

Giving Parents True Power

by Emmalie Dropkin

It is an exciting time for our country as the Obama Administration encourages and provides incentives for Early Head Start and child care to forge new partnerships and serve additional vulnerable children and families in their communities. With this increased attention, it is important to shed light on aspects of our work that are not commonly understood, for example, the role of the Policy Council as a central element of quality in Head Start/Early Head Start.

Parents enrolling their children in Early Head Start or Head Start are often young, or raising their children alone; often they haven't completed their own education; nearly all are working to meet their families' needs while overcoming the many obstacles of poverty. For them, the idea that their right as a parent is to be a teacher and an advocate is transformative. Research and experience have



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shown that parental involvement, both at home and in the classroom, make a difference for children. Head Start works to imbue every interaction with parents with this idea, and reinforces it by giving parents true power.

Since the founding of Head Start, parent engagement has been a key component, and parents' right to make decisions about their children's education is the bedrock of every program. Every Head Start or Early Head Start center has a Parent Committee; every delegate agency has a Policy Committee; and every grantee has a Policy Council. The Policy Committees and Councils must be made up of at least 51% parents, and these bodies vote on decisions about staffing, curriculum, program bylaws, budgets, partnerships, and more. As Shavon Collier, Policy Council President for the Edward C. Mazique Parent Child Center, Inc. Head Start program in Washington, DC, puts it, "You give the parents an opportunity to have a voice and decide what's best for their child."

Shavon has five children, the youngest of whom is currently a Head Start student, and she credits her involvement with Head Start with changing her participation in her children's education. She originally heard about Policy

Council from another Head Start parent. When she attended her first Parent Committee meeting, she volunteered and was elected to Policy Council. Today she's been part of the Policy Council for three years, which is the limit for a parent's term, but her commitment to being a teacher and advocate for her children won't end when she leaves. Shavon's two older children who attended Head Start are now in elementary school and junior high — and she's involved with PTA in their schools. Both are doing well, and have been on the honor roll ever since they left Head Start.

What Shavon has gained from the experience of Policy Council goes beyond the immediate impact on her own children; she's become a leader in this community of parents committed to ensuring the success of the program for all of their children. As she says, "Without Policy Council, you have no Head Start, because we are the ones who make the decisions."

One pamphlet on the 'brand-new Head Start program' from the late 1960s expresses the program's early commitment to parents: "Parents should be encouraged to be part of any Head Start project's activities, both for their and their children's benefit. It is essential to

capitalize on and tap the reservoirs of love and hope, which most of them have for their children." Even today, parents in poverty may face prejudice when seeking help. The right to be respected, to have a parent's love and hope for their child honored, has always been at the core of Head Start and must be integral to any program that seeks to make real connections and support positive change with poor families. Being a high-quality program must include creating a safe place that welcomes and engages both children and their parents in the beginning of a child's learning journey.

In 1970, regulations formally made Policy Councils a component of the nascent Head Start program. Since then these groups have engaged millions of parents and have launched many into lifelong advocacy and careers in early childhood education. Tameka Henry, President of the Policy Council for Acelero Learning Clark County in Nevada, is another parent who may leave Head Start but will never stop advocating for its mission. As she tells it, involving parents in governance plays a critical role in empowering them to take action in their children's lives and their own. "Just because you're low income doesn't mean

Key Features of Head Start Parent Engagement

- Parents are children's first and most important teachers.
- Parents have the right to be treated respectfully, as critical partners in their children's learning.
- Parents have the right to be involved in all decisions made with regard to their children.
- Parents have the right to advocate for their children and for their communities.

your goals and values aren't important," she says, explaining that working as an equal with program staff helps parents feel comfortable reaching out for help to achieve personal goals as well.

Every year, family service workers help parents set and reach goals based on their families' needs, from housing to education to energy assistance. Some staff are former Head Start parents them-

selves, and all of them are committed to the idea that all parents have the right to be treated with respect and to be partners in the education of their children.

For some parents, Head Start involvement also awakens them to their political rights and inspires them as advocates. Because of their involvement with Policy Council, Shavon and Tameka and many others have received training within their programs and at the state and national levels. After the Head Start Parent Conference in 2012, Tameka described, "You feel like you're bigger than your city or county or state. Policy Councils are national. You have something in common with a million other families." That enthusiasm to be part of the bigger picture for early childhood education has driven her, as it has so many other parents, both at the conference and on Policy Councils nationwide. This year Tameka is working closely with a member of her state legislature on legislation for kindergarten and is well versed on the issues of funding, regulation, and governance for early learning programs in her state. Today she's an advocate not only for her own children, but the other children in her community.

If one role of Early Head Start and Head Start is to prepare children for school, another is to prepare their families. Many of the challenges facing low-income families continue for years, long beyond a child's time in Head Start. However, by helping parents take control of their children's education, the program sets a course for a lifetime of positive outcomes. In return, parents contribute enormously to the mission, the direction, and the future of Head Start programs. Without them, there would *be* no Head Start at all.



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