

# Nearly 50 Years of Providing Comprehensive Services to Children and Families in Tennessee and America

## Head Start: It's More Than You Thought!

By Paul Frank, Tennessee Head Start Association  
And Janet Coscarelli, Director, Tennessee Head Start State Collaboration Office

Head Start, America's largest federally-funded early childhood program, has been called "one of the most significant and successful initiatives launched during President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty."<sup>1</sup> Head Start provided the opportunity for a preschool program to be started for all eligible 4-year old children.

The program began in 1965 as a two-month-long summer demonstration program serving more than half a million preschool children. A mandate to serve children with disabilities was initiated in 1972, and in subsequent years the doors have been opened wide to children in foster care children as well as children from homeless families. Since it began, the program has served almost 30 million children in all 50 states, as well as the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, the Virgin Islands, and Pacific Insular Areas.

The major criterion for eligibility, however, continues to be family income. That's because low-income is the major factor that puts a family and its children at risk of failure, prenatally up through kindergarten and continuing through life. Head Start programs actively seek out the neediest of the needy to ensure that at least 90% of the enrollees fall at or below the federal poverty level. This year, that's \$23,550 for a family of four.<sup>2</sup> In Tennessee, that means that 27 out of every 100 children- approximately 136,000 children<sup>3</sup> - - are eligible for Head Start services. However, since Head Start in Tennessee is only funded to serve a little more than 16,000 children<sup>4</sup>, 120,000 children who might otherwise qualify for Head Start services cannot get Head Start. They seek services in other environments, including child care centers or child care home setting, school settings, or pre-school programs.



## So... What Does Head Start Do, Exactly?

Tennessee's Head Start program help high-risk children from low-income families by providing comprehensive services that link high-quality early childhood education with families strengthened by parent education and ties to community services. Typically, Head Start classrooms are smaller than state regulations require, usually fewer than 17 children. In addition, all Head Start classrooms operate under federal "performance standards" that are significantly stricter than those for child care facilities, or for schools. Most Head Start programs provide transportation to and from the classroom in an effort to reach children at greater risk.

Head Start programs in Tennessee served over 20,000 children annually in recent years, with a small expansion last year. Nearly a thousand classrooms are available all across the state, and programs must keep all the funded slots filled throughout the school year (or year round if funded to operate all twelve months of the year). Most programs partner with local school systems for implementation of the Volunteer Pre-K Program in select communities. As it turns out, Head Start programs are the most frequent partners for school systems that implement the community-based theme of the state-run PreK program.

Frequently, Head Start programs also provide additional services and supervision, always including a focus on family and health services. Head Start programs provide and/or coordinate medical, dental, nutritional, and mental

health services for all enrolled children. The overwhelming majority of Head Start children are enrolled in TNCare and EPSDT.

Head Start programs encourage professional development for all staff. Federal law will soon require that all Head Start teachers hold a bachelor's degree in early childhood education. Head Start early childhood classrooms aides will need a CDA credential, or a two year associate degree in early childhood education.

Head Start programs promote self-sufficiency and independence in Head Start parents by helping them get – and then hold onto – responsible jobs. Often, their first jobs are in Head Start itself, a unique “bootstrapping” effect by which more than 25% of Head Start employees come from the ranks of Head Start or Early Head Start parents.

Head Start programs' classrooms consistently score at the 3-STAR level on the Tennessee Department of Human Services evaluation using the Early Childhood Environmental Rating Scale (ECERS) and the Infant Toddler Environmental Rating Scale (ITERS).

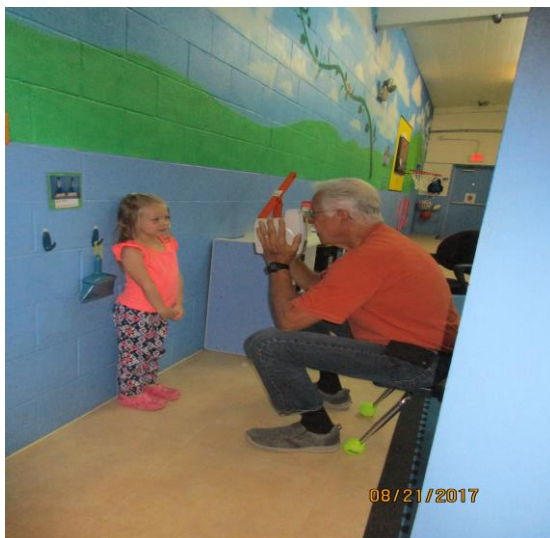
Head Start children receive a high-quality **education** that carries them on to success into kindergarten. They also receive an array of services designed to meet the critical needs of Tennessee's highest-risk children centered on health services, nutrition, social services and parent involvement.

Head Start children receive multiple **health screening** to detect hearing and vision problems, to monitor height and weight, and to detect obesity; find and treat dental problems; help alleviate speech and language problems; and to develop plans that address disabilities.

Head Start children learn about **nutrition** in the form of healthy meals and snacks eaten together with their teachers. Head Start children learn to talk and interact gracefully with each other at tables set with plates, cups, silverware and napkins, eating a sit down meal that they serve to each other.

Head Start children and their families receive **social services** in which the Head Start staff builds meaningful relationships with each child and with each family to help them become stronger and more self-sufficient. Unique to Head Start is the 'family goal planning' service which helps families tap all the resources of government and private agencies to help the families get to where they dream of being.

Head Start teachers and family workers work one-on-one directly with **parents**, supporting them with everything from adult education to emergency food and clothing to job counseling – and making sure that each parent knows he or she is their child's best teacher.



In addition, families in many programs also have access to **Early Head Start** services, aimed at pregnant mothers, infants and toddlers. Early Head Start offers pre-natal and post-natal service until the child is three years old and can enter Head Start, staying there until moving on to public kindergarten after their fifth birthday.

While striving to reach more children with Head Start services, the national program has also been known for its forward-looking stance in early childhood education. Since its launch in 1965 (as “Project Head Start”), the program has been a continuous demonstration project that has been instrumental in leading the development of best practices in early childhood education. “One of Head Start's great strengths,” noted Janet Coscarelli, the director of the Head Start State Collaboration Office in Nashville, “is its ability to embrace change.” Coscarelli and the Collaboration

Office work to create and foster “significant, statewide partnerships between Head Start and the state. Education and especially early childhood education – is faced with meeting increasingly complex, intertwined, and difficult challenges,” Coscarelli noted. “Head Start is constantly changing. We are never the same,” she said. “Whenever something has changed in our society – the advent of computers, the launch of Sesame Street, the need for better assessments, the development of research-based curricula – whatever it’s been, Head Start has been right there, right at the forefront.” From the development of CDA credential to the promotion of good oral health through findings children’s dental homes, to the development of Early Head Start and its emphasis on stimulating and nurturing brain development in the very young.... “throughout all of this,” Coscarelli said, “we have been there, and we’ll continue to be there.”

Working hand – in- hand with Coscarelli is Judy Graham, the director of a Tennessee Head Start program as well as the president of the Tennessee Head Start Association (THSA). The Association includes representatives of every Head Start program in the state. Graham has also served as president of the Region IV Head Start Association (RIVHSA). From offices in Atlanta, RIVHSA serves the states of Alabama, Florida, Georgia, Kentucky, Mississippi, North Carolina, South Carolina, and Tennessee. In addition to working on national Head Start advocacy issues, RIVHSA also hosts three regional conferences as well as other training and technical assistance activities.



<sup>1</sup> <http://epx.sagepub.com/content/25/1/36>

<sup>2</sup> <http://aspe.hhs.gov/poverty/11poverty.shtml>

<sup>3</sup> [http://www.nccp.org/profile/TN\\_profile\\_16.html](http://www.nccp.org/profile/TN_profile_16.html)

<sup>4</sup> [http://www.nccp.org/profile/TN\\_profile\\_7.html](http://www.nccp.org/profile/TN_profile_7.html)