning pedagogical approaches	Advocate for rule changes within the Office of Head Start to recognize tools other than the CLASS that meet requirements set forth in federal legislation
Use of CLASS tool for program assessment	U.S. Congress	The CLASS tool, currently required by the Office of Head Start, doesn't appropriately reflect the quality of classrooms using certain Ideal Learning pedagogical approaches	Advocate for legislative changes to allow alternative program assessment tools and greater emphasis on program improvement as opposed to high-stakes accountability
Regulatory burden	Office of Head Start; state licensing and QRIS departments	Overlapping, redundant and sometimes contradictory requirements make compliance and recordkeeping burdensome for Head Start providers	Advocate at state and federal level for streamlining and/or mutual recognition of regulations

Conclusion

The Ideal Learning Head Start Network continues to grow, welcoming new providers and working to provide mutual support as well as to address the policy issues identified in the Network's first year. Moving forward, participating providers will be working to build relationships at the state, regional and national levels to influence these policy issues.

Conclusion Program/Contact Information

For more information about integrating Head Start with an Ideal Learning approach, you may contact the following individuals and programs that participate in the Ideal Learning Head Start Network.

Organization	Approach	Location	Contact Person	Contact information
Ideal Learning Head Start Network Director	Montessori	Georgia	Annie Frazer	annie@montessori-partnerships.org (404) 228-6326
Ideal Learning Head Start Network Co-Director	Reggio-inspired	Chicago, Illinois	Karen Haigh	karenmhaigh@aol.com (773) 415-1956
Manny Cantor Center, and Ideal Learning Head Start Network Co-Director	Reggio-inspired	New York City, New York	Louis Hamlyn-Harris	lhamlynharris@mannycantor.org (646) 395-4253
Discovery Multiple Intelligences Preschool	Montessori	Scranton, Pennsylvania	Stacy Nivert	mydiscoverypreschool@gmail.com (570) 702-7909
Iberville Elementary School	Montessori	Plaquemine, Louisiana	Lydia Canova	lydiacanova@ipsb.education (225) 687-5400 x1081
Children's Aid Society of New York	Tools of the Mind	New York City, New York	Margot Sigmone	msigmone@childrensaidnyc.org (212) 949-4684
Child-Parent Centers	Reggio-inspired	Tucson, Arizona	Leo Lundholm	llundholm@childparentcenters.org (520) 906-7055

References

1 Trust for Learning (2018), Assessing Supply of Ideal Learning Models, Internal Report: unpublished.

2 S. Bernstein, C. Bush, N. Aikens, E. Moiduddin, J.F. Harding, L. Malone, L. Tarullo, J. Cannon, K. Filipczak, and S. Lukashanets. (2018). A Portrait of Head Start Classrooms and Programs: FACES Spring 2017 Data Tables and Study Design. OPRE Report 2019-10. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.



Photo courtesy of Discovery
Multiple Intelligences Preschool

To learn more about the Ideal Learning Head Start Network,
please contact Director Annie Frazer:

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(404) 228-6326

The Ideal Learning Head Start Network is currently accepting new members. The Network is open to Ideal Learning providers seeking Head Start funding, as well as to Head Start providers working to implement Ideal Learning approaches. Providers interested in joining the Ideal Learning Head Start Network and participating in our monthly video calls and joint advocacy, please contact Co-Director Karen Haigh:

karenmariehaigh@gmail.com
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