

# A Head Start Story: How Family Engagement Paves The Way for a Child's Journey to Success

*This post is the first of a six-part series in which we will explore how Head Start serves communities in the states of Region 9 (Arizona, California, Nevada, Hawaii, and the Pacific). Each post will highlight one of six "Exemplary Practices" of the Head Start philosophy, present a first-person impact story from the field, and inform the reader of ongoing administrative efforts to expand Head Start success.*

## Exemplary Practice: Family Engagement

*Families are children's first and most important caregivers, teachers, and advocates. Engaging families in their child's learning, and recognizing parents as a child's first and most influential teacher is one of the key exemplary practices of the Head Start program.*<sup>1</sup>

The enduring desire of parents to provide their children with the best start possible in life is nearly universal. It is one of the strongest instincts in human nature to protect, nurture, and encourage children to fulfill their potential and lead healthy, productive lives.

A crucial component to a child's early success is the degree to which their home environment supports the learning process. Head Start implements a structured approach to encouraging Family Engagement as it relates to the best interest of the child. The program empowers families through education, access to resources, and parental involvement to create an environment in which the child can thrive. The [Parent, Family, and Community Engagement Framework](#)

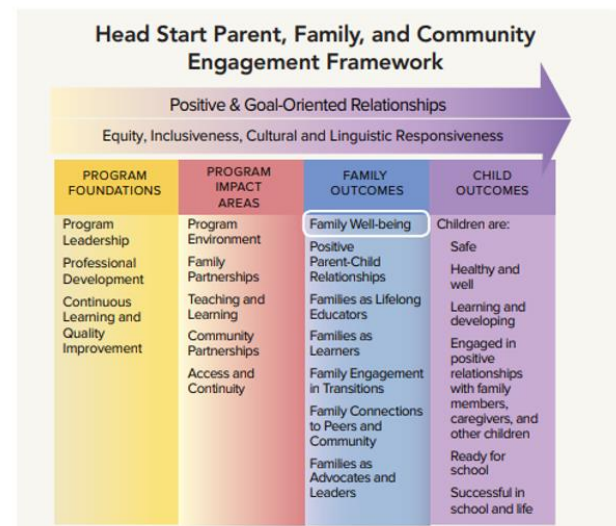


Image source: HeadStart.gov

<sup>1</sup> "Parent" and "family" refer to all adult caregivers who interact with early childhood systems in support of their child. These caregivers include biological, adoptive, and foster parents; pregnant people and expectant families; out-of-household parents; grandparents; legal and informal guardians; adult siblings; and other family members.

illustrates how the program aims to support families in order to maximize successful outcomes for children.

Through its commitment to supporting the whole family, and providing a structured approach to development for both parent and child, Head Start leads with its exemplary practice of Family Engagement.

## Family Engagement in Action

By design, Head Start programs are often located in low-income communities where parents may struggle to provide their children with a stable home life, adequate nutrition, and medical care. These are vital components to a child's wellness, and the detrimental effects of their absence often become more obvious once they begin school. Whether a child attends a care center or receives home visits, Head Start staff work closely with families to identify their unique needs, and connect them to appropriate resources and support.

Every family that registers with Head Start joins a comprehensive program that includes several elements designed to encourage Family Engagement:



- A **Family Partnership Agreement** that encourages the [parallel learning process](#) between parent and child to develop a goal-oriented approach to education.
- Regular **Parent-Staff Meetings** assess whether a child's activities and well-being align with the goals set out in the Agreement.
- **Community Advocates** at each center connect parents with resources in the community to help foster a stable, healthy home life.
- **Volunteer opportunities** encourage parents to actively participate with the wider program.

A testament to the strength of Family Engagement is the fact that a significant number of parents remain involved with Head Start even after their children have left the program. About 22% of Head Start staff are current or former program parents<sup>2</sup>, with many choosing to pursue their teaching credentials in childhood education.

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<sup>2</sup> Source: <https://acf.gov/ohs/about/head-start>

# Head Start Success Story: Placer County Family Puts Down Roots

*Interview with Brianna Rollins*

*Parent and Policy Chair - KidZCommunity, Placer County Action Council*

Located in the forested Sierra Nevada foothills, the Placer County Action Council (PCAC) provides early childhood support services to low-income families throughout Placer and Nevada counties in Northern California. PCAC serves a population of more than 500,000 residents in a region that covers over 2,000 square miles. Communities range from suburban Rocklin and Roseville along Highway 80, to the rural communities that border Lake Tahoe.

Brianna Rollins, a bright and vivacious single mother-of-two, perfectly exemplifies the Family Engagement principle within PCAC. Her daughter, Scarlett, recently graduated Head Start to begin kindergarten, while her son, Noah, began in the Early Head Start program and now attends Head Start. Besides being a busy mom, Brianna serves a volunteer role as PCAC Policy Chair, and attends classes at Sierra Nevada College.

Brianna was introduced to Head Start by her mother, when she explored child care options that would align with her class schedule. The location of a Head Start center right across from the college campus made it a convenient choice, and Brianna appreciated the play-based model of learning.



From the outset, Brianna found the staff at KidZCommunity to be supportive and engaging. “You really feel like they care for your children the way you would,” said Brianna. “It’s reassuring how supportive the staff are.” Teachers worked with her to create a Family Partnership Agreement to outline behavior and learning goals for her children to help them transition to kindergarten. They were also able to receive dental and wellness checks from visiting healthcare providers.

The emphasis on supporting the well-being of the whole family became clear when her assigned Community Advocate helped Brianna locate permanent housing for her family. After a period of instability in their young lives, having a permanent home allows Scarlett and Noah to build the foundation for a happy, active childhood. “The belief at Head Start is, ‘When the family thrives, the child thrives, so how can we help you succeed?’” said Brianna.

Brianna herself has also flourished since becoming involved with Head Start. Not only is she currently serving as the Policy Chair, improving lines of communication between parents and policy makers, she was recently awarded the Soroptimist International's '[Live Your Dream](#)' scholarship for women. This scholarship will help support her academic pursuits and improve her economic situation in years to come.

## Head Start: Looking Forward

What's clear from both qualitative (Brianna's success story is one of many) and quantitative assessments is that Head Start provides enormous value to the communities it serves. Research has shown that for each dollar invested in Head Start, there is a return on investment of \$7-\$9 in economic gain.<sup>3</sup> This valuation is a result of reduced need for special education, welfare, and other support services for low-income families, as well as improved employment prospects.

With economic uncertainty one of the few certainties American families face in recent years, providing children with every potential advantage has become even more crucial. Over the past 60 years, Head Start has successfully developed methods to help parents get, and stay, engaged with their children's education because it is proven to have a direct impact on children's success.

This work is ongoing. As the needs in their communities' change, Head Start programs continue to remain agile and innovative to respond effectively. Leadership remains focused on facilitating Family Engagement in ways that empowers parents to make permanent improvements in their families' lives. Through a network of comprehensive services, education, and volunteer opportunities, Head Start supports parents in becoming their child's most influential lifelong teacher.

### **Recommendations from Head Start Leadership to Continue and Strengthen This Critical Work:**

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<sup>3</sup> Ludwig, J. and Phillips, D. (2007). The Benefits and Costs of Head Start. Social Policy Report. 21 (3: 4); Deming, D. (2009). Early childhood intervention and life-cycle skill development: Evidence from Head Start. American Economic Journal: Applied Economics, Meier, J. (2003). Interim Report. Kindergarten Readiness Study: Head Start Success. Preschool Service Department, San Bernardino County, California; Deming, D. (2009). Early childhood intervention and life-cycle skill development: Evidence from Head Start.

**Action 1: Increase Funding to Recruit and Retain Qualified Staff**

Provide increased funding so that local programs have the resources to hire and retain professionals with a strong background in working with children and families.

Individuals with extensive preparation—ranging from bachelor’s degrees in social work or human services to clinical certifications and master’s-level qualifications—are better equipped to foster meaningful engagement and help families achieve their goals.

**Action 2: Reduce Caseloads for Family Service Advocates (FSAs)**

Lowering the number of cases assigned to each Family Service Advocate benefits everyone involved, especially the children striving to meet school readiness goals. When FSAs have the capacity to build strong relationships with both the child’s teachers and families, services become more personalized and effective. Trust-building, goal setting, and supporting individual family growth require time and focused attention—resources that are only possible with manageable caseloads.

**Action 3: Create Family-Friendly Facilities to Foster Collaboration**

Develop welcoming spaces where parents can actively engage with educational staff, community organizations, and one another. These facilities should encourage family participation in children’s learning and provide opportunities for collaboration with early childhood education (ECE) providers, school systems, faith-based organizations, and agencies serving children with disabilities or culturally specific needs.

**Action 4: Implement Technology to Support Family Engagement**

Adopt modern technologies that streamline family engagement with Head Start, other community services, and the transition to elementary school. Tools that allow for real-time input, access to services, and family feedback will enhance both the credibility and effectiveness of Family Services staff.

**Action 5: Strengthen Partnerships with Educational Service Providers**

Enhancing Head Start’s family support requires intentional collaboration with educational institutions. Building bridges between systems benefits children and families alike. Formal roles for families in Policy Councils, along with informal involvement through a range of family-centered activities, especially in partnership with elementary schools—will expand participation and foster lasting personal and educational growth across generations.

