



The Collaborative Forums Final Report December 2007

*Building relationships one community at a time: conversations with Head Start,
Pre-K and Child Care*

Introduction

Early childhood in Virginia is facing an unprecedented time and it is vital that the Head Start, Pre-K and Child Care communities seek opportunities to collaborate on important work that will benefit and improve services to children and families across the Commonwealth.

In 2006, the Head Start Collaboration Office (HSSCO), the Department of Education (DOE), and the ACF Regional Office met on several occasions to discuss collaboration strategies. Single point of entry (joint registration) and blended classrooms were successful strategies identified by many localities as instrumental in their success.

As a result of these discussions, a memo co-signed by the Superintendent of Public Instruction at DOE and the Commissioner of the Department of Social Services affirmed and promoted both strategies as important first steps toward successful collaboration. This success was heightened by an offering from the Regional Office to fund Head Start programs willing to form the partnerships necessary to model the single point of entry recruitment.

The purpose of the single point of entry grants was to create or strengthen local partnerships that provide a coordinated, cost-efficient means for parents to access a comprehensive system of early care and education.

The objectives of the grants were to:

- Establish or strengthen the relationship between local Head Start programs and the Virginia Pre-school Initiative (VPI);
- Establish collaborative agreements that recognize the strengths of each partner, and support the weaknesses of their colleagues for the purpose of establishing better opportunities to reach and serve more children;
- Establish a joint recruitment process and service delivery system that utilizes all available resources and serves as many children as possible; and

- Use research-based strategies to increase capacity and improve quality of Head Start and VPI programs.

Programs receiving the Single Point of Entry grants were:

- Culpeper Human Service Head Start
- Fredericksburg Regional Head Start
- Hanover County Public Schools Head Start
- Henrico County Public Schools Head Start
- Clinch Valley Community Action
- People, Incorporated of Southwest Virginia
- Prince William County Schools Head Start
- Richmond Public Schools Head Start
- Shenandoah Valley Consortium for Head Start
- STOP Organization for Head Start
- TAP Head Start, Roanoke

In January 2007, HSSCO was invited to participate in a national meeting held in Washington, D.C. to discuss ways to work together in state teams to advance early childhood systems development. Representatives were also invited from Department of Education, Virginia Head Start Association (VAHSA) and Child Care and Development at Department of Social Services. Grant funding was offered to support these efforts.

It was determined that the most beneficial use of the funding was to continue the discussions held at the January meeting, yet in local settings. HSSCO and VAHSA partnered together to host four collaborative forums held across the Commonwealth from March through November, 2007. Forums were held at the following locations: Richmond, Floyd, Fredericksburg and Verona. A total of 111 persons participated. Representatives were present from Head Start, VPI, Title I, and Child Care programs.

The Forums were held, in part, to highlight the work and the progress made as well as to share lessons learned by the grantees that had received the single point of entry grants.

The objective was to bring Head Start, Child Care and Pre-K representatives together to discuss key issues relative to collaboration, identify challenges to collaboration, develop strategies to address the challenges, and ultimately, build positive working relationships.

This report summarizes discussions from the forums and offers recommendations on continuing to building partnerships to better serve young children.

Collaboration in Virginia

The following definition of collaboration was used during the Forums to focus the discussion on collaboration:

Collaboration is the most intense level of working together. It is a structure and a process for creating change. A collaborative effort is driven by partners who agree to share information, activities, resources, influence, power, and decision-making authority to achieve common goals—goals that no single partner or program could achieve by acting alone.

The format for the Forums was as follows:

- Identification of the challenges and barriers to collaboration by participants working in small groups and a reporting out of those challenges and barriers.
- Representatives from those programs receiving single point of entry grants sharing the nature of their collaborative effort (collaborating with whom), what had worked well, what had been frustrating and/or challenging to manage in their collaborative efforts and how they had dealt with the frustrations and challenges, and lessons learned.
- Participants working in small groups, choosing a challenge or barrier and identifying strategies to address it followed by a reporting out of their discussion.
- The last activity involved participants writing on an index card a “learning/new insight” from the session and one “thing” they would do upon return to their program to enhance their collaborative efforts with others serving 3-4 year-old children.

Identified Best Practices – Panelists’ Discussion

The following best practices were shared by panelists from programs who had received a single point of entry grant:

Southeast

- There has to be buy-in by top-level administrators of all the cooperating programs.
- Building relationships between all the cooperating programs takes lots of time and patience and it needs to occur at all levels of the organizations (teachers, supervisors, administrators)
- There needs to be a vision for the collaborative effort that is focused on “what’s good for the child.”

- Marketing for registration has to be focused on “pre-school” education with representatives from all the cooperating programs involved in registration and screening.
- Teachers from the cooperating programs need to be involved in activities that help them to better understand programs other than their own and to form relationships with other teachers.
- Administrators in school buildings need to see the programs as one (blended classrooms) with all programs treated as one program.

Southwest

- Someone has to be designated as the point person to pull the collaborative effort together and keep it together.
- All programs have to have the same objective: preparing children for success in school and believing every child needs to have a pre-school education.
- There needs to be activities that bring the teachers together from the various programs so they can better understand the curricula, activities, and facility needs of each.
- Exploring each other’s curriculum allows opportunities for joint programming and joint training of all teachers.
- The child selection process has to be neutral. A person was hired by Head Start and the public schools to accept applications and manage the screening process with the teachers. A central phone number for recruitment was effective in that parents did not call an individual program to register.
- Communication among all involved is the key to good relationships.

Northeast

- School administrators look at the programs as one program with the program operating on the Head Start model.
- The recruitment and screening process is one process. A Post Office Box is used to receive applications, with partners reviewing the applications together.
- Program is focused on what is best for child with each program providing services to address the child’s needs, i.e., public schools providing special education services and Head Start providing case management that allows VPI children to get comprehensive services.
- All programs speak the same language so the community sees the programs as one program.
- Use of an outside facilitator to get the cooperating partners through the “messy” parts of creating the collaborative effort was important in moving decision-making forward.
- Making sure that not all 3-year-olds are in one program and 4-year-olds are in another program.

Northwest

- Primary focus has to be placed on what is best for the child and family and the consistency and quality of programs.
 - Marketing the programs as pre-education or pre-school program has helped the community to see the effort as one program. In addition, all marketing efforts including printed materials, enabled parents to see what is available for their child.
 - Marketing materials contained no dates so they could be used for multi-year recruitment efforts.
 - All programs join together for a kick-off event/community evening for families to promote the program and encourage registration.
 - Joint training is provided to all providers of services regardless of funding source.
 - Screening of children is done prior to the start of the school year so services start prior to the start of the school year.
 - The application form (one form) for pre-school education includes only what is required by state and federal regulations, not what is “nice to know.”
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Challenges and Barriers

Challenges

The following challenges were identified at the forums:

- Philosophies differ—focus on needs of the kids versus training of teachers; holistic approach for children versus academic approach
- Staff qualifications/expectations vary among programs
- Curricula among programs vary
- State and federal regulations vary among programs, i.e., eligibility requirements, licensing requirements
- Wage differentials for teachers in various programs; benefits vary among programs—particular challenge when one partner (education) give raises and others can’t afford to do the same. Loss of teachers from one program to another for higher wages.
- Linking/bringing-in child care to the collaborative effort with Head Start/VPI, other public school programs (Calendars, hours of operation, scheduling of services differ)
- Co-mingling funds, determining what funds from which programs will fund what services
- Development of a vision that binds all programs together
- Communication among all involved
- Competition for 4-year-olds/enrollment issues among programs

- Difficulty in maintaining consistent services for children and families across programs
- Identifying and keeping people “at the table” to resolve differences/conflicts
- Transportation of children in large geographic service areas
- Parent involvement and being comfortable with movement to “one” program/blended classrooms
- Children with disabilities and serving their needs
- Volume of applications when program is multi-jurisdictional
- Serving children that are on a waiting list; how do we continue to have space for all eligible children when pre-school is not compulsory?
- Territorial behaviors; not wanting to compromise on curriculum, assessments
- Lack of funding to serve all eligible children (lack of funding options, allocations, parameters)
- Determining who is in charge in blended classrooms
- Working with families from different cultures
- Getting past “my program syndrome” and “us versus them”
- Naysayers

Barriers

The following barriers were identified at the forums:

- Lack of understanding of what true collaboration means, lack of commitment to the concept of collaboration/those (in key positions) who don’t see a benefit to collaboration
- Difficulty in making collaboration work (the time commitment, the willingness to explore/resolve differences in philosophies/programs)
- Attitudes of teachers, supervisors/administrators/fear of change/resistance to change/misconceptions of programs
- Not enough funds/facilities (classroom and playground space) to serve identified children
- No written format provided for blending funding; not being able to get written direction from funding sources (outside of jurisdictions) on what can and can not be done when using two separate funding streams
- Fiscal parity issues among programs, the sharing of resources among programs, public schools drawing teachers away from Head Start because they can pay the teachers a higher wage
- Technical compatibility, i.e., computers

Recommendations for improved Collaboration

Strategies to overcome some of the identified challenges and barriers

At the forums, not all barriers and challenges were addressed. Each small group was asked to pick one challenge or barrier and develop strategies to address it. More than one group worked on some challenges/barriers. What follows is the work on the challenges/barriers that were addressed. There is some redundancy among the areas listed below.

- Issue: Not enough funding; neither Head Start or VPI can fully fund their required program services; children on waiting lists in some areas
 - Tap into Title I funds
 - Apply for grants; solicit the services of a grant writer or increase the grant writing skills of current staff
 - Merge funding streams (within guidelines)
 - Collaborate with other funding sources to increase revenues, e.g., businesses, foundations
 - Collaborate with other agencies to provide services
 - Advocate for funds, elimination of the match with decision-makers/legislators
 - Recruit-enlist professional associations/advocacy groups to tell the story to decision-makers/legislators
 - Develop a marketing/public relations effort that involves the education of parents
 - Enlist the services of universities, colleges, and VOICES to assist with the education of the community and business community

- Issue: Communication; establish relationships that lead to better communication/relationships between programs
 - Identify partners and others to whom communication information flow is critical
 - Set up regularly-scheduled meetings and other forms of communication using the appropriate methods for various players (stakeholders, parents). Provide written communication to those that can not attend meetings; do minutes/summaries of all meetings so there is a written record of the discussion/decisions made.
 - Clarify mission, goals, program dynamics of respective programs, including 1) standards, 2) funding, 3) scope, 4) reporting, 5) staffing, 6) requirements, 7) limitations, and 9) target populations
 - Develop a common vision for childhood education within the collaborative
 - Create a document that articulates a plan for shared site
 - Develop memoranda of understanding among all partners.
 - Share all staff development efforts through email, newsletters and other forms of communication; implement joint trainings.
 - Bring everyone involved together at least two times a year for staff development, sharing of information, celebrating successes, and discussing ways to improve current practices.

- Issue: Staff lack of understanding of other programs
 - Conduct an orientation for all staff that includes all programs. Focus on philosophy, mission, curriculum, and requirements. Provide opportunities for staff to meet periodically to share issues, celebrate successes, and discuss ways to improve current practices.
 - Develop an agreed-upon definition of collaboration
 - Conduct team-building activities
 - Provide opportunities for teachers/assistants to visit classrooms in other programs
 - Create a chart of risk factors per programs so staff can see the differences and also start to think about the curriculum that would address all the factors.
 - Develop joint training for all teachers

- Issue: Creating a single point of entry process
 - Discuss concept with Superintendent, Principals, Program administrators, Parents, enlist their support for the concept
 - Look/review successful models
 - Conduct a joint meeting with key administrators, teachers, family service workers and other key program personnel; Review successful programs
 - Develop a single point of entry process and develop action steps
 - Develop a recruitment, registration and selection plan—VPI, Head Start, Title I—develop calendar, timelines
 - Establish selection criteria
 - Involve DSS and other agencies/organizations that serve the same families
 - Share information with private sector

- Issue: Implementing the collaboration process
 - Establish a clear vision for pre-school education involving all key players (public and private providers)
 - Communicate and educate others on the vision
 - Establish a written handbook as a team that includes the process and supporting materials, i.e., marketing, recruitment, registration, screening/assessment processes and decisions on curriculum, facilities, etc.
 - Develop joint professional development opportunities for all supervisors, teachers/assistants
 - Involve the private sector in a discussion relative to space and funding concerns
 - Develop a public relations campaign to enhance community awareness

- Issue: “Us” versus “them” and “my program syndrome”—difficulty in giving up control of “my program”
 - Bring staff together from the cooperating programs to develop a vision for pre-school education for children, identify goals and outcomes for the collaborative effort
 - Use an outside facilitator to maintain focus, help participants to resolve differences in viewpoints, move past personality issues, and their sense of “my problem,” and focus on the vision
 - Keep the focus on children and their needs, not the funding streams and what is or is not being done currently within the funding streams
 - Help partners to identify not only the benefits to children and their families but also the benefits to them as professionals
 - Explore the differences in programs, i.e., eligibility requirements, staff credentials, standards/regulations—determine who has more flexibility. Build where flexibility exists
 - Work with the operating principle that nobody is the “expert” but all are learners together when it comes to working collaboratively to address the needs of children.
 - Educate the community to support the collaborative effort/idea of blended classrooms to overcome any negative perceptions that may exist
 - Provide opportunities for participants to learn about each other’s programs (swap teachers, visit classrooms, joint training)
 - Find new ways of ways of working together—look at various models, become creative; give participants permission to try new things and scrap what doesn’t work
 - Acknowledge differences and determine how they could be turned into strengths
 - Monitor and evaluate efforts on a fixed schedule

- Issue: Resolving philosophical differences
 - Begin dialogue to identify differences and similarities in thinking/perceptions
 - Identify where there is agreement and use the agreements as a base to explore/resolve differences
 - Involve administrators/decision makers
 - Review data and research that undergirds the various programs and philosophies
 - Use an outside facilitator to guide the participants through the above discussions
 - Identify a vision that keeps the focus on what is best for the child and his/her family and develop goals/objectives that will implement that vision

- Issue: Working with parents/parental involvement

- Develop joint parent committees
 - Involve parents in all classrooms
 - Develop a parent resource center
 - Conduct teacher-parent conferences
 - Do home visits
 - Provide family literacy programs or provide access to those within community
 - Utilize the family services coordinator's services for all children, not just Head Start
 - Involve parents in planning
 - Hold joint Head Start and VPI parenting workshops for parents
 - Align the curriculum so parents see one program
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Lessons learned

Panelists shared the following lessons learned:

- There is a great need for patience, a sense of humor and the ability not to take conflict/differences personally. People have to move "outside the box" and be open to a different philosophy. This takes lots of meetings and time. People have to be willing to create time in their schedules to keep the process moving.
- The collaboration process has to start at the top of each organization. Buy-in by key administrators is critical to success.
- Time needs to be spent creating a vision for the program that focuses on putting the child and his/her family first. The vision has to include all players including child care.
- To start the process, pick one area of collaboration to work on first so success can be built. Most of the panelists indicated their first project was creating the single point of entry process and application.
- When discussion appears to be broking down, walk away for a while and then reconvene the group to see where everyone is and begin the discussions again.
- People have to be willing to come together to work out differences. Placing the focus on what is best for the child is a way to help work through the differences.
- Involve the community outside of the pre-school/education to be a part of any community activity involving registration. Make it a community event with activities for all members of the families.
- Draw on the resources of partners in addressing the needs of children. For example, the public schools can provide special education services to Head Start children. Head Start can provide comprehensive services to VPI children.

- The key to addressing differences in regulations per program is to meet all of them in all the programs.
 - There is a need to take risks in order to meet the needs of all the children.
 - Use an outside facilitator to work the group through the process of discussion/decision-making.
 - Conduct registration and early identification of children in March/early spring so services (e.g., special education) can start prior to the start of the school year.
 - Market the program as “pre-school education” to the public, not Head Start, VPI, Title I.
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Conclusion

The early childhood community is in a unique position to achieve some extraordinary accomplishments in Virginia. Governor Tim Kaine has demonstrated his commitment to expanding opportunities for children to have access to high quality early childhood education by promoting the Smart Beginnings and Start Strong initiatives. The Governor’s Working Group on Early Childhood Initiatives, established by Kaine in his Secretariat of Education, focuses on promoting these initiatives and places early childhood education as a top priority.

The Governor’s commitment, coupled with numerous community coalitions and cross-agency partnerships, has established a firm foundation for long-term, systematic improvements in early childhood education. The success of efforts like the collaborative forums further demonstrates a commitment to improving services for children and families and exemplifies the willingness of the Head Start, VPI and Child Care communities to come together to strengthen relationships that will ultimately benefit children and families across the Commonwealth.

The legislation to reauthorize the Head Start Program was signed into law by President Bush on December 12, 2007, with the purpose of improving program quality, expanding access, and promoting school readiness for low income children. Head Start Reauthorization focuses on expanding services and increasing program quality for all children in the community. Collaboration is the key to successfully bring together all of the key school readiness stakeholders. This is an opportunity for Head Start to take a lead role in conducting outreach and bringing together local education authorities (LEA) and community partners to start a local school readiness council.

Early childhood professionals from every program are encouraged to take the successful strategies and best practices provided in this report and mold them to fit their communities. Viewing the unique preschool environment that presently

exists can be an opportunity to build on and strengthen existing relationships. Use the information found in this report as a stepping stone towards working together to improve program quality and promote school readiness for all children in Virginia.

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