

Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework and School Readiness
Head Start Family Engagement Week 2011 – Introduction

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes: Hello and thank you for joining me for the launch of Family Engagement Week. I'm Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, Director of the Office of Head Start. Many of you know that parent and family engagement in Head Start is a real passion of mine. Head Start has always recognized the critical role that parents and families play in the long-term success of their children. Family engagement is central to our mission of ensuring that all Early Head Start and Head Start children are ready for school. Head Start is committed to forming partnerships with families in order to support and strengthen family well-being and most importantly, support the bonds between parents and their children. These partnerships also provide the means for ongoing conversations between staff and parents around children's progress and this dialogue is critical to positive child outcomes.

At the Office of Head Start, we are working with our National Center on Parent, Family, and Community Engagement to develop materials that will help programs in their efforts to support family well-being, strengthen parent-child relationships, and help children learn and develop. During Family Engagement Week, we'll have a series of online events on the ECLKC that focus on program-family partnerships. Tomorrow through Thursday, there are short video segments that feature staff from the Office of Head Start and local programs, giving examples of parent and family engagement in action.

As the week's events unfold, you'll be hearing more about the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework. The intention of this document is to help programs plan and implement best practices and program requirements around parent and family engagement. On Friday, there will be a national call with Kiersten Beigel from the Office of Head Start and National Center staff. They will answer your questions about the new framework and effective strategies. These videos and a recording of the call will be available on the ECLKC for future viewing. Let me tell you more about the Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework, because it will serve to guide your programs as they implement and achieve family engagement goals.

The framework is grounded in a research-based approach for program change and it has a prenatal through age eight focus. The framework defines parent and family engagement outcomes. The outcomes are family well-being, positive parent-child relationships, families as lifelong educators, families as learners, family engagement in transition, family connections to peers and community, families as advocates and leaders. We recognize that programs may use different strategies to achieve these outcomes, given the uniqueness of each family and each community. The Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework describes our goals for all programs and gives us a common language to talk about them.

Our vision of family engagement is broad and inclusive. We are talking about the caring adults in a child's life and this might mean parents, grandparents, foster parents, other relatives, or guardians. We want to support the relationships between children and their families in an inclusive way and work with

children's caregivers to reinforce the learning that goes on during a typical Head Start or Early Head Start day. The framework really highlights an integrated, system-wide approach to family engagement. Engaging families is not just the job of family service workers. All staff have a role to play: teachers, front office staff, kitchen, transportation staff, managers, and directors. Parent and family engagement must be intentional in program policy and practice and everyone has a role to play. There are many and varied ways to engage families and each family arrives at an Early Head Start or Head Start program with different interests, strengths, and challenges.

Our partnerships begin when programs reach out into their communities and begin the enrollment process. From the very first day that families and programs have contact, we invite ongoing, two-way conversations that acknowledge parents' knowledge about their children and engage them as experts, collaborators, and educators. Parents are equal partners with staff in supporting children's learning and development. As programs define school readiness goals for children, they must dialogue with parents about their expectations and their hopes. What do they want their children to learn in Head Start and what skills and knowledge do they need to be successful in school? Programs ask parents how are we doing, preparing your children for school and how could we be doing it better. This is program-parent partnership at its best. Engaging parents and families also means that programs provide opportunities for parents to emerge as advocates and leaders. They sit on policy boards and actively participate in the decision-making process regarding the overall direction and services of the program. A Head Start grandparent in Boston wrote me about what family engagement had meant to him: "I accomplished things I never dreamed of.

I represented Head Start parents at city meetings and at state and national conferences. Head Start taught me that all parents, no matter how busy, need to be strong advocates for their children and to work with teachers and schools every step of the way, from preschool to kindergarten and up on the education ladder." It is through these and many other opportunities that we engage families on a daily basis across the country in our programs.

We engage families as nurturers, teachers, dreamers, goal setters, leaders, and advocates and, in so doing, we have the opportunity to set in motion the kind of family engagement around children's learning that leads to strong parent-child relationships and, ultimately, to children's ongoing academic and lifetime success. From Alaska to Florida, I've heard parents talk about how Head Start has helped them grow in their relationships with their children. One parent told me this story about how her Head Start experience helped her realize how important she is in her child's life. She said, "I knew that I had to take care of my child, like, the basics of feeding her and keeping her safe, but I never knew that I could be her very best teacher.

The Head Start program really helped me understand that everything I did was about teaching my little girl: how I could read the names on cans and point out the letters and count the steps going up to our apartment. My parents never did this with me. I learned that this was so much fun for us and I realized that doing things with her was a way to show her that I love her and how smart I think she is." Other parents have told me how Head Start has made it possible for them to achieve educational dreams they

never imagined. Head Start connects them with educational resources in their communities. They take courses and get training and as they begin to achieve their own educational dreams, their children do too. As one Head Start parent says, "My four children have watched me go to school and get my degree. That gave them the sense that school is important. What more would a mother want to give her child?" And that's just the legacy we hope all parents can give their children.

School matters and with strong and nurturing relationships between parents and children, children can do well and can go far. This speaks to the power of parent engagement in Head Start. The ripple effect is across the generations. I hope you'll join us tomorrow when we'll be talking with parents about how Head Start has engaged them in their children's learning and promoted their family goals. We hope, of course, that you will incorporate this week's events into your local professional development and parent education activities. Welcome to Family Engagement Week.