



Health Section

Head Start keeps kids and families focused on success

SAN DIEGO, Calif.- Every day throughout the school year more than 10,000 San Diego preschoolers cross through the doors of the Neighborhood House Association (NHA)'s Head Start and Early Head Start programs. The goal of the Head Start program is to increase school readiness of children from birth to age five who live at or below the federal poverty line.

Over the past four decades, Head Start has touched the lives of more than 250,000 low-income preschool children and families at more than 130 locations in San Diego County. Neighborhood House Association currently holds 80 licenses to operate Head Start facilities. Head Start employs more than 800 people, from social workers, teachers and nurses to counselors and administrative personnel.

“Our goal with Head Start is to provide a child development program of such high quality that even if parents could afford to send their children to any preschool they wanted, they would still choose Head Start,” said NHA President and CEO Rudolph A. Johnson, III. “The well-being and success of every child and family enrolled in Head Start is the unwavering commitment and dedication of every person in this organization.”

Head Start is a federally funded child development program designed to provide a comprehensive program to meet the emotional, social, health, nutritional and psychological needs of eligible preschool children and those with disabilities. Early Head Start focuses on children six weeks to three years of age, as well as pregnant women. The program was created in 1965 as part of President Lyndon B. Johnson's “War on Poverty.”

What San Diego's Head Start Program offers to children and parents

- * Close-knit setting: Head Start typically offers a small setting that allows for close relationships between provider and child and provider and parent. Head Start families get the benefits of mixed age groups and can keep siblings together.
- * Providers from the same culture: Head Start allows parents to select care that reflects their culture. Providers usually are of a similar background with parents and show the possibilities of being bicultural while still being very traditional.
- * A system of quality education: The San Diego Head Start program expects that providers continue their education and attend trainings.

- * Flexible hours: Parents who work nights, weekends or other shifts can pick the providers whose schedules fit theirs.
- * Partnerships with providers: Head Start requires providers to involve parents in their child's program.
- * Family support: Head Start and its parent organization, Neighborhood House Association offers the family and children a full range of social, education, behavioral and emotional services.
- * Connections with other parents: Head Start requires that each provider gather parents together at least three times a year. At these events, parents chat and find out how others handle parenting struggles.

Johnson, himself a Head Start child, speaks from experience when noting that Head Start offers a sense of belonging, social service support and a chance to be involved in activities to help the whole family. Johnson emphasized that in today's economic climate it is vital that the families served by NHA and Head Start have resources to assist them in transitioning from welfare to work, have access to quality child care and are able to access educational and skill-building opportunities.

“Head Start focuses on the family because we know that if the family is successful, the child has a better chance at being successful,” continued Johnson.

“The good news is that Head Start is reaching the community. In September 2006, the Head Start program achieved 100 percent enrollment within the first week of the new school year,” said Johnson. “This historical accomplishment was repeated again this year, due in large part to a refocusing of monitoring and staff support by NHA, along with more effective collaboration with various local school districts, including San Diego Unified.”

Head Start eligibility

- * The Head Start program is available for income eligible children three to five years of age.
- * To be income eligible, a family of four must have an income of \$20,650 a year or less.
- * Children with disabilities are mainstreamed into the program and receive a full range of developmental services.
- * Proof of citizenship is not a requirement for enrollment in Head Start.