My name is Sara Mead, and I am a partner with Bellwether Education Partners, a nonprofit that helps education organizations improve results for high-need students. I conduct research on Head Start and other early childhood policies and advise foundations, advocacy organizations, and others—including Head Start grantees—working to improve early learning.

**Head Start Plays a Crucial Role in Supporting Early Development of Our Nation’s Most Vulnerable Young Children**

Serving nearly a million children, Head Start plays a crucial role in our early childhood system and in improving outcomes for children in poverty. Children in poverty are more likely to experience trauma and toxic stress, have less access to early learning experiences, and hear 30 million fewer words by age 3 than affluent children. Achievement gaps for disadvantaged youngsters emerge as early as 9 months in age, and by the time they enter kindergarten, they are already behind. Given these challenges, all children in poverty need access to high-quality early learning programs, including Head Start and state or locally funded pre-k, to enable them to enter school ready to succeed.

**Head Start Is Working—Let’s Make It Work Better**

Research—including the federally funded Head Start Impact Study and the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES)—shows that Head Start improves children’s school readiness at kindergarten entry. Although impacts on test scores decline in the early elementary grades, longer-term studies, which follow children into adulthood, show that Head Start alumni are more likely to graduate high school and have better adult life outcomes than similar children who did not attend Head Start.

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not attend. Further analysis of Impact Study data also finds that Head Start produces significant learning gains compared to no preschool at all—and these gains last into elementary school.

In other words, Head Start works. But its results, on average, do not match those of the highest-quality publicly funded pre-k programs, such as those in New Jersey, Oklahoma, and Boston. Further, Head Start results vary widely across centers and programs—as much as or more than those of K-12 public schools.

The key question, then, is not whether Head Start works, but how to enable all Head Start grantees to match the results of the best Head Start and pre-k programs.

**Bipartisan Policy Reforms Have Improved Head Start Quality**

The bipartisan 2007 Head Start reauthorization took crucial steps to improve the quality of Head Start. As a result of these changes:

- 71% of Head Start preschool teachers have at least a bachelor’s degree.
- Designation Renewal, which requires low-performing grantees to compete to retain their grants, has led to the replacement of low-performing grantees and spurred others to improve their quality. Over the past 3 years, roughly 5% of all grantees have been replaced through the designation renewal process.

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The quality of teaching in Head Start classrooms is also improving.\footnote{16}

**Key Priorities for Improving Head Start**

Despite this progress, additional reforms are needed. Six issues are particularly important:

1. **Supporting quality teaching**: Preschools that produce strong, sustained learning gains employ teachers with bachelor’s degrees and training in early childhood, provide high-quality professional development, and pay preschool teachers the same as K-12 teachers. In contrast, one in four Head Start teachers lacks a bachelor’s degree,\footnote{17} and Head Start teachers make $20,000 a year less than comparably trained kindergarten teachers in public schools.\footnote{18} Improving Head Start teacher preparation and compensation must be a priority.

2. **Improving curriculum**: To prepare children to succeed in school, great teachers need evidence-based, developmentally appropriate, content-rich, well-organized curricula.\footnote{19} But many early childhood curricula used in Head Start fail to provide sufficiently rich content or support for teachers. All Head Start programs must use evidence-based, content-rich curricula and support teachers to implement it effectively.

3. **Continuous improvement**: At both the grantee and federal level, Head Start needs to collect, analyze, and use data to support ongoing program improvement. This requires building grantee capacity and shifting the focus of monitoring from compliance to continuous improvement. To accelerate these efforts, researchers and federal officials must collect and use program performance data to identify, learn from, and disseminate the practices of high-performing grantees.

4. **Reducing burdensome regulations**: Head Start programs are subject to some 1,400 separate requirements prescribing not just what they do, but how they do it. Head Start monitoring focuses largely on compliance with rules—not program results. Federal policymakers must reduce overly prescriptive and bureaucratic requirements on Head Start programs and provide greater flexibility to innovate.

5. **Improving coordination with state early childhood and K-12 systems**: As states build early learning systems, state and federal policies must work to integrate Head Start with these systems, including state workforce and early childhood data systems. State and federal policies should also support Head Start grantees to access and combine state and local pre-k and childcare funds to improve quality and lengthen the program day. As state pre-k expands, Head Start programs need greater flexibility to shift resources between infants, toddlers, and preschoolers in response to changing community needs.

6. **Ensuring adequate funding**: For too long, federal policies have added new requirements to Head Start programs without providing sufficient funding to meet them. Improving quality and outcomes will require additional federal investments to enable

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\footnote{16}{See Office of the Administration for Children and Families Early Learning and Knowledge Center, National CLASS Reports, http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/class-reports}


Head Start programs cover the costs of improving quality without reducing children’s and families’ access to Head Start programs.

The Obama administration has proposed changes to streamline Head Start Performance Standards, reduce overly prescriptive and bureaucratic requirements, and bring expectations for Head Start in line with current research. But addressing the challenges I have outlined also requires statutory change in the next reauthorization of Head Start, as well as additional funding. As you begin your consideration of Head Start reauthorization, these issues—and the needs of Head Start children and families—must be at the center of the conversation.