

Wisconsin Head Start State Collaboration Office Case Study

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

There are few priorities that warrant stronger private support or public funding than the welfare of our nation's children. The nearly universal agreement regarding the importance of promoting the early development of children and the health of low-income families guided the implementation of Head Start as a federal-to-local program and underscored the importance of strengthening and expanding the states' role through the creation of state Head Start Collaboration Offices.

Local Head Start Programs

Wisconsin Head Start programs deliver a range of comprehensive and high quality individualized services in the areas of education and early childhood development; medical, dental, mental health, nutrition, and parent involvement designed to foster healthy development in low-income children and their families. There are 305 Head Start or Early Head Start centers in Wisconsin that served 13,432 children in 2004. Supplementary state funding extended Head Start and Early Head Start comprehensive services to another 1,516 children and their families. Wisconsin Head Start programs have maintained an unwavering focus on the needs of low-income preschool children and support services for families since 1965. Parent involvement and leadership guide these services. The design, funding, and history of Head Start programs in Wisconsin underscore the importance of Head Start as a prominent player in shaping the state's commitment to high quality education and the future workforce.

Wisconsin Head Start Association

All 54 Head Start and Early Head Start programs in Wisconsin are members of the Wisconsin Head Start Association, Inc. (WHSA). WHSA is a membership organization representing Head Start families, staff and administrators in Wisconsin and has an elected board of directors that governs the association and provides support to local Head Start programs.

Wisconsin State Head Start Collaboration Office (WHSSCO)

Wisconsin has received funding for a Head Start Collaboration Office since 1996 and continues today to focus on the goal of strengthening early childhood

systems and access to comprehensive services for low-income children and families by building partnerships between Head Start and other early childhood related entities and through strategic involvement in state planning efforts. WHSSCO is currently located in the office of the Secretary at the Department of Workforce Development (DWD), a move to a more prominent position in the state government structure with which many early childhood education and care partners are pleased. The Wisconsin HSSCO and its Advisory committee, works with the Wisconsin Head Start Association (WHSA) as well as state departments, associations, and organizations in order to enhance the ability of Wisconsin's children to enter school healthy and ready to learn. These partnerships exemplify the extensive networks that have been established and maintained through the Wisconsin Collaboration Office.

Rationale for the Case Study

Making the connection between partnerships, collaboration and results is always a challenge and has been no less for the Wisconsin Head Start State Collaboration Office (WHSSCO). An examination of key social, economic, and political dynamics that impact this relationship was a key reason for the commissioning of this case study. The purpose of this report is three-fold: 1) it responds to the desire and the need of the Wisconsin HSSCO and its partners for an historical record of their activities, including the design, management, and effectiveness of the project; 2) it documents the impact of these activities, including the lessons learned; and 3) it provides a look at the challenges and opportunities for the future.

Impact of the WHSSCO

In order to understand the current status and the accomplishments of the Wisconsin HSSCO, it is important to note that Wisconsin has benefited from an early and on-going history of working collaboratively around early childhood care and education and Head Start. More recently, current political conditions also have contributed to the feasibility and efficacy of increased collaboration around early childhood initiatives at the state level. It is not surprising, then, that the re-location of the Collaboration Office and the strong structural support it receives provides a powerful context within which the WHSSCO can serve as a resource between and among state agencies, policy-makers and local Head Start programs.

Major successes and a snapshot of the impact of the WHSSCO and its partners are highlighted below.

- *The emergence of true collaboration among and between partners.* Wisconsin has a long history of collaboration among early childhood care and education partners. It is nurtured by the extensive trust and strong relationships previously established. The addition of the state Collaboration Office has assisted in deepening and broadening early childhood partners' work together and is reflected in the core values they espouse, including group cohesion, consistent leadership, vision, and honoring diversity.
- *The creation of a cross-sector professional development system.* Since the early 1990's when the Professional Development Initiative (PDI) was launched, WHSSCO staff has assisted partner institutions in developing a comprehensive articulated system of early childhood professional development. This cross-sector collaboration has resulted in a strong foundation for initiating seamless transitions between two and four-year higher education campuses, a statewide credential registry, a career guide, a scholarship program for working students and annual conferences that bring early childhood professionals and the business community together.
- *The impact of state initiatives on early childhood care and education* From the onset of the WHSSCO, the collaboration staff has been at the table for most of the major state committee meetings and policy discussions involving early childhood care and education. These cooperative relationships at the state level have resulted in community partners who bring more clout and confidence to successfully addressing local Head Start priorities. Confidence in the WHSSCO and its partner's ability to influence state initiatives and policy is high, leading to an enhanced potential for leveraging and braiding resources among agencies and organizations.
- *The increased implementation of a grassroots community approach to four-year old kindergarten (4K).* WHSSCO has been a strong partner in promoting a community approach to local reform that brings together Head Start, preschools, child care providers, and others to work with the public schools to provide universal 4K. The use of regional coaches, funded in part by the WHSSCO, to facilitate these multi-agency community approaches was identified as key to the success of this local collaborative effort.
- *The progress on the federally mandated goals by the WHSSCO.* As described in various annual profiles over the past 10 years, the WHSSCO has been a strong partner in collaborative efforts that have aligned with and supported the federal goals mandated by the Head Start Bureau. Noteworthy examples include the Wisconsin Collaboration Office's work in effecting systemic change in; health care, child care, education, welfare systems, family literacy, children with disabilities, community services, and recently, services for homeless families.

Future challenges for the WHSSCO

It is clear from the data (including the content of artifacts and respondent interviews) presented in this case study that the Wisconsin HSSCO and its partners in communities across Wisconsin are seeking, creating and finding success in working out collaborative solutions to the service delivery and funding challenges that threaten the well being of the state's youngest and most vulnerable children and families. The data identified five major challenges facing the Wisconsin HSSCO in the next several years.

- *Building support in the business community for Head Start and other early care and education programs, including developing economic strategies that will improve the quality of the future work force and inviting new partners to shape initiatives and share resources,*
- *Assisting state policymakers in developing initiatives and policy for Head Start and other early childhood programs that supports collaboration and braided funding,*
- *Building and sustaining cross-sector community collaboration among Head Start locals and early childhood partners through a grass-roots effort,*
- *Continuing to build a strong cross-sector foundation for seamless professional development that improves the quality of the early childhood care and education workforce and life for low-income children and families, and*
- *Planning for the changes in the soon to be re-authorized Head Start Act and giving careful consideration to how it will impact the WHSSCO and local Head Start programs.*

The good news is that the Wisconsin HSSCO is in capable hands. The diverse partnerships that have anchored and ensured the successes of the WHSSCO in the past will continue to support its goal of providing accessible and affordable quality care and education to young children and their families. The challenge to all involved is to continue to be worthy of this goal.