

Continuous Improvement through Cooperation

Head Start Program Data Hubs in Minnesota and Illinois

by Emmalie Dropkin



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At a time when accountability is the buzzword in nearly every field, early childhood programs have a responsibility not only to funding sources and the schools young children will enter, but to children and families themselves. Beyond assurances that children are in safe learning environments and are making progress, what should that accountability look like?

In Head Start, there has been a long history of tracking children's individual progress and looking at the patterns of children's development between classrooms and across demographic groups; however, having the staff and technological capacity to fully interpret and use data can be a barrier for many organizations. Fortunately, many of those challenges can be overcome through collaboration and sharing resources — and two Head Start

state associations are among the leaders in developing these types of cooperative systems.

In 2006, through the leadership of the Minnesota Head Start Association (MHSA), Head Start programs in Minnesota came together to share practices and collaborate in their interpretation and application of data. Their work looked both at outputs (e.g. number of children enrolled or days attended) and outcomes (e.g. how children progressed in various domains of development). Even while programs were still working primarily with their own data, this cross-agency learning helped build consistency of practices and provided peer learning.

In 2010, repeated requests for data from state and national policymakers and the desire to conduct common analysis (instead of two dozen variations) spurred MHSA to take the next step and begin to aggregate data across programs, through joint licenses for their most common assessment tools and with the support of the University of Minnesota Human Capital Research Collaborative (HCRC). The analysis done by HCRC helped programs better understand three things:

- the program factors that predicted child outcomes.

Gayle Kelly, Executive Director of the Minnesota Head Start Association, says that as important as the results of this project have been for advocacy and for demonstrating the effects Head Start has for children, "This work really builds quality because as programs use data and compare their work to each other, they can better individualize and inform instruction to be sure all children get what they need."

That focus on quality extends to looking at the features of programs that relate to children's learning and development, like teacher credentials or skills, which, in turn, allow all programs to put their energy and resources into what will truly move the needle for children. Since 2010 MHSA has released three annual summaries of their data work, highlighting gains for Head Start as a whole, as well as programs' effects with the most vulnerable children in the state. (Reports are accessible at www.mnheadstart.org/outcomes.html.)

The Illinois Head Start Association (IHSA) was inspired — both by the work of their neighboring Minnesota association and by the rapid growth of early childhood infrastructure in Illinois as a



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NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

- the quality of their data.
- the progress of their four-year-old children.

result of a Race to the Top–Early Learning Challenge (RTT-ELC) grant — to begin a similar project in 2013. The Illinois effort focuses more broadly on children from birth to age five in Early Head Start and Head Start and has used the RTT-ELC resources to establish a data cooperative with support from the University of Illinois Center for Prevention Research and Development. Now Head Start programs can share their data while retaining ownership and preserving the privacy of that data.

IHSA has also established quality enrichment circles in regions within the state to build on an idea of communities of practice borrowed from Minnesota; these circles allow programs to share local data practices and dig into important conversations about what is most important to share and aggregate to further all of their work. As Lauri Morrison-Frichtl, Executive Director of the Illinois Head Start Association, puts it, “The powerful work has come with people coming together talking about it. We never dreamed how far this would come so quickly. It’s really a cooperative effort.” That collaboration has allowed programs to learn tremendously from their shared work and they’re now moving forward with thoughtful conversations about how to integrate with other state data systems. (Find IHSA’s Guiding Principles for data and more about their work at <http://ilheadstart.org>.)

The national call to justify investments in early childhood by focusing on children’s outcomes is steadily growing. The recently proposed new standards for Head Start have new requirements that programs use data both internally for Continuous Quality Improvement and externally with State Longitudinal Data Systems in order to better understand the impacts of Head Start over time. Whether the sharing of data occurs within these formal state systems or through the informal collaboration of programs, there are critical opportunities to learn from data

Questions that Sharing Data Across Programs Can Help Answer

- What does our program do better than anyone else? How can we share those strengths?
- What progress can be demonstrated over the course of a year or from year to year?
- Where are our children showing smaller or slower gains than children in other programs? What can we learn from those programs?
- Are we all really talking about the same concepts and measuring in the same way?
- How are children in our region or state doing on the whole? What state and federal investments can we advocate for with this information?
- How do community demographics vary and how are different programs working with the most vulnerable children?
- What factors influence outcomes and how can all programs cultivate those factors?

across programs in order to work more effectively every day to support the learning and growth of young children. As early childhood communities across the country deepen their involvement with state data conversations, Minnesota and Illinois offer lessons for where to start and how much programs can benefit from collaboration.

