Building Partnerships to Access Head Start Funding

Guidance for Ideal Learning Providers

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Introduction

Head Start is the most significant funding source in the U.S. for providing children from low-income families with early learning opportunities. A federal program established in 1965, Head Start promotes school readiness for children in low-income families by offering educational, nutritional, health, social, and other services. Head Start providers work with families to ensure they have the means to obtain health insurance, services for children with disabilities, adequate housing, job training, and more. Head Start providers also establish relationships with other programs that serve families in their communities, such as health care providers, schools, childcare providers, libraries and museums, housing agencies, and other social service agencies.

In 2018, Congress funded Head Start to serve nearly 1 million children and pregnant women in centers, family homes, and in family childcare homes in urban, suburban, and rural communities throughout the US. These funds play a critical role in helping quality early learning providers reach children experiencing adversities and stress.

Recent attention has focused on the integration of innovative approaches and curricula, sometimes described as Ideal Learning, with Head Start. Ideal Learning is a term coined by Trust for Learning to represent high-quality, holistic early childhood programs, models and traditions, such as Montessori, HighScope, Reggio Emilia, Tools of the Mind, Waldorf, and others. Ideal Learning approaches share several core philosophical beliefs about high-quality early learning — the Principles of Ideal Learning — that paint a vision for what every child deserves.
While Ideal Learning programs vary in their approaches, models, and contexts, the threads that link them are a commitment to play; relationship-based interactions; an ecologically-focused, child-centered perspective; equity; and a strengths-based and inquiry-based approach with children, adults and families. Ideal Learning programs balance principles of attachment and independence that are meaningful for young children’s development.

Through partnering with organizations that already participate in Head Start, Ideal Learning programs can expand their reach to serve children from low-resourced and disadvantaged communities.

**Partnership Structures**

Not every Head Start provider receives funds directly from the federal government in the form of a Head Start grant. Because Head Start contracts are tightly controlled and seldom renegotiated, it is often easier to begin serving children enrolled in Head Start by partnering with an existing Head Start grantee, rather than by applying to the federal government for a new Head Start grant.

Many Ideal Learning providers that offer Head Start do so through partnerships with Head Start grantees. This is a particularly good way for smaller organizations to be able to serve eligible families.

The following language is used to describe the roles of various organizations involved in such a partnership:

- **Direct grantee**: an organization that receives Head Start funding directly from the federal government’s Office of Head Start (OHS)
- **Lead agency**: a direct grantee that contracts with one or more other organizations (delegate agencies) to provide services such as childcare
- **Delegate agency**: an organization (which may be an Ideal Learning provider) that receives Head Start funds indirectly through a contract with a lead agency
Recommendations: Before you Seek a Partnership:

Evaluate your organization’s readiness.

At a minimum, early learning providers participating in Head Start must:
- Be licensed by their state
- Participate in their state’s Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS), with some exceptions

Educate yourselves about Head Start.

Head Start is a federal program with oversight by a federal agency, the OHS. Head Start expectations and performance standards, as well as available funding and supports, are established by law and publicly available.

- Read and become familiar with the Head Start Act
- Read the Head Start Program Performance Standards to understand what is expected of Head Start providers
- Read the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework, to understand the skills children are expected to develop through Head Start

It is critical that potential Ideal Learning Head Start providers review the Head Start standards and understand how the standards align (or misalign) with state and local licensing regulations, QRIS standards, Department of Education standards, and most importantly, with the provider’s own Ideal Learning approach.
Explore your local Head Start landscape.

Who are the Head Start direct grantees in your area? Do they already partner with delegate agencies, or do they provide all Head Start services themselves for all the children they are contracted to serve? Are they able to serve all eligible children in the community, or would they like to be able to offer additional spaces? What can you learn from their expertise?

Explore your own motives and capacity.

What is the purpose of this relationship with Head Start? What is the impetus for seeking out Head Start partnership? Is it to meet the mission of your program? What would Head Start funding specifically allow you to do that you are unable to do any other way (e.g., provide dental care, mental health services, early intervention)?

Why do you believe low-income families in your community would benefit from participating in your program? How have you engaged with the communities you seek to serve? What do parents in these communities need and want from early learning providers? What aspects of your program meet those needs and desires?

How have you prepared to face the questions of race, class, and inequity that participation in Head Start will bring to the fore?

- As an organization, how have you explored the deeply disparate opportunities and outcomes that have existed and persist for children from low-income families, those of color, English learners, and children with disabilities?
- To what extent have you considered the ways your own organizational structures, procedures, and institutional culture might contribute to these disparities? How will you continue to deepen your investigations, and how will you act on what you have learned?
- How well does the diversity of your staffing reflect the families you hope to serve? If not very well yet, how will you address this?
- What structures do you have in place for supporting staff who are struggling to support a particular child?
Recommendations: Developing a Partnership

Establishing clear expectations is critical in developing partnerships between Ideal Learning providers and Head Start grantees.

These expectations can be detailed in the grant contract or in a Memorandum of Understanding. Before drafting such a document, Ideal Learning providers seeking a Head Start partnership should consider and get clarification on these questions:

**How do your values align with the values of the Head Start grantee?** Trust for Learning’s Principles of Ideal Learning can serve as a discussion guide and a tool for gauging alignment.

- How do you each define the role of the teacher in children’s learning (e.g., didactic teacher vs. guide/facilitator)?
- How do you each feel a high-quality, child-centered learning environment should look (e.g., pictures on the wall)?
- Do you agree about what aspects of instruction and the classroom environment should be assessed and how? Note: the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) is currently used as part of the Head Start evaluation system to determine whether or not a grantee will be required to compete to renew their Head Start grant. How will your classrooms meet the expectations of CLASS? How can you communicate any challenges to your lead agency while protecting the integrity of your pedagogical approach?
- How do you each document and assess children’s learning? Will you use the child assessments currently in use by the lead agency, or will you identify alternative child assessment tools that meet the expectations of Head Start?
What will each partner be responsible and accountable for? Different partnership agreements establish different divisions of responsibility between the lead agency and delegate agency. In your partnership, who will be responsible for:

- Child screenings (selecting, paying for, and conducting the screenings; storing the data)?
- Home visits?
- Supporting and engaging families?
- Providing health and mental health services to children?
- Providing required professional development for staff?
- Maintaining documentation about enrollment and compliance with Head Start mandates?

What resources come with this partnership and how can they be used in program operation? There is no universal cost-per-child for Head Start programs; funding is negotiated between direct grantees and the Office of Head Start in an original grant proposal, and between lead agencies and delegate agencies as they work out their respective responsibilities. It is critical that potential Ideal Learning Head Start providers understand the cost of providing high-quality care for children, especially children facing multiple adversities and challenges due to biological and social factors. Once there is clarity as to what each partner is accountable for, providers must ensure they have the basic funding to meet their responsibilities and the complex needs of children and their families without putting an undue burden on staff, teachers, and school leaders. Questions to consider include:

- How much flexibility is there in how funds can be used?
- Who mandates funding allocation (federal, state entity)?
- Must funds be allocated for specific things and in a specific way (e.g., a grant must be used to fund 75% of lead teacher salary and benefits)?
- How much funding overall will be allocated to the delegate agency for providing the agreed-upon services?

How is the lead agency organized, and how will that impact the partnership?

- Who makes decisions about how Head Start standards are implemented (e.g., agency director or education director)?
- Who makes decisions about how funding can be used?
- What programs and funding sources guide the operations of the grantee and their providers (e.g., Department of Education, Health and Human Services, philanthropic community)?
- How flexible, creative, and collaborative is the agency in accommodating the approaches and structures of different partners? That is, who gets the final say in interpreting and implementing the Head Start standards?
- What policies may override how Ideal Learning programs are shaped, such as suspension and expulsion rules or teacher professional development expectations?
How will you maintain and strengthen your relationship over time with your partner organizations? An Ideal Learning provider and a Head Start grantee seeking to build a partnership must establish structures within which their relationship can flourish. The goal is to establish how this relationship will operate on a concrete level.

- What are the touchpoints, how frequently should they occur, and what are the expectations of each agency?
- Will there be an assessor employed by the lead agency who is assigned to the Ideal Learning program to conduct all assessments mandated by Head Start?
- Which of the lead agency’s staff (early intervention specialists; home visitors; special education teachers) will work with the delegate agency? What is expected between these staff and the delegate agency’s staff?

Recommendations: Managing the Partnership

Focus on the mutual benefits of the partnership. The underlying premise of Ideal Learning approaches is that they center on meeting the needs of each child. Teachers and staff facilitate and guide children’s learning and discover the levers that unlock children’s development and potential. Head Start, too, is focused on meeting the needs of each child, with deep experience in addressing the specific needs of children from disadvantaged households and communities. With these shared goals in mind, Ideal Learning Head Start providers have discovered there are many benefits to strengthening the integration of Ideal Learning and Head Start. They include:

- **Leveraging additional funding.** The cost for meeting Head Start standards may be greater than the available funding, but providers have leveraged the resources and supports available from Head Start to access additional resources, including philanthropic funding, private donations, child care subsidies, and education dollars, which may not have been available if the provider were not serving Head Start-eligible children. In addition, partnering with an Ideal Learning provider may open up additional sources of funding for an existing Head Start provider, from funders focused on child development and interested in supporting partnership models.

- **Extending Head Start-style supports to more children.** In some cases, the holistic approach of Head Start to ensure children have access to medical and dental care and mental health services has allowed providers to extend these resources and supports to children in their care who may not be Head Start-eligible but have similar needs.

- **Sharing innovative approaches.** Through partnering with existing Head Start grantees, Ideal Learning providers can gain a platform to showcase their innovations and share their practices through participating in conferences, writing comment letters, and engaging in Head Start innovation labs.
Increase documentation of staff support. One challenge that Ideal Learning providers must adjust to is the documentation process throughout the day and year. Head Start performance standards require documentation of coaching and teacher support, professional development, and communities of practice. While many preschool teachers find time during the day to ask their colleagues or supervisors for help with particular practices and approaches, these informal conversations are not often documented. Documenting formal and informal meetings (even when seemingly inconvenient) helps to ensure programs meet Head Start’s teacher training and professional development standards. While it may impinge on the organic nature of inquiry and collaboration, documentation of meetings and conversations may also provide a data source about challenges that teachers and staff are confronting or avoiding, revealing areas that need more concentrated professional development to provide adequate support for teachers and staff.

Connect with other Ideal Learning Head Start providers to turn challenges into opportunities for growth. Ideal Learning providers who are participating in Head Start for the first time must be aware of potential challenges, but note that the Ideal Learning Head Start Network has a diversity of members who have experienced similar challenges and found solutions. There is a challenge in balancing multiple regulations and standards from your approach’s credentialing system, Head Start, state and local licensing, and education departments. Navigating these multiple systems may take resources away from classrooms and children who need them the most, making it hard to create the inspired relationships that are a hallmark of Ideal Learning approaches. Understanding how others in the Ideal Learning Head Start Network have dealt with similar challenges can help reduce the stress of dealing with multiple bureaucracies. As you gain an understanding of the Head Start performance standards and how they align with other state and local regulations, you will be better able to problem-solve for your program and others.
Discovery MI Preschool was founded by parents whose original Montessori school transitioned into a charter school without a preschool program. From the beginning, the school’s founders saw it as part of their mission to make Montessori accessible to all children. They recognized that Montessori started as an approach for children from disadvantaged households and communities, but that over its 100-year history, it had morphed into an upper/middle-class educational approach, resulting in cost barriers for many families. The area where this program is located has a childhood poverty rate of 24%, and the founding families saw it as crucial to serve an economically diverse group of children. They started the first year with 17 children, including 4 children funded by Head Start; the second year, they expanded the number of children funded by Head Start to 12, and the following year to 15 (the 16th student this year is an exception). At first, their mission was to enroll a third of the student body with children from low- to moderate-income households, but they later expanded that goal to have at least 50% of children be from low- to moderate-income households with at least 25% being funded through Head Start. With this change of mission, they served more children from disadvantaged households and communities and opened up increased funding opportunities for the school.

There are 2 primary funding sources that make it possible for this program to serve low-income children: (1) Head Start, which funds 15 children through the Scranton-Lackawanna Human Development Agency, and (2) the state’s PreK Counts program, which funds 15 children whose families earn up to 300% of the federal poverty threshold. The remaining 50% of families are considered “private pay,” but not all pay the school’s full tuition of $6,300 per year; child care subsidies and scholarships funded through the United Way provide additional funding and flexibility to support private pay families with financial needs. The classrooms are economically integrated, with children funded through different sources in classrooms together.
While the Head Start funding offered through their lead agency does not meet the full cost of care for those children (it falls short by about 10% for children staying for the full school day), the lead agency does take care of a lot of the out-of-classroom mandates set by Head Start, including child screening and assessment, home visits, intake process, dental screening, lead screening, and other mandated screenings. The higher rate of reimbursement provided by the PreK Counts program combined with private tuition and donations helps to offset the shortfall.

Discovery MI’s partnership with their lead agency is in some ways perfect for a small Ideal Learning program, in that the lead agency takes care of nearly all the Head Start requirements besides the design and provision of academic instruction. However, the Head Start funding comes with oversight over the school’s programming which is not always compatible with the philosophy of the school. For example, Head Start expectations as they relate to the physical environment—visual cues on the walls, lots of artwork—conflict with the Montessori approach of a very neutral environment with not much external stimulation on the walls. In this case, the two agencies have agreed that the Montessori approach takes precedence.

The strong relationship between the two agencies is fundamental to making this work. Stacy Nivert, board president at Discovery MI Preschool, comments, “Our lead agency is very understanding and supportive, but we do have to have various discussions about particular items. They work with us to accept the modifications required to stay true to our Montessori philosophy. They are as much committed to making it work as we are.” Such instances include child assessments not aligned with the Montessori approach, creation of lesson plans, classroom observation tools, etc. However, the program works to ensure that they are meeting all the licensing standards and to figure out ways to meet the Head Start standards with as little interruption as possible to the way their Ideal Learning approach should be implemented. Their lead agency recognizes that quality shines through even if it is not measured with a specific tool. In essence, Discovery MI Preschool recognizes that there is inherent tension between their philosophy and the philosophy of their grantee, the state, and Head Start in the way it is expressed in the environment, but they are still committed to the same goal of children thriving and being successful.

To learn more about Discovery Multiple Intelligences Preschool and their experience with building a Head Start partnership, you may contact board president Stacy Nivert:

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To learn more about the Ideal Learning Head Start Network, please contact Director Annie Frazer:

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The Ideal Learning Head Start Network is currently accepting new members. The Network is open to Ideal Learning providers seeking Head Start funding, as well as to Head Start providers working to implement Ideal Learning approaches. Providers interested in joining the Ideal Learning Head Start Network and participating in our monthly video calls and joint advocacy, please contact Co-Director Karen Haigh:

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