

Testimony of Yvette Sanchez Fuentes
President
National Alliance for Hispanic Families
United States House of Representatives Committee on Education and the
Workforce
“Strengthening Head Start for Current and Future Generations”

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Thank you Chairman Kline, Ranking Member Scott, and Members of the Committee for the opportunity to discuss strengthening the Head Start program. I am Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, President of the National Alliance for Hispanic Families. From 2009 to 2013, I had the distinct honor of being the Director of the Office of Head Start at the Department of Health and Human Services. Today I’m proud to be before you as an advocate for Latino families and as someone with a number of years of implementing the Head Start program at both the local and the federal level.

As we celebrate 50 years of Head Start, it is an historic milestone that presents a perfect opportunity to reflect on how the program has grown and evolved. Head Start continues to play a critical and often controversial role in the ecosystem of early childhood education and there are two things that make the program unique: The first is that Head Start was initially conceptualized as a two-generation program, supporting the success of both children and their families and the

community they reside. The second is a set of values that have been passed on from generation to generation including but not limited to:

1. The belief that parents are their child's first teacher.
2. The priority to serve the most vulnerable children.
3. The importance of community engagement.
4. The significance of honoring culture - including language and beliefs at all levels from individual values to community values.
5. The consequence of assuring high quality, comprehensive services.

It has been 50 years since President Johnson announced the creation of Project Head Start. The program initially began as an eight week summer program to provide preschool classes, medical and dental care and mental health services to prepare low-income children to enter public school. By 1966, the program was expanded to be a mostly half-day, school year program. Since then, the program expanded to include Early Head Start, the American Indian and Alaska Native program and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start. Head Start has grown from 560,000 children that first summer to almost a million children enrolled in the last school year and has, in total, served more than 30 million children and their families.

Last year over 80 percent of the children served were either three- or four-years-old. In 1994 Congress passed Early Head Start to provide services for pregnant women, infants and toddlers. Today, approximately 1,800 local nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and a few states, have five-year grants from the Department of Health and Human Services.

During my time at OHS, I had the privilege of visiting many Head Start programs across America from the Havasupai Nation at the bottom of the Grand Canyon to programs throughout every borough of New York City. The uniqueness of Head Start is that while there are standards that lend themselves to measuring quality and effectiveness, the exact combination of services designed by local grantees must be responsive to each child and family's ethnic, cultural, and linguistic heritage. Programs build relationships with families that support positive parent-child relationships, family well-being, and connections to peers and community. President Johnson often described Head Start as “not so much as a federal program but a neighborhood

effort”. To that end and to ensure the commitment and engagement of the community, Head Start programs are required to secure at least 20 percent of the total cost of the program through volunteer hours and costs of donating space, materials, and services. Since 1988, Minnesota has appropriated state general funds for Minnesota Head Start programs.

Both Head Start and Early Head Start programs offer a variety of service models, depending on the needs of the local community. Programs may be based in centers, schools, family child care homes or receive services through the home based model, in which a staff person visits children in their own home and works directly with the parent. During my time in a local Migrant Head Start program, we provided both center and family child care because families had made it clear that they preferred to have their babies in licensed homes with trained providers. In addition, there are programs in Alaska that have modified their hours to be responsive to the needs of homeless families.

During my time at the Office of Head Start, the birth-to-five model was piloted. The pilot made grants available to develop a comprehensive, seamless birth-to-five Head Start program. This model offers promise for serving children from earlier ages and for longer periods of time. The City of Baltimore was in the first round of the pilot grants. Several organizations with a long history of providing human services came together to form a collaborative to figure out how to redesign the Head Start program in order to leverage resources to implement a system of continuity and build a pipeline of services.

Much has changed since Head Start began 50 years ago. Head Start is no longer the sole provider of early childhood education. The state role in Pre-Kindergarten for four year olds has grown significantly and left many wondering how Head Start fits into the new policy landscape. For 50 years Head Start has served as the nation's laboratory - providing services to homeless families, children with disabilities, dual language learners, options for professional development for teachers and training parents - there are millions of stories about how Head Start changed the life of a child. I have seen it firsthand - meeting a family in West

Virginia who while their son described his clay creation to me told me about how he had not said a word before attending Head Start and hearing the story of a mom in New Jersey who after losing everything when Hurricane Sandy hit shared with me that when she was able to check her phone messages the only messages were from the Head Start teacher.

As you work and consider changes to improve the Head Start program, it will be critical to maintain the community based structure. The positive effects on children -ranging from cognitive, health, and social benefits—are well documented by numerous longitudinal studies. The federal to local funding structure is critical to Head Start.

I would like to end by sharing what Head Start means to me: it means that no matter where you are born in America, the color of your skin, the language you speak, the religion you practice or the state of your family and community, Head Start will be there responding to the unique strengths and challenges of their individual communities.

Thank you for your time today and I look forward to your questions.

