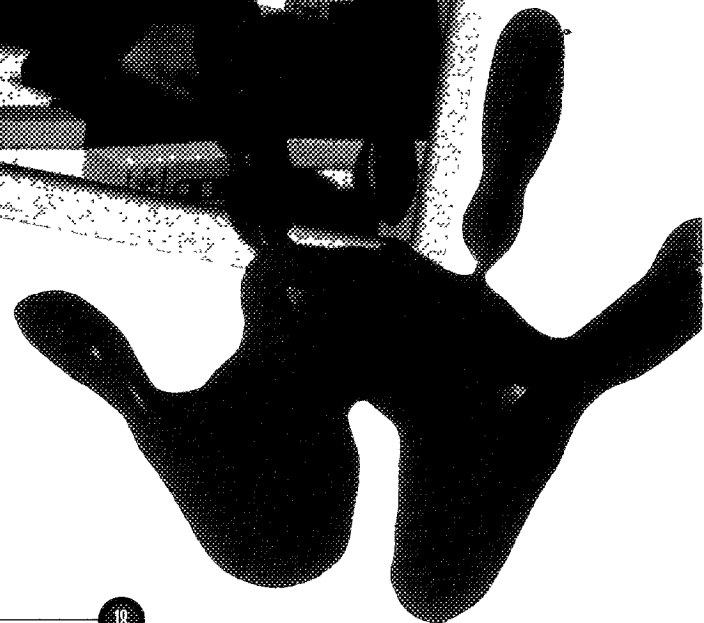


Blurring the Boundaries:

Local Collaborations Among
Head Start, Preschool, and
Child Care Programs



By Jodi R. Sandfort and Sally Coleman Selden

Dramatic changes in the American family during the last 35 years have brought child care and early childhood education to the top of the public policy agenda. With more parents working outside the home, reliable, developmentally appropriate, and affordable child care has become a necessity. The care of young children, however, involves complex public policy issues. On the one hand, extensive research has documented that high-quality classroom environments, teacher continuity, and other social and health services aid children's development. On the other hand, there is an inadequate resource base in the industry. Costs for families are high, teacher salaries are low, and turnover is common. Continuity of children's care is difficult to guarantee. As a result, such contradictions have provided justification for public involvement in the funding and provision of child care and early education.

Most often, public programs are targeted toward disadvantaged children. Head Start, for example, primarily serves three- and four-year-old children from poor families. Many state preschool programs also provide services to disadvantaged three- and four-year-olds, be they children living in poor families or communities, or those otherwise defined as "at risk." State programs that provide subsidies to help pay for child care expenses also focus on serving low-income families; state income eligibility cut-offs range from 125 percent to 255 percent of the federal poverty level.¹ As a result, these public initiatives are often targeted toward the same population of children.

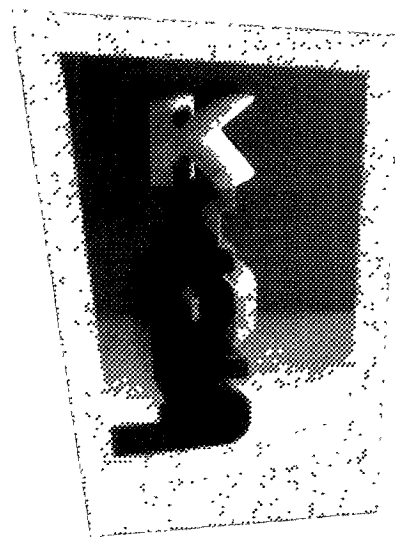
Traditionally, public dollars have either provided enriched early childhood experiences in part-day programs or subsidized the cost of full-day child care in the market. In the last 10 years, however, changes have been occurring in the early childhood community. Local programs have begun to combine multiple sources of public dollars and break down the boundaries that have separated the early childhood community. Motivated by the increased demand among low-income families for high-quality, full-time care that is provided throughout the year, these initiatives provide a new model of service delivery worth examining further.

Policy Environment

The public role in financing early childhood programs has developed along three parallel but distinct tracks. In 1965, the Head Start program was established as part of the anti-poverty initiatives of the Great Society. As a federal initiative, Head Start traditionally operated in a separate sphere from other early childhood programs. Detailed performance standards provide a blueprint for national implementation, teachers and managers receive professional development, and programs undergo standardized monitoring. This infrastructure created by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services has supported the delivery of comprehensive services to low-income families in part-day, part-year programs which have been the hallmark of the Head Start intervention for more than 30 years. According to a survey conducted by the National Head Start Association,

in 1993 only 1 percent of children received full-day, full-year care. Yet, the new work requirements imposed by welfare reform have caused an increased demand for this type of care among the poor families Head Start serves.

In the late 1970s and early 1980s, state governments also began allocating resources to part-day preschool programs focused on three- and four-year-olds. These initiatives are administered by state education departments, which initially allowed a school district to operate programs at its own option. State commitment to preschool education has grown over time; by 1998, 39 states funded at least one preschool initiative. While state governments make policies, local school districts often hold considerable authority in making curricular decisions, developing teacher training, and monitoring quality. Typically, preschool programs operate during the school year with part-day sessions like most kindergarten classes. Preschool programs, however, also are striving to better meet the needs of working parents.



1. Data are from: 1999 State Policy Documentation Project, "Child Care for Low Income Families," a project of the Center on Budget and Policy Priorities and the Center for Law and Social Policy, July 2000 www.spdp.org/tanf/childcare

2. This mode was so popular that, as of 1998, 18 states had decided to supplement the federal funds for Head Start. These initiatives typically built upon the Head Start infrastructure without changing any programmatic requirements.

With more parents working outside the home, reliable, developmentally appropriate, and affordable child care has become a necessity. The care of young children, however, involves complex public policy issues. On the one hand, extensive research has documented that high-quality classroom environments, teacher continuity, and other social and health services aid children's development. On the other hand, there is an inadequate resource base in the industry. Costs for families are high, teacher salaries are low, and turnover is common. Continuity of children's care is difficult to guarantee. As a result, such contradictions have provided justification for public involvement in the funding and provision of child care and early education.

While states began preschool initiatives, other state departments simultaneously developed programs to help defray child care costs for low-income families involved in work or job training. Designed for families who have found their own child care arrangements, these subsidy programs are typically administered through state human service departments. While several federal funding sources for child care subsidies existed during the 1980s and 1990s, they were consolidated as part of the 1996 welfare reform law into the Child Care Development Fund. States vary widely in the degree to which they supplement these federal child care dollars. Subsidies can be used to purchase full-day, full-year care. Yet, because child care subsidy provides a "service" for parents rather than a developed "program" for children, there is not much attention to monitoring quality, developing curricula, or educating teachers. As a result, child care subsidy programs have suffered from a lack of resources, something that has not affected the other two branches of the early childhood community.

These three public approaches to funding early education and care have developed at different levels of government. Within most states, administration of preschool and subsidized child care programs also occurs within different departments. As a result, although they are all focused on the care and education of disadvantaged children, three distinct early education systems have developed, each with different administrative rules, eligibility criteria, programmatic requirements, and funding levels.

Recently, however, the distinctions among these three public policy strategies have begun to blur. Recognizing the demand for financially supported, high-quality programs that meet the scheduling needs of working parents, policymakers have developed new regulations and created incentives that encourage collaboration across these boundaries. Since 1997, the annual Head Start appropriation has targeted funds toward local programs extending their hours or weeks of service to "better respond to the child care needs of families." In addition, special priority is given

to organizations using multiple sources of public dollars or partnering with child care providers to deliver full-day, full-year services.

Similarly, state preschool programs have begun to allow non-school providers to operate classrooms. According to the Children's Defense Fund, more than 75 percent of the states allow their state preschool dollars to go to non-school-based programs. In some cases, the state contracts directly with Head Start or child care centers; in others, local school districts subcontract with these entities. States also have developed other policies—such as funding the cost of transporting children to other child care facilities, giving funding priorities to programs that operate on a full-day, full-year schedule, or providing technical assistance—to encourage preschool providers to collaborate with other early childhood programs. Like the Head Start community, state early childhood administrators are recognizing the diverse needs of families and adopting program innovations to encourage the blending of public monies to respond to these needs.

While estimates do not yet exist concerning the magnitude of these collaborative efforts, it is undeniable that there is increasing overlap among the three early childhood communities. Such organizations as the Children's Defense Fund, Child Care Action Campaign, and the Bush Center in Child Development and Social Policy at Yale University have written reports highlighting local programs that blur these boundaries. The federal government is buttressing these efforts by supporting a website, Quality in Linking Together Early Education Partnerships (QUALIT), that provides information and technical assistance for local program operators.

Local Program Innovations

On a local level, these various policy initiatives converge and, increasingly, create conditions where early childhood professionals can collaborate across programmatic and professional divides. The policy changes mirror what practitioners have long recognized: high-quality early childhood programming can meet both children's developmental needs and parents' needs for safe care during their working hours.

To better understand how the blurring among the three early childhood communities is occurring at the local level, we have begun an in-depth study, *Investigating Partnerships in Early Childhood Education (I-PIECE)*. The sites included in our study blend two or more sources of public early childhood funds to provide full-day, full-year care to three- and four-year-old children. This study is designed to describe the models of collaboration being used; assess how the blurring of these boundaries influences the organization, staff, and services provided to children; and, finally, explore whether there is any link among these collaborations and the dual goals of these collaborations—to meet working parents' satisfaction and to bolster children's school readiness.

Like any grassroots effort, local programs are blending public early childhood dollars in multiple ways. It is easy to understand this diversity

if one first examines the classroom level. Through this lens, there are two strategies for collaborating across subsidized child care, Head Start and preschool funding streams.

First, some classrooms are operated by one organization that decides to diversify its funding to include another source of public dollars. This strategy, called fiscal integration, can involve different programmatic mixes. For example, a child care center may apply for and receive state preschool dollars for its classroom for four-year-olds. Alternatively, a local Head Start grantee agency might decide to expand its hours in one classroom to better respond to the needs of working parents. Because most Head Start families are low-income, most children in the classroom also qualify for a child care subsidy.

A second model for blurring the boundaries among public early childhood programs is when separate entities enter a formal partnership to collaboratively deliver services in a classroom. This strategy, administrative integration, seems to be used when early childhood programs do not possess the physical, political, or managerial resources to expand on their own.

An example of administrative partnering is a school district that operates a preschool program and decides to partner with a child care center to offer "wraparound" child care before and after the part-day

preschool curriculum. Managers from each organization negotiate the details of the partnership, deciding, for example, that the school district will provide space in a school building and access to a certified teacher during the first half of the day. The child care center will bring another teacher to the classroom who "assists" the school district teacher in the morning and assumes lead teacher responsibilities during the afternoon. Another example of administrative partnering is a site where a child care center and Head Start program decide to develop a formal agreement; again, managers must negotiate the terms of the agreement.

A final variation of this model involves partnering among three different organizations to provide services in one classroom. For example, one organization in our study is a child care center in a low-income neighborhood that has partnered with a Head Start agency. Three- and four-year-old children are cared for in a room by a child care teacher who uses standardized curricula and child assessments from the Head Start program, integrates the Head Start nurse into lessons about nutrition, and relies upon Head Start family workers to share important information from visits they conduct to children's homes. In the afternoon, the four-year-olds from this classroom go down the hall, where a teacher from the school district provides a curriculum explicitly designed to help the children make the transition to kindergarten. The school district also provides buses that are available for field trips which allow for a more active learning approach.

Possible Implications for Local Programs, Children, and Families
Although the motivation to attempt fiscal or administrative integration varies, there are many possible consequences of these collaborative initiatives. From a policy perspective, these initiatives provide a new

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strategy for offering high-quality, continuous care that nurtures children's development. This is particularly important given recent data from the Census Bureau's Survey of Income and Program Participation which documents that 44 percent of preschoolers in care regularly spent time in more than one setting. Although parents know what research confirms, that continuity of care is important for children's well-being, the demands of employment and the realities of the fragmented early childhood education system often necessitate trade-offs. The organizations involved in blurring the boundaries are trying to meet the needs of low-income working families and enrich children's preparation for school. The I-PIECE study will assess the degree to which these dual aims are being met.

Garnering additional public resources may have other important consequences for the early childhood system as well. It may increase the availability of other supportive services to families. Unlike child care centers, Head Start and preschool programs typically include additional services. For example, federal Head Start rules require that programs provide health and developmental screenings; referrals to health, mental health, and social services; and parental education and involvement. Most often, a family support worker assigned to the classroom facilitates these activities. Similarly, according to the Children's Defense Fund, many state preschool programs either have similar requirements or strongly encourage local programs to provide these types of comprehensive services. When a local child care center

fiscally integrates Head Start or preschool funds into their agency or partners with another organization, they suddenly have both the mandates and the resources to provide these other services.

Similarly, Head Start and state preschool dollars also often carry with them resources and requirements to bolster classroom quality. Formalized curricula are common, with attention to children's individual learning patterns, age-appropriate skills, and activities that integrate elements of health and nutritional services into the program. The regulations for Head Start and most state preschool programs also require formal child assessment and observation to assist teachers in appropriate curricular planning. In addition, the class size and child/staff ratio guidelines typically are smaller than many states' child care licensing rules. These guidelines assure that children have access to adequate numbers of caregivers throughout their day.

The blending of public early childhood resources also may lead to increased professional development among early childhood professionals. Traditionally, teachers in child care classrooms have received lower salaries and fewer benefits than teachers in Head Start or preschool classrooms. According to the Bureau of Labor Statistics, child care workers earned a median hourly wage of \$7.03 in 1997, compared to \$9.09 for preschool teachers. The salary differential reflects the different credentials required by the three systems.³ Yet, the fiscal or administrative integration of public early childhood programs can provide more resources for programs that can improve salaries or benefits.

These models also create circumstances where the various populations of early childhood teachers come together, often working with each other in the same classroom. They can learn each other's practices, appreciate different classroom innovations, and participate in multidisciplinary professional teams. In some instances, these experiences may motivate teachers to return to school or seek additional education, thereby creating a career ladder within early childhood professions. Additionally, since ongoing professional education is emphasized in most state preschool initiatives and Head Start programs, collaboration also provides increased resources for professional development, making pre- and in-service training a reality.

Although many of these consequences are focused on the classroom level, it is notable that fiscal or administrative integration may also influence the operation of an entire early childhood program. In some sites, nurses and social workers brought in with Head Start dollars provide emergency medical assistance to all children at the center. Teachers returning from specialized training hold workshops for their colleagues teaching in other classrooms to share some of the lessons learned. In other sites, increased revenue allows for the purchase of equipment—playground structures, buses, or computers, for example—that can benefit the operation of the entire organization. Thus, the blurring of boundaries among the three streams of public early childhood funding can potentially have the unintended benefit of spreading some benefits, albeit indirectly, to a larger number of children.

3 Typically, state preschool programs employ teachers certified in elementary or early education (according to the Children's Defense Fund, only 4 out of 48 state initiatives in 1998-99 did not have any requirements). Similarly, the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start requires that by 2003, at least one-half of all Head Start teachers have an associates, bachelors, or advanced degree in early childhood education. In contrast, according to the Center for Career Development in Early Care and Education in Boston, 31 states' child care licensing standards do not require teachers in centers to have any early childhood training at all.

All early childhood professionals, whether they are program administrators, local directors, or teachers, must recognize their common goal of caring for and nurturing the development of disadvantaged children and pledge to work diligently at talking past the professional and administrative divides that separate them. It is only then that we will move closer to developing coherent state and national policies that assure the education and care of young children and support the needs of their working parents. Only then will we be able to talk about something more than a mere blurring of boundaries among the three communities

Policy Strategies for Encouraging Collaborative Early Childhood Programming

Collaborations among Head Start, preschool, and child care providers take on different forms at the local level. What is clear, however, is that more full-day, full-year programs are being created that incorporate the enriched child development and family support programs traditionally relegated to part-day services. These efforts offer the potential to better nurture children's individual development and support parents as they struggle to combine work and family responsibilities. They also offer the possibility of increasing the availability of supportive services, bolstering classroom quality, and improving the salaries and professional development of teachers.

The local efforts to fiscally or administratively integrate programs are clearly supported by the state and federal policies being developed in Head Start, preschool education, and subsidized child care programs. Decisions made by the Head Start bureau to reward collaborative efforts with funding priority for expansion dollars have created a systemic incentive toward fiscal or administrative integration. Mandates in state preschool programs to contract with non-school providers or

decisions to allocate funds for transportation also create these same incentives. Yet, federal and state managers need to constantly be aware of how new administrative rules affect this movement. Does the definition of "full day" and "part day" in the child care subsidy system unnecessarily penalize local programs drawing down multiple sources of funding? Do increased dollars for professional development or training work at cross-purposes with those in another branch of the early childhood system? Are there ways to streamline eligibility requirements to make it easier to serve families with different sources of public dollars?

Administrators also must recognize that there is no way to observe—from the state department of education, the local department of social services, or the regional Head Start bureau—the scope or effect of fiscal and administrative integration across the three public early childhood programs. Because each funding stream has its own administrative structure, each independently monitors the revenues expended, number of children served, and number of organizations providing their particular type of early childhood services. They cannot see how these three programs converge at the local

level, in early childhood education agencies, or in the classrooms. Although public policy is motivating and supporting the increased blurring that is occurring, there currently is no way to assess its magnitude or its effect. Yet, the 1998 Head Start reauthorization created Head Start State Collaboration offices whose mandate is to "foster unified planning for quality full-day, full-year services." Without a clear sense of the magnitude of local early childhood collaboration, however, it is unclear how these offices can achieve this goal. At this juncture, it is imperative for these offices to assume a leadership role in establishing a baseline of information about these local programs and monitoring changes over time.

In this article, we have not stressed the forces that impede and limit the full integration of early childhood education across the three existing branches. They are many, however. Each community—Head Start grantees, preschool educators, child care providers—has its own professional norms, standards, language, and knowledge base. In some communities, historical tensions render it almost impossible to work together across these differences. Sadly, these same divisions exist within many state agencies. All early childhood professionals, whether they are program administrators, local directors, or teachers, must recognize their common goal of caring for and nurturing the development of disadvantaged children and pledge to work diligently at talking past the professional and administrative divides that separate them. It is only then that we will move closer to developing coherent state and national policies that assure the education and care of young children and support the needs of their working parents. Only then will we be able to talk about something more than a mere blurring of boundaries among the three communities. ●