

***Framework  
for Creating and Strengthening  
Language Policies and Procedures  
In Head Start Programs***

Head Start has had a long tradition of sensitively working with families of diverse cultures and languages. The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, 2007 plainly states that programs *must have a plan* to meet the needs of children and families with limited English proficiency.<sup>1</sup> The Head Start Program Performance Standards are clear that programs are expected to actively find ways to support and expand the home language of the child<sup>2</sup> and stresses that programs of excellence strive to assist children's progress toward acquiring English.<sup>4</sup> These standards further emphasize the importance of fully integrating parents into virtually every element of the Head Start experience,<sup>3</sup> being respectful of their language and culture.<sup>5</sup>

This document is intended to assist programs to meet these standards, to sustain the diversity found within Head Start classrooms, and to give impetus for creating or strengthening a policy that will solidify an agency's commitment to each enrolled child and family and which gives assurance that each child will be given every opportunity possible to succeed in school.

Dual Language: For purposes of this document, the term *dual language learners* refers to children ages birth to five who are learning two (or more) languages at the same time, as well as those learning a second language while continuing to develop their first.<sup>6</sup> Dual language encompasses other terms frequently used, such as Limited English Proficient (LEP), Bilingual, and English Language Learners, etc. but emphasizes in its definition the continued, progressive language and literacy development of the home language as well as the acquisition and growth of English.

**[Head Start agencies should have a] “...*plan* to meet the needs of limited English proficient children and their families, *including procedures* to identify such children, *plans* to provide trained personnel, and *plans* to provide services to assist the children in making progress toward the acquisition of the English language.”**

*Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act  
2007 641 (d)(2)(K) (emphasis added)*

In addition to the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), programs must adhere to other regulations, guidelines and policy interpretations of the Office of Head Start (OHS). Other publications issued or recommended by OHS should be regarded as strong resources, which can give important support as a program commences writing or strengthening their language policy. Once written, this policy will provide programs a

frame of reference to guide them in the way they work with parents, children and the community. In addition it will guide them as they write future policies and written service plans. Programs should examine their circumstances with regards to staffing and personnel, to training and education expectations for staff, and to administrative commitments to quality.

In this Framework for Creating and Strengthening Language Policies and Procedures in Head Start Programs, several assumptions are made. Agreement on these assumptions will be critical to the successful design and implementation of a language policy.

1. Being bilingual is a social, educational and professional asset <sup>7, 8</sup>
2. Actively supporting a child's home language is important to the cohesiveness of the family<sup>9</sup>
3. Supporting the home language is crucial for the advancement of the child's education cognitively and socio-emotionally, and assists in a child's English acquisition <sup>10, 11, 12, 13, 14</sup>
4. Exposing children to two languages at once does not impede their ability to learn<sup>15</sup>
5. Migrant & Seasonal Head Start programs are in a unique position to influence a child's lifelong linguistic knowledge and create the foundation for a generation of children who are literate in two or more languages<sup>16</sup>
6. Language, culture and learning are intertwined and must be equally valued, defended and supported<sup>17, 18</sup>

In the formulation of this language policy, program administrators, staff, board, parents and other important stake holders from the community need to work together in order to assure that the interests of each are considered. The purpose of working together via meetings and other forum should be to reach consensus as to what the overall program language philosophy is, and to express a shared vision and purpose. A good deal of groundwork will need to be laid prior to undertaking the task of constructing a policy. A strong facilitator should be identified, one who will allow all stakeholders the opportunity to share their opinions and express their concerns as the work toward consensus progresses. The facilitator should be diplomatic and committed to completing the project. Prior to meeting, committee members should review scientific studies and other documents, as well as language policies of other Head Start programs to gain a solid understanding of the issues surrounding the writing of a language policy. These documents may be referenced as support for the final policy statement.

The resulting policy must be clear and useful. Programs will presumably follow formats already in place within their agency. To lend assistance, we offer here a few suggested sections to include in the language policy.

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| I. Introduction                                    | V. Human Resource Implications |
| II. Opening Policy Statement                       | VI. Commitment to Culture      |
| III. Parent Partnerships                           | VII. Program Guidance          |
| IV. Commitment to Language-rich Classroom Settings | VIII. Resources                |
|  | IX. Key References             |

*I. Introduction:* It is recommended that the program identify the purpose of the policy and a statement of what they hope to achieve with its implementation. Strength would be added to the policy by including a statement on the agency's philosophy to support diversity, to support parent involvement, and to confirm its stand on the value of retaining/promoting a child's home language as he/she progresses toward English learning. This section may also include the scope of the policy, as well as the agency's commitment to keep it updated by regular review. It may explain how the agency intends to keep the policy on the minds of the classroom staff, the administration, parents, and other staff year after year. It would also be appropriate to cite HSPPS or any other documents that give the policy its power and authority as part of the policy rationale. For example from the Head Start Act, [Head Start agencies should have a] "*plan* to meet the needs of limited English proficient children and their families, *including procedures* to identify such children, *plans* to provide trained personnel, and *plans* to provide services to assist the children in making progress toward the acquisition of the English language." *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act 2007 641 (d)(2)(K) (emphasis added)* Programs will want to examine State and local school district policies currently in existence which may impact how these language policies are written.

*II. Opening Statement:* State the policy as clearly and as succinctly as words allow in a summary. It should be brief and to the point. Consider this a mission statement on the agency's commitment to languages regarding the child, the parents, the staff and the program. Each must be deliberately considered to fully respond to the implications as well as the requirements of the HSPPS and the Head Start Act 2007.

*III. Parent Partnerships:* Affirm the program's commitment to the Head Start family, including how it intends to work with parents to establish frequent and open communication in the language of their choice. Staff must be well trained and sensitive to the child's home language, no matter what it may be, and they should have a workable connection to the child's parents or guardians. An important element to a program's Family Partnership Agreement with the families should be a firm understanding that the continued development of the child's home language is critical to his/her future education. Although to some it may appear paradoxical, research has repeatedly

demonstrated that a solid foundation in the home language is key to the educational success of children. The program may want to include ways in which it will share with parents the information found in the increasingly large research base demonstrating the importance of parental support of the home language as the child's exposure to English increases. In addition, if the classroom teacher, home visitor or family child care provider does not speak the home language, explain how the program will meet the HSPPS for home/school communication and partnerships. This may also be the most appropriate section to discuss the agency's commitment to supporting continued education for the parents in the program. Adult literacy has been a key element of Head Start programs from the beginning, and it is well established that educated parents are better equipped and more likely to support education of their children.

*IV. Commitment to language-rich environments:* Children use language as a tool, and they only use the tools they feel they need to communicate in any given situation. State how language will be used as a tool in the classrooms and how these tools will be used to carry out the language policy by defining both language-rich and literacy-rich environments and experiences. Explain the agency's decision in choosing a language curriculum, materials, and experiences, and how often those decisions will be reviewed to assure an up-to-date, research-based foundation. Discuss overall assessment practices, for what purposes, by whom, where and in which language(s).

Include a statement describing how different age groups will be addressed with regards to first and second language support:

- *Settings for Infants and Toddlers:* (ages birth to 36 months) Describe how the policy will impact infants and toddlers. Discuss how much of the second language will be introduced, and at what months of age. Also, describe the level of home language usage in the centers and how this policy implementation will be consistent throughout the program.
- *Settings for Preschoolers:* (ages 36 months to kindergarten entry). Explain the ages and the amount of first and second language support/instruction the children will receive. Expectations of local kindergartens as well as transition activities that will be used for the children moving into the public education system may also be discussed. Explain also how consistency will be maintained program-wide.

*V. Human Resource Implications:* Describe how newly hired personnel will be affected and how recruitment of staff will change. This section should include new qualifications, staffing plans, recruitment and hiring goals, staff development, and anything more the program would like to add that will clarify and solidify the policy. Programs will want to include declarations regarding their strong commitment to current staff, including training tracks for staff which will assist them to meet increased language

expectations. Perhaps options for staff in transition who do not meet the qualifications could be mentioned in this section. Referencing other areas of the hiring policies will be important, noting how they have changed and what qualifications have now been added.

*VI. Commitment to Culture:* Language and culture are inextricably intertwined. Respect for and recognition of the increasing numbers of cultures represented in the classrooms demonstrates a program's commitment to honoring every family's heritage. Songs, stories, food preparation, ways families communicate etc. are as much culture as they are language. A strong policy statement will help cement this commitment as a promise to the families being served, and will help remind the entire organization that all cultures will be recognized and dignified within the agency.

*VII. Program Guidance:* Programs may choose whether or not to include a "Guidance and References" section to accompany the policy statement. Generally, the purpose of this section is to identify areas that may need further detail to be fully understood. A section with a definition of terms used in the policy is an example. Greater fleshing out the details of the policy, such as adding specifics to language/literacy-rich classrooms may be added in a way that is satisfactory to all the stakeholders in the program. All sections of the policy should be revisited frequently to assure they are in compliance and to make updates as needed. For example during the annual revisions of written service plans, cross referencing to this policy would be expected. In addition programs should identify who is ultimately responsible and who is responsible day to day to assure these policies are followed. Some additional areas to be considered in this section are:

- Methods used to keep staff abreast of research and resources that will help teachers be successful in the classroom
- Identifying ways to work with children and families whose languages differ from predominant languages and cultures found within a program

Include as an appendix sections from the Head Start Program Performance Standards, Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, Head Start Outcomes Framework, Program Instructions, Information Memoranda, Code of Federal Regulations (CFR), and any policy clarifications that have come from the Office of Head Start in this section. It will provide instant access to source material for one of the biggest reasons for the policy – it is mandated either legislatively or by regulation.

*VIII. Resources:* This section is unlimited in its size, since programs are free to select whatever resources they want which they feel will offer support and authority to the language policy. This section should be used to identify resource literature and implementation materials that the program used to formulate the policy and which they may want to use in the future. Additional resources may include references to studies the

program wants to cite, websites that are helpful, teaching aids and classroom ideas, etc. Following are resources that programs may want to include:

- Making a Difference: A Framework for Supporting First and Second Language Development in Preschool Children of Migrant Farm Workers, by AED Center for Early Care and Education (TAC-12) <http://www.ece.aed.org/>
- Bilingual Infant/Toddler Environments: Supporting Language & Learning in our Youngest Children – A guide for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Programs, by AED Center for Early Care and Education (TAC-12) <http://www.ece.aed.org/>
- California Department of Education:
  - Preschool Learning Foundations in English Language Development for Ages 3 and 4 <http://www.cde.ca.gov/sp/cd/re/psfoundations.asp>
  - Preschool English Learners: Principles and Practices to Promote Language, Literacy and Learning – a Resource Guide. Issued by the California Dept of Education. Web link:  
<http://www.cde.ca.gov/re/pn/rc/documents/preschoolel.pdf>
- Office of Head Start official website, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center at <http://www.eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov> Search specifically “English Language Learners and Dual Language Acquisition” – many good references here.
- Dual Language Learning: What Does It Take? Head Start Dual Language Report. HHS/ACF/OHS. 2008. Available in English and Spanish on ECLKC
- Head Start Bulletin. 2005. “Creating a Vision for Supporting English Language Learners” (Issue 78)
- English Language Learners Focus Group Report – Identifying strategies to support English language learners in Head Start and Early Head Start Programs, April 2002 <http://www.ece.aed.org>
- Head Start Bulletin. 2002 “Strategies to Promote Language and Social Development” (Issue 74)
- Screening and Assessment of Young English Language Learners National Education for the Education of Young Children. Summer 2005. NAEYC “Position Statement: Responding to Linguistic and Cultural Diversity – Recommendations for Effective Early Childhood Education.” *Young Children*, 4-12
- One Child, Two Languages by Patton Tabors, Paul S. Brookes Publishing Company, 2008 edition
- Challenging Common Myths About Young English Language Learners, Foundations for Child Development Policy Brief No.8 by Linda Espinosa. *Advancing PK-3*, January 2008

Many of the above works have extensive lists of references, some of which are among the most salient studies in the area of language acquisition.

#### ***IX. Key References:***

1. Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 reference Section 641 (d)(2)(K)
2. Head Start Program Performance Standards, DHHS, ACF, reference sections 1304.21(a)(1)(iii), also 1324.21(a)(3)(i)(E), 1996 also see Guidance for this standard)

3. Ibid. reference section 1304.40(d)(1).
4. Ibid. reference section 1304.40(a)(5)
5. Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 reference Section 657B (d)(1)(B)
6. Genesee, F., Paradis, J., Crago, M. (2004) *Dual Language Development and Disorders: A handbook on bilingualism and second language learning*, pp. 3-8 Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co
7. The Goals 2000: Educate America Goals 2000 (P.L. 103-227) was signed into law on March 31, 1994. These speak to the value of learning a “foreign” language in our schools
8. Petitto, L. A. (2007) *Cortical images of early language and phonetic development using near infrared spectroscopy*. In K. Fischer and A. Ballro (Eds.) *The Educated Brain*. England: Cambridge University Press, pp.213-232. Available online at: <http://www.utsc.utoronto.ca/~petitto/ed-brain-2007.pdf>
9. Chang, F., Crawford, G., Crawford, G., Early, D., Bryant, D., Howes, C., Burchinal, M., Barbarin, O., Clifford, R., Pianta, R., *Spanish-speaking children’s social and language development in pre-kindergarten classrooms*. *Early Education and Development*, Volume 18, Issue 2 June 2007 , pages 243 – 269
10. Ramirez, J., Yuen, S., Ramey, D., Pasta, D. & Billings, D.(1991) “The Ramirez Report” Final Report: *Longitudinal Study of structured English immersion strategy, early-exit and late-exit bilingual education programs for language-minority children (Vol. I & II)* (Prepared for U.S. Department of Education). San Mateo, CA: Aguirre International. No. 300-87-0156
11. Thomas, W., Collier, V., *A study of school effectiveness for Language Minority Student’s Long-Term Academic Achievement*. Center for Research on Education, Diversity and Excellence, project funded by US Dept of Education 2001. available online at: <http://www.usc.edu/dept/education/CMMR/CollierThomasComplete.pdf>
12. Krashen, S. (1999) *Bilingual Education: Arguments for and (Bogus) Arguments Against*. Georgetown University Roundtable on Languages and Linguistics, May 6, 1999 see website <http://ourworld.compuserve.com/homepages/JWCRAWFORD/Krashen3.htm>
13. Garcia-Vasquez, E., Vasques, L.A., Lopez, I.C. & Ward, W. (1997). Language proficiency and academic success: Relationships between proficiency in two languages and achievement among Mexican-American students. *Bilingual Research Journal*, 21, 334-347
14. Lopez, L. (2004), *Cross-Language Transfer of Phonological Skills of Hispanic Head Start Children*. *Bilingual Research Journal* 28: 1 Spring
15. <sup>14</sup>Holowka, S., Brosseau-Lapre, F., Petitto, L. (2002). Semantic and conceptual knowledge underlying bilingual babies’ first signs and words. *Language and Learning* 52:2 pp. 205-262.
16. Stechuk, R., Burns, S. *Making a Difference: A framework for supporting first and second language development in preschool children of Migrant farm workers*. AED Children for Early Care and Education publication, 2005
17. Genesee, F., Paradis, J., Crago, M. (2004) *Dual Language Development and Disorders: A handbook on bilingualism & second language learning*. Paul H. Brookes Publishing Co.
18. National Capital Language Resource Center (NCLRC). (n.d.). *Teaching Culture*. Retrieved September 30, 2008 from <http://www.nclrc.org/essentials/culture/cuindex.htm>

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| For additional assistance in policy development, programs are encouraged to contact their Local TA Specialist |
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