

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

OBJECTIVE

To assess factors contributing to Head Start's progress and programs' experiences in increasing teachers' qualifications.

BACKGROUND

With the passage of the Community Opportunities, Accountability, and Training and Educational Services (COATS) Act (P.L. 105-285) in 1998, Congress reauthorized Head Start through fiscal year (FY) 2003 and amended the Head Start Act. The amendments required more specific education performance standards and increased teacher qualifications. The COATS Act specifically mandates that by September 30, 2003, at least 50 percent of Head Start teachers *nationwide* in center-based programs must have an associate, baccalaureate, or advanced degree in early childhood education; or a degree in a field related to early childhood education, with experience teaching preschool children. According to the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Head Start met this requirement with 51 percent of teachers nationwide holding appropriate degrees in FY 2002.

In addition, to the COATS Act, ACF established a self-imposed staffing goal for Head Start programs – that *each* program should strive to achieve 50 percent degreed teaching staff by the end of FY 2003. Teaching staff is defined as those staff members who are responsible for leading a classroom of children in daily activities.

A source of data we used in our analysis was ACF's Program Information Report (PIR). PIR is the only comprehensive national source of data available concerning the staffing levels and qualifications of Head Start teaching staff. We supported the PIR analysis with data collected from a random sample of 300 Head Start program directors and a separate stratified cluster sample of 444 current Head Start teachers. We limited our interviews to Head Start programs (excluding American Indian and Alaska Native, migrant, and Early Head Start programs). This limitation allowed us to make more uniform comparisons across programs.

FINDINGS

Several Factors Have Contributed to Head Start's Progress in Increasing Teachers' Qualifications

Head Start has made significant progress in increasing the qualifications of teachers. Directors of Head Start programs report hiring more degreed teachers to improve their teachers' qualifications. Directors and teachers also reported that their program supports current, nondegreed teaching staff in their pursuit of degrees. In addition, programs

reported using Quality Improvement funds to retain teachers. Finally, turnover rates for Head Start teachers remain low, below that for public schools and non-teaching professionals.

Data Reflect That Disparities Exist in the Percentage of Degreed Teachers

Although we recognize that Head Start is not a regionally or State-administered program, we note that specific regions, States, and program types have a lower overall percentage of degreed teachers. The lack of degreed teaching staff is particularly acute in 15, mostly southern, States. Additionally, American Indian and Alaska Native, migrant, and Early Head Start programs are well below the 50 percent program goal. We also analyzed program performance among programs within the same county, since programs in the same county are likely to face similar circumstances and staffing challenges. We identified a total of 72 counties that had at least 1 program meeting ACF's self-imposed staffing goal and 1 program not meeting the goal.

Directors' attitudes regarding the degreed teaching staff requirement may influence the percentage of degreed teaching staff in their programs. Directors we interviewed who had a positive attitude concerning the value of degreed teaching staff in Head Start also had a higher percentage of degreed teaching staff in their own programs.

RECOMMENDATION

Provide Targeted Assistance to Programs Who Have Not Met ACF's Self-Imposed Staffing Goal

ACF, in conjunction with their regional offices, needs to target assistance to those programs where the level of degreed teaching staff is below 50 percent. The first priority should be to assist programs in those regions and States that are having the most difficulty. Special attention also must be focused on American Indian and Alaska Native, migrant, and Early Head Start programs, most of which were well below ACF's self-imposed goal for degreed teaching staff.

AGENCY COMMENTS

In its written response to the report, ACF concurred with our recommendation to provide targeted assistance to programs which had not met ACF's self-imposed staffing goal of 50 percent degreed teachers with a degree in early childhood education or a degree in a field related to early childhood education *in each program* by September 30, 2003. It will prioritize these efforts in Head Start programs in Regions 4 and 6, States that are below 50 percent, as well as American Indian and Alaska Native, migrant, and Early Head Start programs.

We have made technical revisions to the report based on ACF's comments. The full text of ACF's comments is contained in Appendix D.