



A 50-Year Journey and Beyond

Head Start's war on poverty continues today | *Lilly B. Irvin-Vitela*

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Head Start in the United States. It remains one of the most effective set of policies and practices in the war on poverty. There is much to celebrate, not the least of which has been our ability in the Head Start community to prevent Head Start from succumbing to a war on those in poverty.

At its inception, Head Start was designed to be a child, family, and community strengthening approach.

Today, Head Start continues to hold up as a way to overcome the disadvantages in educational, developmental, and health outcomes that often accompany poverty and lack of access to resources. This two-generation model still serves effectively to achieve prevention and early intervention goals.

Head Start's commitment to the whole child and the whole family within the context of their community and culture has proven to be a bedrock of positive child and family

development outcomes. Now, 50 years later, Early Head Start, Head Start, Tribal Head Start, and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start in Wisconsin continue to deliver on our promise to children and families.

■ A Shared Responsibility

Head Start and Early Head Start have persisted in being a place to refine best practices, develop an evidence-base for high-quality early childhood and family service, and build relationships with others who



Lady Bird Johnson, the First Lady, is shown reading to children enrolled in Project Head Start at Kemper School in Washington, DC, in March 1966.

Head Start programs began in the summer of 1965 as part of President

Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Early Head Start was added in 1994. Head Start has served more than 30 million children since 1965, growing from an eight-week demonstration project to include full-day/full-year services and many program options.

care about young children and their families.

The most important relationships Head Start has built have been with the families within Head Start. From working together to address specific child and family goals to parent leadership on policy councils, school readiness committees, health advisory committees, and other program level decision-making, parents are never underestimated as the essential partner in positive outcomes for their children.

In Wisconsin, another important partnership has been with the K-12

system. From shared efforts on developmental screening and transitions to contracted delivery of 4-K services and shared professional development, the journey toward high-quality service delivery and exceptional outcomes has been a road traveled with friends and partners. Together we work to understand the unique assets, needs, and opportunities for overcoming the challenges that poverty present.

■ Work to Do

Unfortunately, 50 years later, Wisconsin still has huge disparities



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For more information on the Parent Family Community Engagement Framework, visit <http://bit.ly/headstart-framework>

Join in the Effort



Throughout 2015, the Wisconsin Head Start Association (WHS) will be celebrating, asking hard questions, and planning for ongoing action. WHSA encourages K-12 school leaders to join in these activities. WHSA is hosting its annual conference Feb. 22-25 in Wisconsin Dells. The theme this year is ABCs of Head Start: Advocating, Believing, and Changing Lives for 50 Years!

WHS will hold a mini-conference called Finding Your Way on May 20. This event will focus on the Parent Family Community Engagement Framework and Asset Based Community Development. This too is an opportunity for K-12 and early childhood partners to join the WHSA in strengthening collaborations that benefit children and families.

For more information, visit <http://whsaonline.org>.



in long-term educational and health outcomes for those in poverty. This is not simply an issue of personal responsibility for those who are of low-income. It's also an issue of public policy and public will.

Looking back 50 years ago, poverty was understood as a threat to our democracy and our humanity. It remains a threat today. With the launch of Head Start in 1965, that threat was met with wise and com-

passionate public policy efforts that drew from the expertise of the medical, educational, and community development professionals.

Our democracy cannot withstand huge sectors of our community struggling to meet basic needs and unable to expend energy to participate in civic life. A core strategy for redressing this inequity must be a shared and unrelenting commitment to partner in deep and meaningful ways with parents and families of young children. The earlier we do this, the better prepared we will all

be to support children in achieving their optimal potential and making contributions to our communities.

■ A Unified Approach

Head Start has developed a Parent Family Community Engagement Framework that can serve as a tool for Head Start and our community partners to strengthen our collective work. It challenges us to think deeply and work systematically to be accountable to child and family outcomes.

The framework includes



The Ceremony for National Head Start Day on June 30, 1965, at the White House — right to left: Sargent Shriver, director of the Office of Economic Opportunity; Lou Maginn, director of a Head Start project in Vermont; Lady Bird Johnson; entertainer Danny Kaye; and Mr. Shriver's sons Robert and Timothy.

Learn more through the **Head Start Interactive Timeline** on the *Education Week* website: <http://bit.ly/headstart-timeline>.



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resources and strategies to actively promote family leadership, well-being, and positive parent-child relationships. It pushes professionals to understand the role of families as life-long learners and educators and to support their leadership and relationship building with each other and the broader community. Children thrive when their families thrive. Children are more likely to be successful as life-long learners if that is being modeled for them at home, at school, and in the community.

This unified approach to working with and on behalf of children and families is something that most communities strive to do. So, why aren't we achieving the outcomes that all children and families deserve? The answer to that will vary from community to community, but we must ask ourselves and one another hard questions.

What else do children and families need and deserve from all of us? What of our work is good and effective and needs greater time and focus? What of our work is well-intentioned but not as fruitful? What changes do we need in policies and practices both within our organizations and agencies and within our state to respond to the opportunities to better partner with families in the service of Wisconsin's children?

And, finally, what will it take over the course of the next 50 years to be able to look back and celebrate? ■

Lilly B. Irvin-Vitela, MCRP is executive director of the Wisconsin Head Start Association.



Head Start in Action

According to the Wisconsin Head Start Association, the state is home to 42 Head Start and 20 Early Head Start programs operated by 44 unique organizations. CESA 11 operates and oversees Head Start in northwest Wisconsin. Programs in Chippewa Falls, Menomonie, Rice Lake and others help prepare hundreds of low-income children and their families to be successful in public school.

"The goal of Head Start is to get children who are living in poverty to a good transition to public school," said Sharon Glessing, Head Start Director at CESA 11.

Research shows that children from low-income households start school with about a six-month skills gap behind their peers. Children from low-income households may also be less likely to have parents with the time, resources and ability to read stories and engage in other developmentally stimulating activities.

Head Start programs try to erase the disadvantage that many children from low-income families face before even starting school. In Head Start programs, children ages birth to three are enrolled in Early Head Start and three to school age in Head Start. The typical Head Start program is three and half hours long and held four days a week. CESA 11 has been able to expand many of its programs to a six-hour day, which benefits the children and families.

"We try to develop school readiness skills," Glessing said. "These include not just the ABCs and colors but also important skills like self-regulation and social skills." □

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