



Head Start in Practice

Standardization and Flexibility

Overview

In Head Start's effort to achieve high quality services for all children, the program attempts to strike a balance between granting local programs flexibility to adapt to the unique needs of the children and families in their communities, while still enforcing a degree of standardization around minimum requirements (such as class size and health and safety procedures). Since tailoring programs to meet local needs is an integral part of Head Start's philosophy and practice, it is important to consider program in-practice variation, as it has implications for equitable access to the type, quantity and quality of services that children receive and for evaluations of Head Start's effectiveness. Program self-assessments and other performance reviews may document the specific practices of each program, but this information is not publicly available or systematically used to examine patterns across programs.¹ Below are some examples of standardization and flexibility in Head Start:

Standardization in Practice

Teacher qualifications: The 2007 Head Start Act mandates that as of September 30, 2013, at least half of all Head Start teachers in center-based programs must have either a baccalaureate or advanced degree in early childhood education or a baccalaureate or advanced degree combined with significant coursework in early childhood education and experience teaching preschoolers. It also delineates educational requirements for teaching assistants and education coordinators in center-based programs.²

Class size: Head Start has specific rules regarding the number of children per classroom in center-based programs. These rules vary by child age; for example, for four and five year olds, the maximum class size is 20 children, but for three year olds, class size is capped at 17 children. Classes must always be supervised by at least two staff, one of which must be a teacher.³

Facilities requirements: The Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) maintain detailed requirements concerning the physical facilities of a Head Start center. For example, "centers must have at least 35 square feet of usable indoor space per child available for the care and use of children (i.e., exclusive of bathrooms, halls, kitchen, staff rooms, and storage places) and at least 75 square feet of usable outdoor play space per child." The HSPPS also specify smaller-scale facilities requirements such as the provision of toilet training equipment for children who are being toilet trained, and the use of child-resistant outlet covers, safety plugs, or child protection outlets on electric outlets accessible to children.⁴

Flexibility and Variation in Practice

Operating schedule: Head Start does not enforce a standardized operating schedule. Instead it allows programs to tailor their schedules to the needs of their local communities. For example, in the 2010-2011 program year, 52% of programs offered services for six or more hours a day for five days a week, while 25% of programs offered less than six hours a day for four days a week.⁵ These different schedules mean that the children who attend these programs will have a different level of exposure to Head Start services.

diversitydatakids.org
data for a diverse and equitable future



Curriculum: Head Start requires that agencies use a written, research-based curriculum that is aligned with the Head Start Program Performance Standards, but no specific curriculum is required or recommended. As a result, there is a great deal of flexibility surrounding curriculum selection, which may also be associated with variation in other classroom or program characteristics. For example, a study using a nationally representative survey of Head Start children and classrooms, Family and Child Experiences Study (FACES) 2000⁶ compared Head Start classrooms that used Creative Curriculum or High/Scope curriculum versus any other type of curricula. This study found that classrooms using some other type of curriculum (e.g., not Creative Curriculum or High/Scope) were of lower quality, as measured by three classroom quality scores: the ECERS-R Total score, ECERS-R Language score, and Quality Composite score. In addition, it also found that a higher proportion of children in classrooms using some other type of curriculum were very poor and non-white, compared to classrooms using Creative Curriculum or High/Scope.⁷

Languages: Head Start regulations and guidelines require that classroom staff be able to communicate with children and families of limited English proficiency, but the fraction of staff able to do this varies greatly by geography. English language learners may have different Head Start experiences in California, where 57% of Head Start non-supervisory staff⁸ speak a non-English language, compared to Alabama, where two percent of non-supervisory staff speak a non-English language.⁹

Sources & notes:

¹ There are a few research studies that do monitor implementation, such as the Head Start Research-Based, Developmentally Informed (REDI) intervention and the national evaluation of Early Head Start. However, implementation studies are not required and the Head Start Impact Study did not include one.

² The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 42 U.S.C. §9801 *et. seq.* (2007).

³ Staffing requirements and program options, Center-based program option, 45 CFR § 1306.32 (2007). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1306/1306.32%20%20Center-based%20program%20option..htm>.

⁴ Program performance standards for the operation of Head Start programs by grantees and delegate agencies, Facilities, materials, and equipment, 45 CFR § 1304.53 (2008). Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1304/1304.53%20Facilities,%20materials,%20and%20equipment..htm>.

⁵ CLASP *DataFinder*, program year 2010-2011. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/data>.

⁶ Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey, 2000 Cohort.

⁷ McKey, R.H., Pai-Samant, S. & Sorongon, A. (2002). *Curricula being used in Head Start programs: Who gets what?* [PowerPoint Presentation]. Sixth National Head Start Research Conference. Retrieved from: http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/curriculum_being.pdf.

⁸ Non-supervisory child development staff includes classroom teachers, assistant teachers, home-based visitors, and family child care providers. Source: 2010-2011 Head Start Program Information Report survey form.

⁹ Author's calculations using 2010-2011 Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) data.