

# Developing a Village

## The Campagna Center Head Start • Alexandria, Virginia

by Emmalie Dropkin

It is the responsibility of every early childhood program director to support the development of staff, to ensure that teachers and caregivers have the skills and understanding they need to provide the highest quality of services to children. For Head Start directors, this same responsibility is intensified by federal mandates and a mission statement that goes beyond the needs of the child to encompass the development of entire families. Across the country, more than 1,800 Head Start and Early Head Start grantees have spent the past 46 years evolving local practices for encouraging the professional advancement of teachers, staff, volunteers, and parents based on the needs and resources of their communities. In Alexandria, Virginia, the Campagna Center is one such example of innovation and success.

The Campagna Center is a non-profit organization that has been serving Alexandria since 1945. In the 1960s, during the early years of Head Start, Campagna became one of the first grantees. Today it runs Alexandria Head Start, a NAEYC accredited program serving 270 preschool students, and Early Head Start, which serves an additional 60 infants and toddlers in center-based, family child care, and home-based settings. The Early Head Start

program also works with expectant mothers. In addition to child care and early education, these programs meet the other needs that Head Start and Early Head Start are designed to address: they provide nutritional meals, health screenings, special services for children with disabilities, and family support services for employment, housing, and more.

### Professional Development

While research on the impact of teachers' educational credentials for children's learning has been mixed, the 2007 reauthorization of the Head Start Act called for at least 50% of Head Start teachers to have Bachelor's degrees by 2013, and programs are working to meet that goal. Their ability to do so varies for a number of reasons: in rural areas, the lack of local institutions for higher learning makes it difficult to get staff to the classrooms that would provide their degrees; in both rural and urban settings, higher-paying K-12 teaching jobs often lure Head Start teachers once they've completed their BA degrees.

But in spite of these and other obstacles, the Campagna Center has set an even higher goal for itself: the Alexandria Head Start program is working toward

having 100% of teachers with Bachelor's degrees. Currently, all teachers have Associate's degrees, and the program has already met the 50% mark for Bachelor's set out in the law. The remaining teachers are aware of the increasing qualification requirements and many are working toward higher degrees. These requirements are possible because of Campagna's long-standing relationship with its community. Senior Director of Early Childhood Programs and Family Services for the Campagna Center, Joy Trejo, took time to describe the changes underway and credited community partners with helping to make this increase in qualifications possible by being willing to invest in higher salaries to maintain more educated staff. It is unquestionably more expensive to have a staff made up entirely of teachers with BAs, but Campagna Center partners have recognized that that expense is valuable to the children in their area and to the future of their community, and they're willing to invest.

For their part, the Campagna Center provides in-house training to support the on-going development of all teachers. Their professional development team includes two curriculum specialists who help to mentor teachers and a lead Family Service Provider who both sup-



ports families and focuses on quality and outcomes in the classroom, which includes training staff.

Just as teachers work to encourage children's learning every day, the Campagna Center recognizes that adults are capable of constant learning and nurtures their growth in order to provide even higher quality services to students.

### Workforce Development

Since the early years of their Head Start grant, the Campagna Center has built a strong partnership with the Alexandria City Public Schools. Today that partnership is the basis for a large number of Head Start sites within ACPS facilities; special education teachers who collaborate with Head Start staff to serve children's needs; and shared resources for preschool mental health treatment, tracking, and teacher training. These

contributions from the school system count toward the 'in-kind' donations that Alexandria Head Start, like all Head Start programs, is required to obtain. But one effort of the Campagna Center and the Alexandria City Public Schools goes even farther, connecting the dots not only from early childhood education to K-12 education, but from there to the early childhood workforce.

T. C. Williams High School — of *Remember the Titans* fame — is home to Tiny Titans Child Development Center, a site for Campagna's Alexandria Head Start and Early Head Start programs. The Tiny Titans facility was incorporated into the high school's renovation several years ago, inspired by a decades-old program that trained students in T. C. Williams' Family and Consumer Sciences career and technical education program to pursue their Child Development Associate (CDA) credential. For

years the high school students in the program had completed training hours in the Alexandria Head Start programs; those students who earned their CDA were eligible to work as assistants for Head Start, and many went on to become teachers.

The renovation offered an opportunity to strengthen the relationship between T. C. Williams and Head Start, and so Tiny Titans was created. Now high school students in Early Childhood Education courses are able to watch through a two-way mirror as Head Start teaching staff interact with students. When they're ready, they can practice working with the children and give each other feedback.

While the CDA alone is not enough to become a Head Start teacher now that Bachelor's degrees are required, the high school students graduate with a

head start of their own on career and educational opportunities. During a recent visit from Jacqueline Jones, Senior Advisor on Early Learning to Secretary of Education Arne Duncan, one high school senior proudly proclaimed that her goal was to run three child care centers of her own. A number of juniors chimed in that they wanted to work with young children when they graduated. Given the difficulty of both preparing high school students for careers and finding quality early childhood education staff, the partnership between Campagna and ACPS is a success story for both organizations.

## Parent Development

One of the fundamental missions of Head Start is to help children and families gain education and move toward self-sufficiency. To that end, the Campagna Center and thousands of

other Head Start grantees across the country make efforts to include parents in every aspect of program function — from volunteering in classrooms to decision making on Policy Councils. For many parents, the opportunities they are given to see their children's development and work as advocates for their children inspire them to greater involvement with the program.

For the Campagna Center, there are many potential obstacles to parent volunteerism. Among their Alexandria programs Joy Trejo estimates that students and parents speak upwards of 50 dialects and languages — the most common are English, Spanish, Arabic, Urdu, Tsee, and Amharic. With many languages come many cultural backgrounds, and diverse expectations of what schools can and should be. Nonetheless, staff make an effort to be culturally responsive, use Language Line for

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instant translation services, and translate documents into four or five languages on a regular basis. And to support the children, they encourage parents to participate in the education process as much as possible. Quite a number of parents pursue coursework and eventually careers in early

childhood education as a result of the supportive training they get as volunteers and the encouragement from program staff.

One such effort has developed in the past few years out of the Campagna Center's Early Head Start socialization program. All Early Head Starts are required to provide two socialization sessions per month for their families, but Campagna has chosen to go far beyond that. Instead they have partnered with local churches and other community groups to offer scheduled playgroups at various times of day throughout the week at four locations that are along bus lines and in targeted neighborhoods. The socialization sessions are open not only to Early Head Start families, but to all families in the area with young children. In addition to promoting awareness of Early Head Start in the community, the socialization groups enhance the local support system for Early Head Start families.

To expand this effort, Campagna Center staff began training parents as volunteer facilitators. Once parents were trained, they could run socialization sessions alongside Early Head Start coordinators or home-visitors, allowing the program to spread its employed staff further and reach more children. Once parents began working with the Campagna Center, they also had the chance to be trained as substitute teachers, which qualifies them to work both in their children's Head Start classrooms and in the school system. For many families this window of opportunity to gain meaningful employment and begin a career in education changes their trajectory for years to come, long after their children have moved on from Early Head Start or Head Start.

## Community Development

While the Campagna Center is an outstanding example of Head Start at its

best and provides opportunities for teaching staff, the developing workforce, and parents that all early childhood programs can aspire to, it is not unique. Head Start programs across the country have developed innovative ways to build their communities based on local needs and resources. Their successes would not have been possible without those communities; this is clear from the Campagna story. From partnership with local stakeholders willing to invest in teacher quality, to collaboration with the public school system, to churches and other groups willing to offer space and support for socialization sessions, the Campagna Center's achievements arise out of an extensive network within the community. The relationships they've built grow in large part because it is so clear how the Campagna Center gives back to that community. Not only do four year olds leave Alexandria Head Start ready for school and for life, but high school students, parents, and teachers are encouraged to develop their careers and their futures.

In describing the breadth and quality of services the Campagna Center offers to students, Joy Trejo talks about how the many people involved make up 'the village' that opens a window of opportunity for Head Start children. The Campagna Center's power is that it doesn't just depend on the village, it develops that, too.



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