

**Sara Mead**  
**Partner, Bellwether Education Partners**  
**Testimony before the House Education and Workforce Committee**

My name is Sara Mead, and I am a partner with Bellwether Education Partners, a nonprofit that helps education organizations improve results for high-need students. I conduct research on Head Start and other early childhood policies and advise foundations, advocacy organizations, and others—including Head Start grantees—working to improve early learning.

**Head Start Plays a Crucial Role in Supporting Early Development of Our Nation’s Most Vulnerable Young Children**

Serving nearly a million children, Head Start plays a crucial role in our early childhood system and in improving outcomes for children in poverty. Children in poverty are more likely to experience trauma and toxic stress,<sup>1</sup> have less access to early learning experiences,<sup>2</sup> and hear 30 million fewer words by age 3 than affluent children.<sup>3</sup> Achievement gaps for disadvantaged youngsters emerge as early as 9 months in age,<sup>4</sup> and by the time they enter kindergarten, they are already behind.<sup>5</sup> Given these challenges, all children in poverty need access to high-quality early learning programs, including Head Start and state or locally funded pre-k, to enable them to enter school ready to succeed.

**Head Start Is Working—Let’s Make It Work Better**

Research—including the federally funded Head Start Impact Study<sup>6</sup> and the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)<sup>7</sup>—shows that Head Start improves children’s school readiness at kindergarten entry. Although impacts on test scores decline in the early elementary grades, longer-term studies, which follow children into adulthood, show that Head Start alumni are more likely to graduate high school and have better adult life outcomes than similar children who did

---

<sup>1</sup> The Science of Early Childhood Development. (2007) National Scientific Council on the Developing Child. <http://www.developingchild.net>

<sup>2</sup> David T. Burkam and Valerie Lee, “Inequality at the Starting Gate” (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “Entering Kindergarten: A Portrait of American Children When They Begin School: Findings from the Condition of Education” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000); Nicholas Zill and Jerry West, “NCES 2001-035” (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001).

<sup>3</sup> Betty Hart and Todd Risley, *Meaningful Differences in the Everyday Experiences of Young Children* (Paul H. Brookes Publishing Company, 1995).

<sup>4</sup> Tamara Halle, Nicole Forry, Elizabeth Hair, Kate Perper, Laura Wandner, Julia Wessel, and Jessica Vick, “Disparities in Early Learning and Development: Lessons from the Early Childhood Longitudinal Study – Birth Cohort (ECLS-B)” (Washington, D.C.: Child Trends. 2009) <http://www.childtrends.org/wp-content/uploads/2013/05/2009-52DisparitiesEExecSumm.pdf>

<sup>5</sup> David T. Burkam and Valerie Lee, “Inequality at the Starting Gate” (Washington, DC: Economic Policy Institute, 2002); U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, “Entering Kindergarten: A Portrait of American Children When They Begin School: Findings from the Condition of Education” (Washington, D.C.: U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, 2000); Nicholas Zill and Jerry West, “NCES 2001-035” (Washington, DC: U.S. Government Printing Office, 2001); Christopher Jencks and Meredith Phillips, eds., *The Black-White Test Score Gap* (Washington, DC: Brookings Institution Press, 1998).

<sup>6</sup> U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (January 2010). *Head Start Impact Study. Final Report.* Washington, DC.

<sup>7</sup> N. Aikens, A. Kopack Klein, L. Tarullo, and J. W est. (2013). *Getting Ready for Kindergarten: Children’s Progress During Head Start.* FACES 2009 Report t. OPRE Report 2013-21a. W ashington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

not attend.<sup>8</sup> Further analysis of Impact Study data also finds that Head Start produces significant learning gains compared to no preschool at all—and these gains last into elementary school.<sup>9</sup>

In other words, Head Start works. But its results, on average, do not match those of the highest-quality publicly funded pre-k programs, such as those in New Jersey,<sup>10</sup> Oklahoma,<sup>11</sup> and Boston.<sup>12</sup> Further, Head Start results vary widely across centers and programs—as much as or more than those of K-12 public schools.<sup>13</sup>

The key question, then, is not whether Head Start works, but how to enable *all* Head Start grantees to match the results of the best Head Start and pre-k programs.

### **Bipartisan Policy Reforms Have Improved Head Start Quality**

The bipartisan 2007 Head Start reauthorization took crucial steps to improve the quality of Head Start. As a result of these changes:

- 71% of Head Start preschool teachers have at least a bachelor's degree.<sup>14</sup>
- Designation Renewal, which requires low-performing grantees to compete to retain their grants, has led to the replacement of low-performing grantees and spurred others to improve their quality. Over the past 3 years, roughly 5% of all grantees have been replaced through the designation renewal process.<sup>15</sup>

---

<sup>8</sup> David Deming, "Early Childhood Intervention and Life-Cycle Skill Development: Evidence from Head Start," *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics* 1, no. 3 (2009), [http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~deming/papers/Deming\\_HeadStart.pdf](http://www.people.fas.harvard.edu/~deming/papers/Deming_HeadStart.pdf); Jens Ludwig and Douglas L. Miller, "Does Head Start Improve Children's Life Chances?" *The Quarterly Journal of Economics* 122, no. 1 (2007), <http://qje.oxfordjournals.org/content/122/1/159.abstract>

<sup>9</sup> Zhai, Fuhua; Brooks-Gunn, Jeanne; Waldfogel, Jane *Developmental Psychology*, Vol 50(12), Dec 2014, 2572-2586; Compared to What? Variation in the Impacts of Early Childhood Education by Alternative Care-Type Settings, Avi Feller Todd Grindal Luke Miratrix Lindsay Page, Working Paper, December 2014. [http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/feller/files/feller\\_grindal\\_miratrix\\_page\\_12\\_6\\_14.pdf](http://scholar.harvard.edu/files/feller/files/feller_grindal_miratrix_page_12_6_14.pdf).

<sup>10</sup> W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D. Kwanghee Jung, Ph.D. Min-Jong Youn, Ph.D. Ellen C. Frede, Ph.D. "The Abbott Preschool Program Longitudinal Effects Study (APPLES): 5<sup>th</sup> Grade Follow up" (New Brunswick, NJ: National Institute for Early Education Research, 2013). <http://nieer.org/sites/nieer/files/APPLES%205th%20Grade.pdf>

<sup>11</sup> Carolyn J. Hill, William T. Gormley, Jr., Shirley Adelstein, and Catherine Willemin The Effects of Oklahoma's Pre-Kindergarten Program on 3rd Grade Test Scores, Georgetown University: Center for Research on Children in the United States, May 2012 [http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Long-term%20Policy%20Brief\\_05-22-2012%20\(2\).pdf](http://fcd-us.org/sites/default/files/Long-term%20Policy%20Brief_05-22-2012%20(2).pdf)

<sup>12</sup> Christina Weiland and Hirokazu Yoshikawa, "Impacts of a Prekindergarten Program on Children's Mathematics, Language, Literacy, Executive Function, and Emotional Skills," *Child Development* 84, no. 6 (2013), doi: 10.1111/cdev.12099.

<sup>13</sup> Howard Bloom and Christina Weiland, "Quantifying Variation in Head Start Effects on Young Children's Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Skills Using Data from the National Head Start Impact Study" MDRC, 2014. [http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/quantifying\\_variation\\_in\\_head\\_start.pdf](http://www.mdrc.org/sites/default/files/quantifying_variation_in_head_start.pdf); Christopher Waters, Inputs in the Production of Early Childhood Human Capital: Evidence from Head Start NBER Working Paper No. 20639 Issued in October 2014 <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20639.pdf>.

<sup>14</sup> Office of the Administration for Children and Families Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center, Head Start Program Fact Sheet FY 2014 <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/factsheets/2014-hs-program-factsheet.html>

<sup>15</sup> Bellwether analysis of following data sources: Sara Mead, *Renewing Head Start's Promise: Investing in What Works for disadvantaged preschoolers*, Bellwether Education Partners, 2014.

<http://bellwethereducation.org/publication/RenewingHeadStartsPromise> Katherine Molina-Powell, "2013 Designation Renewal System, analysis of the winners," *Shine Early Learning*. 2014. <http://us2.campaign-archive1.com/?u=2e497af71a7649bfa2fdcccd1&id=c577635f52&e=b2d02a75a7> Abbie Lieberman, "The Results Are In: Head Start Re-competition Round 2." New America Foundation, August 21, 2014.

<http://www.edcentral.org/results-head-start-re-competition-round-two/>; Buildwell Group, "Programs in the Third Cohort of Recompetition," (retrieved August 31, 2015)

- The quality of teaching in Head Start classrooms is also improving.<sup>16</sup>

### Key Priorities for Improving Head Start

Despite this progress, additional reforms are needed. Six issues are particularly important:

1. **Supporting quality teaching:** Preschools that produce strong, sustained learning gains employ teachers with bachelor's degrees and training in early childhood, provide high-quality professional development, and pay preschool teachers the same as K-12 teachers. In contrast, one in four Head Start teachers lacks a bachelor's degree,<sup>17</sup> and Head Start teachers make \$20,000 a year less than comparably trained kindergarten teachers in public schools.<sup>18</sup> Improving Head Start teacher preparation and compensation must be a priority.
2. **Improving curriculum:** To prepare children to succeed in school great teachers need evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, content-rich, well-organized curricula.<sup>19</sup> But many early childhood curricula used in Head Start fail to provide sufficiently rich content or support for teachers. All Head Start programs must use evidence-based, content-rich curricula and support teachers to implement it effectively.
3. **Continuous improvement:** At both the grantee and federal level, Head Start needs to collect, analyze, and use data to support ongoing program improvement. This requires building grantee capacity and shifting the focus of monitoring from compliance to continuous improvement. To accelerate these efforts, researchers and federal officials must collect and use program performance data to identify, learn from, and disseminate the practices of high-performing grantees.
4. **Reducing burdensome regulations:** Head Start programs are subject to some 1,400 separate requirements prescribing not just what they do, but how they do it. Head Start monitoring focuses largely on compliance with rules—not program results. Federal policymakers must reduce overly prescriptive and bureaucratic requirements on Head Start programs and provide greater flexibility to innovate.
5. **Improving coordination with state early childhood and K-12 systems:** As states build early learning systems, state and federal policies must work to integrate Head Start with these systems, including state workforce and early childhood data systems. State and federal policies should also support Head Start grantees to access and combine state and local pre-k and childcare funds to improve quality and lengthen the program day. As state pre-k expands, Head Start programs need greater flexibility to shift resources between infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in response to changing community needs.
6. **Ensuring adequate funding:** For too long, federal policies have added new requirements to Head Start programs without providing sufficient funding to meet them. Improving quality and outcomes will require additional federal investments to enable

---

<sup>16</sup> See Office of the Administration for Children and Families Early Learning and Knowledge Center, National CLASS Reports, <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/class-reports>

<sup>17</sup> The Office of the Administration for Children and Families Early Learning and Knowledge Center, Head Start Program Facts FY2014 <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/factsheets/2014-hs-program-factsheet.html>

<sup>18</sup> Whitebook, M., Phillips, D., & Howes, C. (2014). Worthy work, STILL unlivable wages: The early childhood workforce 25 years after the National Child Care Staffing Study. Berkeley, CA: Center for the Study of Child Care Employment, University of California, Berkeley, p 31.

<sup>19</sup> Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, "Final Report (report submitted to the Secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Washington, D.C. August 2012.)

Head Start programs cover the costs of improving quality without reducing children's and families' access to Head Start programs.

The Obama administration has proposed changes to streamline Head Start Performance Standards, reduce overly prescriptive and bureaucratic requirements, and bring expectations for Head Start in line with current research. But addressing the challenges I have outlined also requires statutory change in the next reauthorization of Head Start, as well as additional funding. As you begin your consideration of Head Start reauthorization, these issues—and the needs of Head Start children and families—must be at the center of the conversation.