

**Improving the Delivery of Early Care and Education in Oklahoma:  
Collaboration Among Head Start, Prekindergarten and Child Care**

**EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**

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## **Acknowledgements**

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## **About Smart Start Oklahoma**

Smart Start is Oklahoma's statewide early childhood initiative whose board of directors serves as the state's early childhood advisory council. Through a shared commitment, active collaboration and innovative leadership, Smart Start seeks to provide better opportunities to the children and families in our state.

There are four key strategies that guide our efforts toward achieving our goal of giving Oklahoma's children a smart start.

**Community Initiatives:** Responding to the needs of children and families by leveraging local support and resources to meet individual needs.

**Public Engagement:** Educating Oklahoma on the importance of the early years.

**Resource Development:** Committing resources at both the state and community level with increased public and private funding devoted to early childhood services.

**Public Policy:** Improving public policies to support young children and their families.

## **Research Findings**

The benefits of collaboration currently extend to thousands of Oklahoma children. Rough estimates based on figures provided by Head Start directors indicate that the sites included in this study reach approximately 7,000 children. With new partnerships forming each year, there is certainly potential to increase the number of children being served in collaborative programs with expanded services and opportunities. The findings outlined below include factors that prompted respondents to collaborate, strategies for securing buy-in from potential partners, common contractual obligations among partners, benefits of collaboration and common challenges. Results are summarized for each partner to provide insight into varying perspectives.

For the purposes of this research, collaboration was defined as “a mutual agreement between a public school and a Head Start program or a child care provider to offer the public school four-year-old program which includes the employment of a bachelor degreed, early childhood certified teacher and the implementation of the public school curriculum as well as compliance with the applicable partnering program’s regulations and requirements.” Potential respondents were required to meet these criteria in order to participate, and were identified via Head Start directors and Oklahoma State Department of Education (SDE) reports.

Each response from a Head Start director is based on large geographic regions of the state for which they are responsible, and each public school administrator response is based on the experience of a school district. This approach allows for a broad perspective on collaborative arrangements in Oklahoma. However, there will be some variation across collaboration sites within a region or district that may not be included. Child care director responses are based only on the experiences of individual facilities.

### *Factors Associated with Collaboration*

Though collaboration is associated with a number of benefits for both the programs involved and the children served, administrators were asked to identify those factors that served as catalysts to initiating collaboration. Among Head Start directors (n=26), the most common catalyst was the knowledge that such an arrangement could produce fiscal benefits for the program (89%), followed by the ability to provide a comprehensive, high quality program for children (77%), a need to serve more children (65%), convenience for families (65%) and inadequate space to serve children (39%).

The top three catalysts for public school administrators (n=39) were the same as those identified by Head Start directors, though the desire to provide a comprehensive, high-quality program (62%) and to serve more children (62%) were slightly more common than fiscal benefits (54%). By far, the most common response among child care directors (n=13) was convenience for families (85%) followed by the provision of a comprehensive, high-quality program (69%). Only 23% of child care directors indicated that fiscal benefits prompted them to collaborate. More than one-third of child care directors (39%) stated that other factors outside of those listed in the survey prompted them to collaborate. These include concerns with transporting very young children, competition for qualified teachers and previous experience with early childhood programs.

### *Securing a Collaboration Partner*

Once a Head Start region, public school district or child care program decides to begin collaborating, there are several strategies utilized to secure buy-in from potential partners. The most common strategies were informal communication, recognition of the significance of potential partner contributions and ensuring that the program itself makes a significant contribution.

Administrators recognize the importance of communicating the resources and support each of the partners has to offer the other, thereby strengthening the program's ability to provide effective and efficient services to children and families. Head Start (n=26) and child care directors

(n=13) were more likely than public school administrators to visit other collaboration programs as a means of securing buy-in (35% and 23% compared to 13%), and child care directors were more likely than either Head Start or public school administrators to employ public relations and marketing strategies and a rigorous application process (23% compared to 4% and 11%).

### *Partner Responsibilities*

A well-constructed contract explicitly stating requirements for each partner is necessary and provides a clear picture of how program services will be delivered, as well as an accountability mechanism. Administrators were asked to identify the most common contractual obligations for which they were responsible. The most common responsibilities among Head Start directors (n=26) include curriculum (85%), snacks/meals (85%), supplies (85%), salary for the assistant/paraprofessional teacher (81%), professional development (77%), and equipment (77%). More than half also indicated they are responsible providing the facility (62%), the salary for the lead teacher (62%) and substitute teacher pay (54%).

Among public school administrators responding (n=39), the most common obligations included providing special education services (64%), salary for the lead teacher (51%), providing the facility (49%), professional development (46%) and providing transportation for the children (44%). With the exception of providing special education services, each of these was also a responsibility of many of the Head Start directors ranging from 48% to 76% of those responding.

Child care providers collaborating with a public school and/or Head Start (n=13) were responsible for providing the facility (100%). Other common obligations included providing equipment (77%), paying the salary for the assistant/paraprofessional teacher (62%), supplies (46%), snacks/meals (31%) and discipline (31%). None of the responding child care providers was responsible for the salary for the lead teacher, and very few were required to provide professional development (8%).

To ensure that each contract is well constructed to meet the unique circumstances of the partnership, one school district has “a team of early education teachers and administrators that reviews applications, schedules onsite visits and interviews, and then makes recommendations regarding contracts. Each contract is designed to meet the individual needs of that collaboration.” The administrator explains that “We have a gifted elementary administrator assigned to oversee these partnerships. Even with the additional challenges, coordination and supervision it is worth it! Our children and their families receive the benefit of our combined energy and time commitments.”

### *Impact of Collaboration*

Beyond the factors that prompted respondents to begin collaborating, they identified a number of benefits experienced as a result of their partnerships. The majority of respondents in all three groups of administrators experienced benefits related to sharing of resources, fewer transitions for children, fiscal benefits, improved communication among partners, better coordinated services and improved program quality. The majority of child care directors (n=13) and public school administrators (n=37) indicated that collaboration resulted in more family-friendly services (69% and 51%, respectively). Approximately one-third or more of the respondents in all three groups also benefited from coordinated professional development and improved program accountability.

A public school administrator noted that “it [allows] us to maximize resources that otherwise would not be available in individual programs”. This was echoed in personal interviews with both Head Start and public school administrators and classroom staff. A very important outcome of sharing resources and coordinating services has been the ability to offer health and dental screenings that many of the children would not otherwise get through the program. “Young children with speech problems have received help sooner in life,” states one administrator. Two



public school administrators suggested that they believe children are more prepared for public school as a result of their participation in a collaborative program.

### *Challenges of Collaboration*

Despite the numerous advantages of collaboration and the opportunities for program improvement, administrators noted a number of challenges that were encountered. As one respondent stated, the challenges will vary from site to site as circumstances will vary given the multitude of ways to structure a collaboration. The most common challenge for Head Start, pre-kindergarten and child care administrators alike was the difficulty in complying with more than one set of regulations and requirements. This often took the form of additional paperwork required of classroom staff. Other examples include differences related to the provision of snacks, family-style dining, home visitation, discipline and Oklahoma Department of Human Services child care licensing requirements. These activities require additional work from classroom or site staff, and may require adjustments due to the availability of time and other resources to fulfill these obligations. Furthermore, it was noted by some either via survey feedback or personal interview that staff retention can sometimes be an issue. The additional work required of staff at a collaboration site requires a team that is flexible, open to change and has the ability to meet the increased demands.

More than half of Head Start directors responding to this question (n=22) also experienced challenges associated with recruitment and eligibility (59%), discipline (50%) and curriculum/instruction (50%). Among public school administrators (n=34), more than a third encountered issues related to curriculum/instruction (35%), while more than one-quarter had to work through obstacles associated with discipline (29%), communication among partners (29%) and scheduling (27%).

## *Overcoming the Obstacles*

Despite the challenges that exist, many administrators and classroom staff stated that the benefits made the process worthwhile. Challenges were commonly viewed as something that could be resolved through team work, communication and innovative thinking. Respondents often stated that the purpose was to more effectively and efficiently serve children and families, thereby making it necessary to work out any issues that were encountered rather than go back to the old way of conducting business.

There are a number of common strategies or approaches used by collaborative partners to ensure a strong sense of cooperation and inclusion among staff, as well as effectively moving forward as a team to meet requirements and provide the best program possible to children and their families. The most common theme from all partners was the need for open, honest and ongoing communication. This applies both to administrators in the partnership as well as to classroom staff who may be at a location outside of the public school and must be connected to both the collaboration site and the associated public school site.

A number of administrators involved all staff (i.e., Head Start, public school, child care) in regularly scheduled staff meetings as well as trainings and professional development opportunities. Another approach to improving communication that was effective for one site was to share office space and house the Head Start coordinator and assistant in the same facility as the four-year-old program. Communication was also enhanced by connecting the collaboration teacher to other teachers in the district. One public school administrator stated that “an advisory committee [was formed to] ...make sure the collaboration teachers meet with other district pre-k teachers one time a month and have planning meetings two times a month.” Finally, one Head Start director noted the importance of communicating and building rapport with public school personnel through regular face-to-face meetings rather than only meeting with them when there was a problem or concern.

Partners should meet often and maintain an ongoing dialogue regarding the strategies that are working well and where there may be room for improvement.

Another strategy for strengthening collaboration was to have supervisors visit collaboration classrooms on a regular basis to provide support. One district appointed a “collaboration principal that visits the sites daily and partners with the site directors on every single issue. [They] meet with the collaboration partners every other month to discuss issues and concerns and share ideas.” This same district has instituted incentive pay for teachers at collaboration sites over the course of a three year period to address concerns about teacher retention. Teachers receive \$1,000 for year one, \$2,000 for year two and \$3,000 for year three.

Staff must also take the time to learn about the requirements of their partners and implement creative strategies for working together and assisting in meeting those requirements. Head Start directors noted that it was important for them to offer assistance such as asking family advocates at the site to assist teachers with the additional paperwork, or assisting with meeting playground standards and licensing requirements.

Collaboration does not end with the initial contract structure agreed upon by partners. Rather it is an ongoing, evolving relationship in which partners learn as they go forward and continue to use data and stakeholder input to reshape both structure and process. It requires commitment to the end goal, which often means compromise and negotiation. According to one respondent, it is necessary to “compromise on the things we can [and negotiate] on things that we can’t”.

Though these are some of the common strategies discussed by survey respondents, there are a number of other ideas presented in the success stories included in this toolkit. Administrators and site staff have identified creative ways to address the unique challenges encountered along they way. Through team work and innovative thinking, each has experienced success that has translated into benefits for the children, families and communities they serve.

## **Conclusion**

Despite the challenges encountered by collaboration partners, the common response was that they are far outweighed by the benefits for families, children and the program itself. Collaboration is a win-win approach that has potential for improving outcomes. There is certainly no one-size-fits-all model or approach to collaboration. Rather, structure, process and strategy will vary depending on the unique circumstances of the partners and the community. This, however, allows for creativity in designing and implementing approaches that are uniquely suited for each community.

Those interested in beginning a collaboration program or improving an existing program should pay close attention to the lessons learned and success stories of others involved in the process. The insight gained can be used to piece together a strong and successful partnership that will benefit all. In a time of serious budget constraints, it is increasingly important to identify and implement innovative ways to “braid” diverse funding streams and provide services in a more efficient manner. Though there is a need for further research on effective models and strategies for overcoming challenges and barriers, this report is the first step toward greater understanding and better planning. There must be continued dialogue and sharing of experiences and ideas among those who are involved in collaboration as well as those who have yet to embark on the journey.