

Head Start: Improving School Readiness for Children, Empowering Families and Communities

Since 1965, the goal of the nationwide Head Start program has been to improve the school-readiness skills of children, ages three through five, in income-eligible families. The Berks Community Action Program (BCAP) has been the grantee receiving funding from both the federal government and state government to facilitate our local program from the beginning.

Head Start programs engage parents in their children's learning. Based on a "whole child" model, the program provides comprehensive services that include preschool education; medical, dental, and mental health care; nutrition services; and efforts to help parents foster their children's development. Head Start services are designed to be responsive to each family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. All of this is accomplished following the mandates established in the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007.

Under the new national leadership of **Yvette Fuentes Sanchez**, director of the Office of Head Start, a "Roadmap to Excellence" has been created that clearly defines the direction for the Head Start program. This roadmap lays out a set of specific actions to improve school readiness outcomes among Head Start children and to promote their long-term success.



A key factor in promoting positive outcomes for young children is the dynamic interaction between a child and a caring adult. In the Head Start program, this means that teachers provide age-appropriate classroom activities, as well as comprehensive services to address the needs of the child. Meals and transportation are provided, medical and dental services are made available, and opportunities to experience appropriate activities that will make the transition to kindergarten successful are all part of the total Head Start experience.

At home, Head Start staff work in partnership with families to help them support and reinforce the learning that goes on during a typical day with Head Start. Key elements include increasing every Head Start child's exposure to effective, appropriate learning experiences, both in the program and at home; raising expectations for teaching practices and family engagement through a long-awaited revision of the Head Start performance standards; helping programs meet new expectations through professional development initiatives; a stronger training and technical assistance system; and holding programs accountable for meeting expectations.

At the local level, BCIU has contracted with BCAP to provide direct services to children and families of



Berks County. Since the mid-1970s, the BCIU program provided services to children living outside the city of Reading. The Reading School District provided services to children and families in the city until 2006, when BCIU assumed the responsibility for all of Head Start in Berks County.



Funded by a combination of federal and state money, the program budget for 2010 is \$4,952,905. Additionally, the program is required to support its operation through in-kind contributions that take various forms, including donated space, volunteer hours, and other services.

Currently, the program serves 640 children throughout the county and operates Monday through Friday. Staff members use Monday for planning and professional development, while children attend Tuesday through Friday. Head Start classes are in 17 locations, and the staff consists of 118 professionals who provide high-quality pre-school education, as well as comprehensive services to families.

The Head Start staff includes not only teachers, assistant teachers, and para-professionals, but also Family and Community Partnership staff who help meet the social service needs of families. A mental health specialist, a disabilities and transition specialist, a health and nutrition specialist, and other support staff all work together to provide a seamless, comprehensive system that is able to support the overall mission of Head Start.

Head Start works collaboratively with other departments and agencies as well. BCIU Transportation shuttles most of the children to and from school each day. A strong, working relationship also exists with the BCIU Early Intervention (EI) program. Together, we are better

equipped to meet the needs of children requiring special services. We are able to do this by providing student placement within nine Head Start classrooms. Each class is made up of 15 typical preschoolers and five children with special needs.

In addition to a teacher and assistant teacher, a para-professional is also part of the classroom staff. The role of the para-professional is to implement Individual Education Plans (IEP) developed by Early Intervention by working on specific skills with the child. The EI staff provides direct support, both in and out of the classroom. The result of this collaboration is a comprehensive system that provides preschool education for children with special needs in the least restrictive environment.

Head Start and BCAP also share a mutually beneficial collaboration. We work together to connect our families with the many social service programs BCAP offers, including weatherization, budgeting, and a family savings program. Head Start also works with the Reading Public Library to utilize their expertise in enhancing early literacy.

Though government programs come and go, Head Start remains true to its mission 45 years after its creation, continually providing valuable services and opportunities for income-eligible families. Research clearly shows that the millions of children who attended Head Start were better prepared for kindergarten. Without a doubt, the program primes children for academic success and empowers families and communities to move forward.

For more information on the Head Start program, contact **Judith Blimline**, program administrator, at 610-987-8453 or judbli@berksiu.org.

