

PRINCIPLE 7:

Culturally relevant programming requires staff who both reflect and are responsive to the community and families served.



Highlights from the Original Multicultural Principles (1991)

- The *Head Start Program Performance Standards* require grantees to hire staff that reflect the racial and ethnic population of the children enrolled in the program.
- Incorporating cultural relevance and support for the continued development of children's home language is the foundation for a good program.

Research Review

The research and information presented in Principle 6 indicates that young children enrolled in classroom settings benefit when at least one adult speaks their home language. In home visiting programs, the ability of the home visitor to speak the language of the family is especially crucial to establishing and developing relationships that support families' and children's development. Regardless of the program option, families need to be able to understand fully what the Head Start program is, the types of services that their children receive, and how they can become involved. Parents need to understand and contribute to the progress their child is making.

Key Implications

The *Head Start Program Performance Standards* reflect Principle 7. The Standards require that:

- effective two-way comprehensive communications between staff and parents are carried out on a regular basis, in a language parents understand;
- staff and program consultants are familiar with the ethnic background and heritage of families;
- meetings and interactions with families are respectful of each family's diversity and cultural and ethnic background; and
- when a majority of the children speak a language other than English, a classroom staff member (or home visitor) must be hired who speaks their language.

These requirements, along with numerous others related to programmatic cultural and linguistic responsiveness, necessitate that staff members be hired who reflect both the children's and the families' linguistic and cultural backgrounds.

For many years, Head Start programs have had a tradition of "growing their own staff" or hiring from within to reflect the community and families in their program. In some instances, a program may train volunteers who have promise and a commitment to the program, but perhaps lack the qualifications to be employed. During the volunteer process, professional development is built in for these individuals while they are on their way to becoming paid substitutes and then on to paid staff with ongoing staff training. Tribal programs have been hiring from within the community and then growing staff for many, many years.

Programs must be able to communicate with families and children in meaningful ways. Programs should ensure that staff and consultants are familiar with the ethnic background of families. This information should be included in written communication and policies for both staff and consultants. In addition, programs should be mindful of how they utilize bilingual capabilities of staff. For example, if a bilingual teacher, hired for the purpose of teaching and interacting with children and their families, is also being asked to interpret and translate on a regular basis, this may not be appropriate. The additional responsibilities of translating and/or interpreting may cause the teacher to burn out. In addition, programs must remember that a person's ability to speak a language does not mean that he or she is competent or comfortable with either interpreting for someone else or translating the written word from one language to another.

Programs should explore how parents best receive information. Programs need to work with parents to determine their literacy level in their home language and avoid assuming that, if a document is translated and sent home, it is automatically read and understood.

VOICES FROM THE HEAD START COMMUNITY

During the summer months, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs are held to a special education standard by the *Head Start Performance Standards* and the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act. Both require that children with suspected disabilities are screened, evaluated, and identified to receive special education services from Part C or Part B agencies within a finite amount of time. The school districts are responsible for implementing the special education programs but are typically closed during the summer months. This, however, does not preclude the responsibility of the programs to secure proper services.

To meet this requirement, one Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program in California made great efforts to contract with state-licensed, bilingual speech-language pathologists who had been migrant children themselves. The program recruited at universities when the students were close to completing their degree program. The students were able to do their practicum in the migrant Head Start program. What better way to find staff who could properly assess and serve their children? The speech pathologists understood the importance of timely evaluations for families on the move, and they understood the migrant family lifestyle. When meeting with families, their conversations were rich with cultural insights, including the relevance of preserving a home language. These professionals could explain the importance of early therapeutic intervention, as well as help the families work through any reluctance they might have to participate in the program. These conversations were perfect preparation for the school years ahead. They also ensured children would receive services as parents learned how to advocate for their children by providing schools with their child's official Individual Education Program when moving to another state.

These state-licensed, bilingual professionals expressed their desire to give back to their heritage, and, at the same time, they made it possible to provide quality services with minimal interruption to Migrant and Seasonal Head Start children. It was a win/win situation for all.

Reflective Questions/Activities

1. How does your program currently gather information from families? Do your information-gathering practices assist staff to better understand the cultural values and beliefs of the families enrolled in your program?
2. How does your program identify and take into consideration parents' interests in culturally specific resources and services?

