



Head Start Legislative History Highlights

The Increasing Prominence of School Readiness over Time

Year of Legislation	Description
1964	<p>Lyndon Johnson launches the War on Poverty with the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964. The Act authorizes numerous antipoverty initiatives, including the urban and rural Community Action Programs (CAP). CAP's major goals are to:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Make strides towards the elimination of poverty or the causes of poverty. • Empower local residents and members of the targeted group in carrying out the local program. <p>Head Start is envisioned too late to be written into the Act. Instead the program is designed and executed outside of the legislature through the Office of Economic Opportunity (OEO) and placed within CAP. In effect, Head Start does not exist in the legislation as an independent program. Entities carrying out Head Start services receive monies through the urban and rural community action programs funding stream. Therefore, as part of CAP, Head Start shares the general poverty alleviation goals stated above.</p>
1966	<p>The Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1966 explicitly list Head Start as a program within CAP. This new legislation mandates that the director of OEO fund programs that provide "comprehensive health, nutritional, social, educational, and mental health services" to low-income children who are not yet school aged.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Attainment of children's "greatest potential" is mentioned for the first time as a specific Head Start goal. The legislation does not provide a definition for this term. • Legislation also mandates that Head Start programs actively encourage parent participation through the broadly-worded "provision of appropriate activities." This parent-focused mandate aligns with CAP goals of increasing the capacity, motivation, productivity and employment opportunities of low-income individuals.
1967	<p>The Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1967 designate Head Start as a special CAP. This designation allows the director of OEO to fund Head Start programs regardless of whether they align with general CAP objectives. The amendments make a few changes to Head Start program objectives:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • The list of services that Head Start programs must provide to help children achieve their full potential is modified to "comprehensive health, nutritional, education, social and other services." • Parent direct participation is further specified, as Head Start programs are required to "provide for direct participation of the parents of such children in the development, conduct, and overall program direction at the local level."
1974	<p>The Community Services Act of 1974 modifies the language surrounding Head Start's overall purpose and goals:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • A "Statement of Purpose" recognizes Head Start's role in the delivery of "comprehensive health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services to economically disadvantaged children and their families." The Act also requires that Head Start continue to meet "the needs of migrant and Indian children."

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	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> The program objectives outlined in the Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1967, including direct parent participation, remain unchanged but are reassigned within the legislation to serve not as goals, but instead as broad sweeping requirements for Head Start programs to receive financial assistance. <p>The changes in the 1974 Act highlight two components of family engagement in Head Start legislation: (1) direct parent participation in program development, governance and direction, and (2) provision of services to families (beyond the services provided to children). Direct parent participation explicitly appears in the legislation earlier, in 1966, but is somewhat de-emphasized in 1974, when family service provision is introduced and replaces the former as a stated primary purpose of Head Start. Both components have remained in the legislation and have active regulations and requirements associated with them. For more information on family engagement in Head Start, click here.</p>
1981	<p>The Head Start Act of 1981 is the first piece of legislation in which Head Start is authorized as an independent discretionary program, completely separate from CAP. Head Start is assigned its own funding stream and allocation formula. No changes to program goals are made.</p>
1998	<p>The 1998 amendments to the Head Start Act significantly change the goals of the program. In a new “Statement of Purpose,” school readiness is specifically declared the major end goal of Head Start. This new goal acknowledges the importance of providing services to families as well as to children, in achieving school readiness.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> The Statement of Purpose declares that school readiness is to be promoted by “enhancing the social and cognitive development of low-income children through the provision, to low-income children and their families, of health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services that are determined, based on family needs assessments, to be necessary.” <p>The broad sweeping financial assistance requirements are also modified to include school readiness as follows:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Head Start programs “will provide such comprehensive health, nutritional, education, social and other services as will enable the children to attain their full potential and attain school readiness.” The language around direct parent participation is unchanged and continues to be a requirement.
2007	<p>The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 is passed and reinforces the 1998 changes to Head Start’s goals.</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> Above all, school readiness remains the major objective. The academic aspects of school readiness are emphasized more strongly as contributing factors to this major end goal. For the first time, specific academic areas are mentioned as target areas for child learning within Head Start’s statement of purpose (language, literacy, mathematics, and science). No changes are made to the sweeping financial assistance requirements: health and educational services, as well as direct parent participation in the program at the local level remain requirements for agencies to receive funding.

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Sources & notes:

- Zigler, E. & Styfco, S.J. (2010). *The hidden history of Head Start*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press.
- The Economic Opportunity Act of 1964, Pub. L. No. 88-452, §202, 78 Stat. 516 (1964).
- The Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1966, Pub. L. No. 89-794, § 211-1, 80 Stat. 1462 (1966).
- The Economic Opportunity Amendments of 1967, Pub. L. No. 90-222, §222, 81 Stat. 698 (1967).
- The Community Services Act of 1974, Pub. L. No. 93-644, §502 & §511, 88 Stat. 2300 (1975).
- The Head Start Act of 1981, Pub. L. No. 97-35, §636, 95 Stat. 499 (1981).
- The Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services Act of 1998, Pub. L. No. 150-285, § 102, 112 Stat. 2703 (1998).
- The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 42 U.S.C. § 9801 *et. seq.* (2007).