

**2011 Leadership Institute:
Shannon Rudisill**

Yvette Sanchez Fuentes: So over the past two years, the Administration for Children and Families has launched a historic partnership between the Office of Head Start and the Office of Child Care. So next, I'm pleased to introduce to you my friend and my colleague, Shannon Rudisill.

Shannon serves as the director of the Office of Child Care. And under her leadership, she has implemented new projects for the Office of Child Care in the areas of infant and toddler care, social-emotional development of young children, and early literacy. In addition, she has built bridges between the ACF early childhood programs and programs of the Department of Education. Prior to that, Shannon served as special assistant to ACF Assistant Secretary Olivia Golden, and worked extensively on the Clinton administration's child care initiative. So, please join me in welcoming Shannon Rudisill.

[Applause]

Shannon Rudisill: Good morning, everyone; and I'd like to thank Yvette and her team for inviting me here to share the stage for just a moment so you can hear about some of the work that we're doing. I mean, the thing is they really know how to bring people together. That's what I always know when I come to a Head Start meeting. So the theme of this conference is about leadership, and I've been thinking about leadership a good deal over the past few months, partially because our colleagues in the great state of Colorado invited me to come and speak to their Buell Leadership Fellow Program back over the summer; and I bet some of our Buell Leadership Fellows are here.

And it was a fantastic opportunity to reflect on leadership in the context of early childhood. And I thought about it for a few weeks, and the thing I really came to as I was considering it and reflecting is I appreciate how horizontal leadership is in our field. And I think the video was a great example of that. You've got parent leaders; you've got leaders in our food services bringing healthier meals to our children; you've got leadership shown by the children themselves in the classroom; and teachers all up and down the spectrum. No matter what the title is – whether you're assistant or lead, it doesn't matter – everybody has an opportunity to show leadership. And certainly, many folks come to Washington thinking that they're coming to see the leaders, and I always think, "Wow, look at these great leaders coming to tell me what to do next!" But, you know...

So I had this whole theory of horizontal leadership, and it's funny though, because my child Wesley – my little guy, he's five. He just started kindergarten. He put this to the test for me: "Do I really believe in this?" Because you always want to see your child out front, right? Even if you have a very egalitarian world view. And so recently I was talking to Wesley, who I've always worried has been dominated by his older brother, who has – sort of dominates the whole family, and I've been worried about it.

And Wesley and I were talking, and Wesley's decided lately – you know, "What are you going to be when you grow up?" It changes all the time. "I want to be a construction worker, Mommy." "Okay, that's great, Wes," you know. And I've been trying to point out more construction sites on the side of the road – easy to do if you live in Washington. And – and then one day he said to me, "So Mommy, I want to be a construction worker, but I don't want to be the boss of the construction workers because that's too big a job, and I kind of like people telling me what to do." [Laughter] So I thought, "Okay, that's fine, you don't have to be the boss of the construction workers."

And then he started kindergarten; and the first day I said, "Who's at your table? Tell me the names of the kids at your table." And I knew one of them from the open house, you know, so I knew I would have at least one or two on my mind. And he said, "Well, Lucas is at my table." And I'm like, "Well, who else did you learn the names of at your table?" "Well, that was it. I just learned the name of Lucas." And I'm thinking, "Gosh," you know, "like seven hours of kindergarten and you only learn one kid's name? Okay." It's overwhelming there, you know. "Okay, so tomorrow when you get home you'll tell me the name of one more kid at your table."

So he came home the next day and he was like, "Well..." I said, "Who – whose name did you learn at your table?" He said, "Uh, just Lucas." And I said, "Well, okay, did you learn anybody else's name?" And he said, "My friend at the yellow table is Brian, my friend at the green table is Sarah, and my friend at the blue table is Royelle." And I realized, like, he has a diplomat's mind. He wasn't worried about the kids at his table; he's establishing diplomatic relations with each of the other tables. So – so, it's like a show of horizontal leadership.

So we've always, you know, in early childhood, looked to Head Start for leadership; and I say that coming as someone who's mainly worked in the child care world. One day I'm going to work in a Head Start job. It's just that I'm waiting for that day to come. I know it's going to happen soon. But coming from the child care world, you know, we always looked to – to Head Start to show us what are the cutting edge practices.

It really is, I think, a lab for all of us who work in early childhood. That was very evident in Baltimore in March. I saw several presentations there that really deepened my own understanding of where we're headed, how we observe children more deeply, and not only observe them more deeply but then individualize our instruction and our practices throughout the day to meet their needs. And I'm really looking forward to similar kinds of sessions at this – at this gathering. I think this cutting edge leadership is never more needed. And then the challenge that we really face, I think – which I'll talk about just a bit before I wrap up – is how we disseminate this better throughout all of the early childhood programs in the country, how Head Start looks both inward to improve itself and outward to be sure that everyone benefits from the great learning that's taking place in Head Start.

We're doing a few things at the Office of Child Care that I thought would be of great interest to you, and I wanted to mention them. First, just this past week, we released new guidance for our state child care agencies around subsidy – child care subsidy policies and practices that would improve continuity of

care. This has been a huge concern for us. [Applause] Thank you. We've heard loud and clear from a number of people, including the Head Start folks who come visit me, that the constant churning off of subsidy creates a real hardship for families. It disrupts the relationship between caregivers and children, especially for babies. I find that heartbreaking.

And so, one of the things we're doing is we're encouraging states to adopt a number of policies to improve continuity. Now, one thing I want to point out – I think a lot of you know this because you've been advocating at the state level – is states choose, within the Block Grant structure, their policies and practices, but we're going to try to put a little thumb on the scale with this guidance to say we'd like you to look more at continuity. We're – we have a number of policies that we've got in this.

I'll just mention some highlights. We're formally encouraging states to adopt 12-month redetermination periods between times when families have to come in and get re-determined. [Applause] We're encouraging states to line up their eligibility periods and processes with Head Start, pre-K, and school-age care programs. [Applause] And we even talk about some practices that some of you have brought to me about things like possibly delegating part of the work around eligibility determination to providers so that they can gather the documentation to get the packages together and facilitate the family's interaction with child care subsidy system.

So, putting this out, we feel, is a step forward, but that's only a baby step because it's really going to be up to our leaders in our states and to all of the folks who work with them on state early childhood advisory councils and in other venues to make those a reality. And I really encourage you to look at the guidance; it's posted on our website at Office of Child Care. And then, you know, stay in dialog with us, and stay in dialog with your state lead agencies because there are reasons they put these policies in place. There really are. They've got long waiting lists; they're worried about the folks on the waiting lists. Where are their children while they're working? You know... And so I say, "Go to them gently and understand their perspective," because I've talked to them on numerous occasions, and they really do have the best interests of children and families at heart, and the challenge is to talk together about how we move forward to – to take care of all the kids.

We also just announced four new technical assistance centers last week. We are one year behind the Head Start program in terms of our new national technical assistance centers, but we're excited that we'll be moving forward. We awarded last week. So first, we're putting forward a National Center on Child Care Quality Improvement, recognizing that both shoring up the health and safety of licensing systems and monitoring systems, and helping people reach beyond those basic standards to really high levels of quality, like our sometimes in-state quality rating improvement systems. It's a great area of growth in the states and we want to help with it, and so we've got a new Center on Child Care Quality Improvement.

One of the centers I'm most excited about is jointly funded with Yvette and the Office of Head Start, and that's our National Center on Child Care Professional Development Systems. That's acknowledging the 1.2 million early childhood educators in the United States and, really, our investment in their career

advancement, not only for better practices in the classroom but also for recognition, compensation. We partnered with Head Start on this one. We think it's going to be a great complement to the National Center on Teaching and Learning. The National Center on Teaching and Learning is focused at lifting up the best classroom practices, and this Center will really look at: What is the system the state has in place? Do people have access to college? Is college really meeting the needs of our learners – our adult learners and our early childhood programs? How can we finally untangle that thorny compensation knot? So, that's what we're going to focus on there.

And finally, the National Center for – nope, next to last – the National Center on Child Care Subsidy and Accountability; not necessarily is relevant for the purposes of folks in the Head Start community, except the reason we named it "Subsidy Innovation" is because we really want to work with states around this concept that we've been talking to them about now for two years. "How do you take a child care subsidy system that was built on helping people get to work and make it child-focused, family friendly, and fair to providers?" And we're really hoping that new TA system is going to help them walk through how they can do that. We also have a National Center on Tribal Child Care Implementation and Innovation, which will partner strongly with the Head Start TA for Tribes.

So, a little bit about what we'd like to see more of from you. We'd like you to pay attention to full-day/full-year services, because our families are working and over half of them are still in poverty. Eighty percent of them are still below 150 percent of poverty, and we're talking about folks who work a lot, work long hours. So we really ask you not only to work on expanding your programs to full-day/full-year, but where you're not able to do that to partner with child care and to really think about, "Where else is my child during the day when they leave my program? Are they with a relative? Can I reach out? Can we do a home visit there?" You know, think about all the places that the kids are.

Also, disseminate and share. I mean, that is the number one thing that I'd like to see happening more around the country, is dissemination and sharing between the Head Start world and the rest of the child care world, especially around family engagement and health promotion, which are two things that you're learning about here. You have strong leadership on and you have an infrastructure for it that we just don't have in Child Care, so we need to learn more about that.

And be the voice of parents; you know? I – I frequently have heard from Head Start parents about the way even that our child care subsidy system is working or not working for them. It's extremely valuable to me to hear that parent perspective. And because of the strong empowerment, organizing framework of Head Start, when I hear about it it's frequently from Head Start parents.

So, in closing, I'll just say it's a new year. It's a new school year; it's a new federal fiscal year. For some of us that matters a lot. And, you know, I also – I married a Jewish man a few years ago, so it's also Rosh Hashanah – it's a new year there. And I have to say, that felt very natural to me because I've always thought September makes more sense as a new year than January. Maybe it's because, you know, you go through all those years of schooling and you get it ingrained into you that September is the beginning of the new year. So, you'll bear with me. I'm a huge – probably the biggest advocate of separation of

church and state, but when I was in Rosh Hashanah services last week a couple of themes came to me that I thought would be a way to close here.

So there were two kind of universal themes. The first was the new year is a time to imagine the world as you wish it would be – to really think about your ideal vision of the world. And it seems to me that's a great thing to do with the beginning of the school year, too, because you see – you're here in October, right? You've already met your kids for the year, and you can envision how you want them to be when they get ready to go to kindergarten or move from Early Head Start to your Head Start classroom – the confident little learner that you want them to be. You can envision the family going off and being ready to sit in the parent-teacher conference and really be a partner with the school. You can envision that.

And then the second theme was to reflect in word on the changes that you're going to need to make and how you can sharpen your skills in the new year to make that vision a reality. And I think that's really what's brought you here. I really saw in the meeting in Baltimore back in March is the goal of the meeting – the reason that Head Start brought you all here is to take a moment to turn inward and to reflect. It's a great time to do it because you now can see where you want these kids and families to be, how you want to facilitate and support them in reaching their goals. And you're here to sharpen your knowledge, your skills, your abilities, to be their facilitator. So, I really encourage you to do that.

I notice that they've even given you an action plan journal. I brought mine up here so that I can take notes during the next presentation. And, you know, I hope that you really make the most of the opportunity that's been afforded to you here this week. It's been my great pleasure to spend some time with you. [Applause]