Ideal Learning Head Start Network

The Ideal Learning Head Start Network is a group of ideal learning providers who receive Head Start funds, either directly as grantees or indirectly as partners. The goal of this Network is to facilitate the integration of ideal learning approaches into Head Start, ensuring that children from low-resourced and disadvantaged communities can access innovative, holistic, and high-quality early learning experiences. The Network serves as a community of practice to provide resources, guidance, and support for programs that bridge ideal learning and Head Start.

We define ideal learning as highly personalized, developmental approaches to early education that focus on the whole child—building their intellectual, social, emotional, and moral skills. Examples of ideal learning approaches include Montessori, Reggio Emilia-inspired, Waldorf, HighScope, Bank Street College of Education, Friends Center for Children, Tools of the Mind, All Our Kin, Educare, EL Education, AVANCE, and others.

The Need: Access to Head Start funding plays a critical role in helping quality early learning providers reach children in underserved communities. However, for many ideal learning programs—which may use innovative program structures, curricula, and evaluation models—navigating the requirements of Head Start can be daunting. Likewise, existing Head Start providers that use conventional approaches but would like to implement ideal learning models may be dissuaded by real or perceived barriers.

Goals: Established in 2019, the Ideal Learning Head Start Network was designed to convene a group of innovative early learning providers who receive Head Start funding in order to:

1. Support existing Head Start/Early Head Start programs that use ideal learning models in strengthening their practice;
2. Influence systems change at the national level by educating Head Start to be more open to ideal learning approaches; and
3. Lay the necessary groundwork for more ideal learning providers to enter the Head Start space.

The Network achieves these goals by engaging in the following (among other initiatives):

A. Holding monthly video conferences to learn from one another and discuss the successes, opportunities, and challenges in implementing ideal learning approaches within the Head Start structure.

B. Attending conferences and meetings to build relationships and to advocate for policies that support ideal learning implementation within Head Start.

C. Buildingaresourcesbankandwritingwhitepapersthatprovidesupportand guidance for ideal learning providers seeking to participate in Head Start, as well as for Head Start programs seeking to adopt ideal learning models.

D. Engaging in the policymaking process by submitting comments on and influencing proposed federal rules and regulations impacting Head Start and/or ideal learning providers.

Members: The Network currently comprises Head Start providers implementing ideal learning approaches and national support organizations working with multiple providers. We are looking to grow the Network and are especially interested in expanding to include ideal learning providers seeking to participate in Head Start, as well as Head Start providers seeking to implement ideal learning approaches.

Please reach out to Network Co-Director Karen Haigh at karenmariehaigh@gmail.com if you or someone you know is interested in joining the Network.

Trust for Learning is proud to have helped co-launch the Ideal Learning Head Start Network with Montessori Partnerships for Georgia's Executive Director Annie Frazer, who chairs the Network. The Trust continues to fund and support the Network.