



# THE HEAD START LANGUAGE PLAYBOOK



NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

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## Section 1

# INTRODUCTION

# FOREWORD FROM HEAD START LEADERSHIP

## To our Head Start family,

When people tell us that they've been involved with Head Start for 5, 10, or even 20 years, that fills us with pride. We are grateful to be part of this passionate, driven, diverse community doing such important work.

Every day, Head Start provides essential services for hundreds of thousands of children from birth to age five. We partner with countless parents, teachers, and community members to understand how we can support them and their communities. And together, all of us at Head Start are creating meaningful, measurable change.

Research shows that Head Start delivers a clear advantage for students who participate in our program as they prepare for kindergarten and beyond. They are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and receive a post-secondary degree, license, or certification than children who don't participate in Head Start. Learning alongside you, they gain the confidence, resilience, and persistence that will carry them through life. On top of that, the parents of Head Start children who we partner with are more likely to read with their children, continue their own education, and be strong advocates for their children's education.

Results like these aren't something we take lightly. They're a reflection of the incredible work you do, and they paint a picture of why Head Start matters. You've probably heard questions from someone outside Head Start about who we are and how we make an impact. Building a greater understanding of what we do has never been more challenging—or more important.

Today we're taking a step to help share our Head Start story. The Head Start Language Playbook you're reading is filled with words that work, words that don't work, and why. We've designed it to equip all staff with tools for talking about who we are and what we do. When we share our story in language that more people can understand and get on board with, we have more successful conversations. More successful conversations mean more understanding of our work, and more support for children who participate in Head Start. When we coordinate our efforts, we can all achieve more.

# HOW TO USE THIS BOOK

## What am I reading?

The Language Playbook you are reading is designed to help Head Start staff have better, more effective conversations about our mission with the public. Though the people you speak with may have varying degrees of experience with Head Start, the following recommendations and “words that work” are designed to resonate with the broadest possible audience. Whether you’re talking to a parent or a policymaker, we hope you’ll find the tips in this book helpful.

## Where did the recommendations come from?

These recommendations are based on messaging research with Head Start practitioners. The research sessions were conducted in Spring 2018 with staff from a range of backgrounds, roles, tenure, and geographic regions. The goal of the messaging research was to hear how we talk about our mission today, and understand what obstacles or misperceptions we face when talking to the public.

## How do I use this Playbook?

That part is up to you! The Playbook is intended to be a resource for you whenever you are communicating about **Head Start’s mission—who we are, and what we do**. At the end of this document, we’ve included a summary of key words that work and words that don’t work, for when you need a quick reference guide.

**You will see a series of call-out icons throughout:**

	<b>Belittling Alert:</b> Language that sounds like we’re talking down to someone, or like we’re taking too much credit
	<b>Buzzword Alert:</b> Language that may be familiar within Head Start, but confusing to others
	<b>Alienating Alert:</b> Language that is inherently negative and isolating, and could be replaced with something more positive

# THE COMMUNICATION CONTEXT

If we had to sum up this Playbook in one sentence, it would be: as we communicate about Head Start, **what our audience believes matters**. It's important to consider the ideas, questions, and perceptions someone brings to the table as they hear from Head Start. How much do they know about what we do? Is there something we can say that might surprise them? When we put ourselves in our audience's shoes, we're that much more effective. And the better we communicate our message with our audience's truth in mind, the more we can tell a clear story that represents all that Head Start does.

In our messaging research, we heard from Head Start practitioners that there are strengths of Head Start some people aren't aware of. There are also misperceptions and questions many of us have heard time and time again. When we adjust the words and phrases we use, we strike a chord with more people in more ways.



## FINDINGS SNAPSHOT

### What We Heard in the Spring 2018 Messaging Research

Every person's approach to talking about Head Start and every person's experience is a bit different. But we were struck by the commonalities we heard in the 2018 messaging research. Across roles, perspectives, and regions we heard many similarities about the strengths of Head Start that matter to us as a community, and areas of skepticism we address. The next two pages are a brief look at themes we heard for each of those topics.





**OUR COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH.** We're not just working with children—we're also working with parents and communities. On top of that, many members of the public aren't aware that our process is individualized for each child, family, and community.

*“The thing I love is that it's not a prescriptive process that says you have to follow this trajectory. It changes and morphs and each child gets individualized, comprehensive services from start to finish.”*

Head Start Practitioner

**OUR COMMITMENT TO  
CONTINUOUS IMPROVEMENT.**

We are constantly learning from each other, and bringing the best ideas forward to make every Head Start classroom even more robust.

*“It's not just that we're always learning; we're learning to respond. Whatever collaboration we do is geared to be able to respond to where we are, and the needs of our current society. We're flexible.”*

Head Start Practitioner

**OUR INCLUSIVE,  
SUPPORTIVE  
MINDSET.** We have a deep respect for each child, parent, and teacher we support. Our role isn't to swoop in and lead—it's to serve as a supportive partner.

*“We take families where they are. Not where any of us think they should be.”*

Head Start Practitioner

**OUR FOCUS ON THE “WHOLE CHILD.”**

We're not just teaching children the basics of early education to prepare them for school. We're teaching them the basics to prepare them for life.

*“For me, that's the difference between an average state Pre-K program and Head Start. Most programs are not focusing on the whole child.”*

Head Start Practitioner



# SKEPTICISM WE MAY ENCOUNTER

**ISN'T HEAD START DAYCARE?** With low familiarity about our comprehensive approach comes confusion about the exact role Head Start plays.

*“In our area, the educators in the community understand. The school district and college understand. But for everyday people in town, their perception is that Head Start is for daycare, not an education set-up.”*

Head Start Practitioner

**HOW EFFECTIVE IS HEAD START LONG-TERM?** Every day, we see the positive impact our work has for families and communities. But we sometimes face questions about how that impact carries over into the future.

*“People very much connect things to the old research. We have a bunch of people who will pop up and say ‘Well, we heard that Head Start doesn’t work.’ I just had to get better at learning or understanding the research, saying this is what has now come out, to change that perception.”*

Head Start Practitioner

**ISN'T HEAD START A POVERTY PROGRAM?** Head Start has continued to evolve since our founding, and we partner with families from a range of backgrounds. Sometimes our evolution isn't widely recognized. And sometimes, there are just stigmas, plain and simple.

*“Everyone filters Head Start through their stereotypes of poor people.”*

*“I am so tired of talking to Congresspeople who think Head Start parents are tired or lazy or don't want to go to work. 60% of parents at our center are working.”*

Head Start Practitioner



We'll explore questions and skepticism we may encounter, and how to overcome them, later in the Playbook.



# PRE-COMMUNICATION QUESTIONS

Before you dive into a conversation or start writing, **put yourself in your audience's shoes**. The questions below will help you speak to their truth in a way that will resonate.

## 1. To ensure what you say is **clear**...

- ✓ ...how familiar is your audience with Head Start?
- ✓ ...what have they already heard or learned about our work?
- ✓ ...are there areas of confusion or misconceptions they have?
- ✓ ...is your message straightforward enough that your audience could repeat it back to you?

## 2. To ensure what you say is **engaging**...

- ✓ ...based on what you know, which topics or issues matter most to your audience?
- ✓ ...is there a personal story you could include of someone who was impacted by Head Start?
- ✓ ...what can you talk about that might surprise your audience in a good way?

## 3. To ensure what you say makes an **impact**...

- ✓ ...how do you want your audience to feel after their conversation with you?
- ✓ ...are you telling stories that your audience will care about?
- ✓ ...are you talking *at* your audience, or asking questions and keeping the dialogue open?
- ✓ ...are you including a call to action, or something you want your audience to do?





## Section 2

# COMMUNICATING OUR MISSION



# INTRODUCING HEAD START: OUR MISSION STATEMENT

No Language Playbook would be complete without a mission statement. As an organization engaged in the important, and ever-changing, conversation around early childhood education and development, Head Start’s mission statement needs to anchor and guide our strategy for what we want to accomplish in the future.

Mission statements can say a lot with a few words. For Head Start, it’s our way of showing what makes us stand out, and getting straight to the heart of our passion and vision.

## When you need to introduce Head Start in a sentence:

**Head Start gives children from at-risk backgrounds the skills they need to be successful in school and life—supporting more kids, families, and communities on their path to success.**

children from at-risk backgrounds	Defines who we help using words that inspire action: when children are at risk, we are called to support them
skills they need	Signals that we’re delivering results: after participating in Head Start, children leave with critical skills
school and life	Shows we’re helping prepare Head Start children for kindergarten and beyond
kids, families, and communities	Speaks to our comprehensive model
supporting their path to success	Sums up our mission in visual, vivid language

# A CLOSER LOOK AT THE MISSION STATEMENT

There will also be opportunities to introduce who we are and what we do in a bit more detail. Below is some language to keep in mind in those situations.

**Head Start is a comprehensive early education program for children from at-risk backgrounds from birth to age 5. From early math and reading skills to confidence and resilience, we help children build the abilities they need to be successful in school and life. Each Head Start program engages parents as equal partners with their child’s teacher, and works closely with the local community to adapt to what each area needs. Every child has the ability to succeed, and together, we’re supporting more children, families, and communities on their path to success.**

comprehensive early education program	Spells out exactly what we deliver, and combats the idea that Head Start is “daycare”
from birth to age 5	Expands the population of children we serve, and connects to the importance of early brain development
early math and reading skills	Defines our approach to readiness—developing skills for school and for life
confidence and resilience	
engages parents as equal partners with their child’s teacher	Illustrates our comprehensive approach and raises awareness of the breadth of what we do
works closely with the local community to adapt	Nods to how we constantly learn and innovate
every child has the ability to succeed	Expresses our social justice mission in language everyone can get on board with



## FINDINGS SNAPSHOT

### What We Heard in the Spring 2018 Messaging Research

In our language research, we tested several potential descriptors for the people Head Start serves, including “at-risk children” and “children at risk of being left behind. “However, we heard during discussions that practitioners were sensitive to any language that unfairly labeled the children themselves, rather than their life circumstances, which is why we recommend saying “children from at-risk backgrounds.”

“We are really concerned about labeling lower income families. We don’t want those kids to be labeled because it’s not in their control.”

- Head Start Practitioner

One exception to this rule is when we are speaking directly to Head Start families or potential families. Then, it’s best to stick to language like “eligible families” or “qualifying families.” For more on this, see Tailoring Our Message in [Section 3](#).



## A NOTE ON METAPHORS

Some metaphors are stronger than others. We don’t want to sound paternalistic, or use language that could potentially alienate key audiences we need support from.

If you say...	Here’s the issue...	Instead say...
Leveling the playing field	<p>“I have family in the Midwest who are well-to-do and they would look down on that. They’d say ‘Why should my money go to benefit these other kids? I want it to benefit my own kids.’”</p> <p>- Head Start Practitioner</p>	Supporting more children, families, and communities on their path to success



# MORE LANGUAGE THAT BRINGS OUR MISSION TO LIFE

A mission statement is only as good as the examples it relies on. Below are key themes and language that illustrate who we are and what we do.

## Bringing the Mission Statement to Life: Words That Work

<b>Our comprehensive approach</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Every neighborhood, school, and student is unique. At Head Start, we don't believe in a one-size-fits-all solution.</li><li>✓ Head Start offers locally-designed programs with feedback and input from parents, teachers, and the community itself.</li><li>✓ We believe in tailoring our approach based on what the community wants from us, because our solutions should be as diverse as the communities we serve.</li></ul>
<b>Our inclusive, supportive mindset</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ At Head Start, we're committed not just to the children we teach, but to their parents too.</li><li>✓ We help families address their immediate needs while giving them support as they plan for future goals.</li></ul>
<b>Our focus on the "whole child"</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Today we have so much data about the importance of early childhood development, like the fact that more than 90% of a child's brain develops from birth to age 4.</li><li>✓ We know that students need healthy brains to learn, and if we don't help address difficult circumstances early in their lives, the impact on their educational outcomes later on is staggering.</li><li>✓ We rely on a "whole child" approach, which means helping our students develop socially, intellectually, and emotionally.</li><li>✓ Head Start offers safe and nurturing spaces for them to learn.</li><li>✓ We put promising ideas in front of children at the time in their lives when it matters most.</li></ul>
<b>Our commitment to getting better all the time</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>✓ Head Start is at our best when we apply an always-learning mindset.</li><li>✓ As a community, we're always learning from each other.</li><li>✓ Our mission is to constantly innovate: to understand what's working and what's not, so we can support more children, families, and communities on their path to success.</li><li>✓ We also create classrooms where innovation and new approaches are encouraged. Head Start provides a variety of personalized learning experiences to help children grow and succeed academically.</li></ul>

## Our connections to national and local partners

- ✓ Ensuring that every child has equal access to education can't be done by just one organization.
- ✓ Even though our geographic reach puts us in a unique position to force positive change, we haven't done it alone. We're at our best when we engage and partner with other organizations.
- ✓ The future of this effort is bright, because there are many helping hands and many voices working to push every student forward.

## Our future, rather than our past

- ✓ Head Start has been serving communities in need for over fifty years. We're proud of our heritage and of all the things we've learned. But as we look forward, our calling is clear: how do we continue improving, and find new ways to help children and their families across the nation?



### **A NOTE ON OUR COMPREHENSIVE APPROACH**

Whenever we can, we should highlight the services we offer to both children and parents. For children enrolled in Head Start programs, we help facilitate critical health services like immunizations, and vision, dental, and hearing screenings.

For parents, we offer job training opportunities, and share information with them about important child development milestones, so they learn more ways to create encouraging home environments and enhance their relationships with their children.



### Section 3

# TAILORING OUR MESSAGE

# COMMUNICATING TO DIFFERENT AUDIENCES

Remember that when we're communicating about Head Start, different people bring different perspectives to the table. Based on who you are, where you're from, and what experiences and awareness you have, you likely have a unique opinion on who Head Start is, and what Head Start does.

Our mission statement is designed to work with the widest possible audience. That said, what follows are some tips to keep in mind if you need to tailor your message for a particular audience.

## When you're speaking with someone who has never heard of Head Start...

### 1. Lean in to who we are and what we do.

Let our new mission statement do the work for you! By highlighting what we offer and who we serve ([page 13](#)), you can let the Language Playbook serve as your guide.

### 2. Share your reason for being involved with Head Start.

Connecting on a personal level matters tremendously when we want to help people understand the value of Head Start. Whether it's an anecdote about a memorable moment or an achievement during your time at Head Start, or the reason you got involved with Head Start in the first place, paint a picture that shows your passion for the work you do.

"I felt like Head Start was the **perfect fit for me**. I believe in the mission so much."

- Head Start Practitioner

"I've been with Head Start for almost 32 years. **I'm a former parent** of a Head Start child. For me, what drives the work I do is that I can relate to the families we serve. I've been there."

- Head Start Practitioner

"To me, it's all about seeing the children introduced to **so many new experiences**. There's a local theater program, and we were invited to go. The children, and even their parents, were looking around because it was their first time in a theater seeing a performance! To have them share their stories of how the program has impacted them, it always moves me to tears."

- Head Start Practitioner

## When you're speaking with a policymaker...

### 1. Start by telling a story about a person who Head Start has helped.

Head Start's goal of helping at-risk children is something that virtually everyone can get on board with. But in the ever-polarized environment of Capitol Hill, our elected representatives need to hear more than just talking points about why our work matters. They need to hear real-life stories about the day-to-day impact our work is having. Paint a picture of a child or family who has personally benefited from Head Start—it provides policymakers with an emotional connection, and a reason to care about our work.

**“The stories matter.** Those in Congress who like us already know the data. Those who don't like us won't listen to data alone.”

- Head Start Practitioner

“I can go and brag about what we do at Head Start, but if **I introduce a parent,** we have someone who can say: This is what we can help people do.

**You can help more people like me.”**

- Head Start Practitioner

### 2. Pair that story with a statistic or two.

After introducing a story, weave in a relevant data point to maximize the impact of your message. Policymakers care about results—so when we use numbers to connect an individual story to a broader trend, what we say becomes even more powerful.

“Before it used to be all about how we at Head Start felt. But we can't tell that story anymore.

**Now we have to prove it.”**

- Head Start Practitioner



For more tips on using data in your communication, check out **“Incorporating Statistics and Data”** in [Section 4](#).

### 3. Speak to your local area—you're the expert!

Elected representatives know their states and districts are all unique. So when they hear that Head Start takes the time and effort to truly understand what an area needs, it underlines our flexible and comprehensive approach. Give an example of how you're catering to the local community when you speak with policymakers. If you're able to highlight a story from constituents in their state or district, that's even better.

### 4. Steer clear of language that's polarizing.

Some words can be polarizing—they sound great to some people, but make others shut down. With policymakers especially, language like this can do more harm than good. To have the greatest impact, it's best to avoid phrases they may hear as politically-charged.



#### Examples of Words That Work

Head Start's programs are locally-designed based on feedback from parents, teachers, and the community itself. For example, here in Providence, Head Start connects families to health services like immunizations, and vision, dental, and hearing screenings.

We believe in tailoring our approach based on what the community wants from us. Here in Contra Costa County, we created a centralized kitchen where children get three servings of food per day. The community we serve is very ethnically diverse, and so are the dishes we serve from Filipino chicken adobo, to Caribbean food, and more.



If you say...	To us, it feels...	Here's the issue...	Instead, try...
<p>The phrase "social justice"</p>	<p>Social justice is a good thing! Doesn't everyone care about social justice?</p>	<p>"If you're talking to Congress, you can say 'social justice' and the reaction will depend on what color tie they're wearing. Everything has to be tailored based on who you're talking to." - Head Start Practitioner</p> <p>"I'm looking at it from a political lens. I work with a philanthropist who's all about social justice, but we don't use that language. But everyone will say they want kids to succeed." - Head Start Practitioner</p>	<p><b>Describe social justice, instead of using this shorthand:</b></p> <p>Every child deserves an opportunity to succeed.</p>



## When you're speaking with someone skeptical...


### 1. Start by acknowledging their questions.

Spreading the word can be frustrating when you hear comments like this:

“I was able to go on local TV to do an interview.  
And what was the first thing that came out of the person’s mouth?  
**‘Well, we heard that Head Start doesn’t work.’**”

- Head Start Practitioner

Remember that no matter who you're speaking to, it's important to make sure your audience feels heard. When speaking to a skeptic, start off by briefly summarizing the question you are hearing from him or her. This shows you're listening, and are open to continuing the conversation.



Instead of...	Try this...
I disagree. That's wrong. Actually, research has shown that...	It sounds like you're asking about _____. I've heard questions about _____ before. I'm hearing that you'd like to talk more about _____.

### 2. Pivot to tangible facts about Head Start.

After acknowledging the question, shift the conversation to facts about Head Start and our impact. Share a stat about our history, or an example of the advantage that Head Start participants gain. Starting with “it might surprise you to hear that...” injects a positive tone and frames the conversation as an opportunity for both parties to learn.

## Try this...

It might surprise you to hear that...

...Head Start has been in operation for over 50 years, and we've served more than 35 million children across the country.

...Head Start children are less likely to need special education services and less likely to have been held back a grade.

...Head Start children are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and receive a post-secondary degree, license, or certification.



For even more examples of the results Head Start creates, check out the yearly **Head Start by the Numbers** [fact sheet](#).

### 3. End with an example of how we're working toward the future.

It's not just about where we've been in the past and where we are today; it's about where we're going tomorrow. We can build credibility by signaling we're continuing to improve for the future. Ending with an example of how we are moving forward shows we've heard and understood their questions, and are always working to improve.

## Try this...

Head Start has been serving communities in need for over fifty years. We're proud of our heritage and of all the things we've learned. But as we look forward, our mission is clear: how do we **continue improving**, and find new ways to help children and their families?

Our aim is to help make sure that every child in America has an opportunity to succeed, and **we're finding new ways** to make this happen.

## Because...

This language shows we're proud of our success, but we're still continuing to challenge ourselves and the status quo.

# When you're speaking with someone who qualifies for Head Start, but thinks they don't...

## 1. Acknowledge the perspective they bring to the table.

Parents want the best for their children, and it's not always an easy pill to swallow that despite their hard work to provide for their families, they could benefit from a little extra help along the way. Be sensitive to their perspective, and highlight the ways in which their children will benefit from Head Start.

## 2. Let them lead the way—don't overshadow their role as parents.

Remember, parents want to know we're listening to them. Don't assume what their needs are before they've voiced them to us.



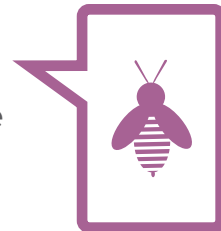
If you say...	Here's the issue...	Instead, try...	Why it works...
We're here to... ...lead you ...inform you ...offer you resources ...serve you	"It sounds like we're training parents to be better parents. That makes it seem like low-income parents aren't smart enough to know how to parent." - Head Start Practitioner	<b>We're here to partner with you.</b>	"We support parents. We partner with them. They're not broken." - Head Start Practitioner



To take language about partnership to the next level, talk about how Head Start provides and connects parents to resources and tools they need to be advocates for their children.

### 3. Avoid buzzwords that could be alienating.

When speaking with parents, be especially careful with how you describe who the program is for. What’s most important isn’t what the family’s income level is—it’s that the family’s children are eligible for Head Start.



If you say...	Here’s the issue...	Instead, try...	If necessary...
low-income families	Few people categorize themselves by their income—and while we know what “low-income” means within Head Start, our audience may not.	<b>eligible families</b> or <b>qualifying families</b>	We know Head Start is perceived as a poverty program. When possible, we should avoid references to income. However, if pressed, say <b>income-eligible</b> or <b>income-qualifying</b> .



To broaden perspectives of who qualifies for Head Start, we shouldn’t just focus on income as the main factor. There are other populations of children we serve:

- ✓ children who are homeless (living with family members, such as grandparents, who are not their custodial parents) or living in foster care (and importantly, these children qualify for Head Start regardless of family income)
- ✓ children with hearing, visual, speech, or language impairments
- ✓ children with intellectual and learning disabilities, autism, or traumatic brain injuries
- ✓ children with orthopedic impairments

### 4. Show them how they can get involved and benefit too!

We know that parents can play a huge role inside the classroom, so be sure to highlight the many opportunities they have to be physically present in their child’s Head Start center – whether it’s volunteering in the classroom, engaging in parent council meetings, or participating at parent leadership retreats. You can even talk about how over [100,000 parents advanced their own education in 2017](#) because their children were enrolled in Head Start.

# DOS AND DON'TS FOR RESPONDING TO CRITICISM.

Below are some dos and don'ts to keep in mind when responding to criticism. Let them be your roadmap for how to answer tough questions in the community.

## 1. The misperception: Head Start doesn't work.

- ✓ DO point to our expertise by mentioning how long Head Start has existed.
- ✓ DO share a story about someone who has benefited from Head Start.
- ✓ DO start with phrases like “it might surprise you to learn...”
- ✗ DON'T overwhelm them with facts.
- ✗ DON'T use a defensive tone.

## 2. The misperception: Head Start is too expensive.

- ✗ DON'T emphasize Head Start's PRICE.
- ✓ DO shift the focus of the conversation to Head Start's VALUE, and the investment we make in students to help them succeed in school and life.
- ✗ DON'T use words like “federally funded,” which raise questions about quality.

## 3. The misperception: Head Start is daycare.

- ✓ DO highlight the impact Head Start has both inside AND outside of the classroom.
- ✓ DO underline that we help both children and families.
- ✓ DO showcase the social, emotional, and intellectual skills children acquire.
- ✗ DON'T fall into the trap of educating your audience on the range of early childhood education options that are out there.

## 4. The misperception: Head Start is a poverty program.

- ✓ DO emphasize that most Head Start parents are working—many in minimum wage-paying jobs.
- ✓ DO show how Head Start benefits parents too.
- ✗ DON'T use the phrase “low-income”—it just reinforces stereotypes.
- ✓ DO talk about income eligibility, and other ways families qualify for Head Start.







## Section 4

# SHARING STORIES ABOUT HEAD START

# TELLING A POWERFUL STORY

One of the best ways to spread the word about Head Start is to tell a story about the impact we've had for a child or a family. But some ways of telling those stories are more likely to break through than others. For the story to truly strike a chord, it should tell your audience something about an individual *and* something about Head Start more broadly.

Below are some essential elements of effective Head Start stories. This is by no means a rigid formula, or a strict order to follow. Instead, it's a starting point to build on as you tell the story in an order and form that feels best to you.

## The Essential Ingredients

### Who the story is about:

Introduce the hero of the story. Is this about an individual person? A family? An organization? Can you paint a picture of who they are?

*For example: Last year we partnered with a group of Head Start parents in Ohio.*

### How Head Start was involved:

What was Head Start's role? How did we partner with this person, family, organization, etc.? Was there something special or different about Head Start's approach this time? Did we partner with another organization or person to make something happen?

*For example: The parents who we partnered with in Ohio were nominated by their communities to be part of our Parent Ambassador program, where Head Start provides a week of personal growth training and public speaking skills.*

## What the impact or result was:

What was the change from before Head Start was involved, to after? What specifics or details happened that made that change clear? How did we support the person, family, or community?

*For example: Later in the year, the Ohio Parent Ambassadors traveled to Capitol Hill, where they shared their stories with members of Congress and made their voices heard.*

## Why this story relates to a broader narrative about Head Start:

Does this story connect to a piece of our mission, like helping prepare children for school and life or tailoring our approach to each community where we work? What does this story say about who we help? Why is that important?

*For example: This story is just one example of how Head Start opens new windows of opportunity for parents. In fact, 60% of our workforce are past or current Head Start parents who are continuing their education.*



## INSPIRATION FOR OTHER STORIES WE COULD TELL

### CONSIDER SHARING STORIES LIKE:

How your program is implementing new tools or technology to help children learn...

How your program plays a role in the local community with job fairs,  
family goal-setting, and more...

How a parent of a Head Start child got involved in a school, ultimately continuing their  
education and/or becoming part of the program leadership...

How events like family literacy night, math night, and science night  
bring families together and provide resources for parents  
to be actively engaged in their child's education...

# INCORPORATING STATISTICS AND DATA

To really make your story shine, weave in a data point that connects your individual story to a larger whole. Below are some suggestions of statistics that work—and some statistics that are even more effective.



A good statistic:	A better statistic:	Here's why:
<p>Head Start children reduce their vocabulary deficit by 38% during the program year.</p>	<p>Head Start students are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and receive a post-secondary degree, license, or certification.</p>	<p>Stick to the positive wherever possible—instead of talking about what's reduced, talk about what children gain.</p>
<p>Head Start serves more than 1 million children in the U.S.</p>	<p>Head Start serves 1 million children from birth to age 5 in the U.S. at a critical time in their lives. More than 90% of a child's brain develops from birth to age 4.</p>	<p>Sometimes two statistics are better than one—especially when they are stats that are hard to argue with, like these.</p>
<p>A single Head Start program can feed thousands of children a day.</p>	<p>Every child in a Head Start classroom will be fed each day—for some, the only meals they will eat that day.</p>	<p>Put the statistic in context to help your audience fully understand what we're delivering.</p>
<p>31% of eligible children ages 3 to 5 attend Head Start.</p>	<p>In 2017, we served over 600,000 children ages 3 to 5 across 57,000 classrooms – and we're still growing! Our goal is to help serve every eligible child and family who could benefit from Head Start programs and services.</p>	<p>Put the 31% of children we HAVE served in context of what that number represents – and what opportunities we have in the future.</p>



As an organization, our language should focus on ALL the children we serve, **from birth to age 5**, to highlight the holistic impact we have throughout early childhood.

That means we should move away from segmenting the children we serve based on their age (i.e., not talking about just children ages 3 to 5), and instead focus on the impact we have from an early age on a child's brain development and their ability to learn.

## OTHER WAYS TO SPOTLIGHT OUR IMPACT

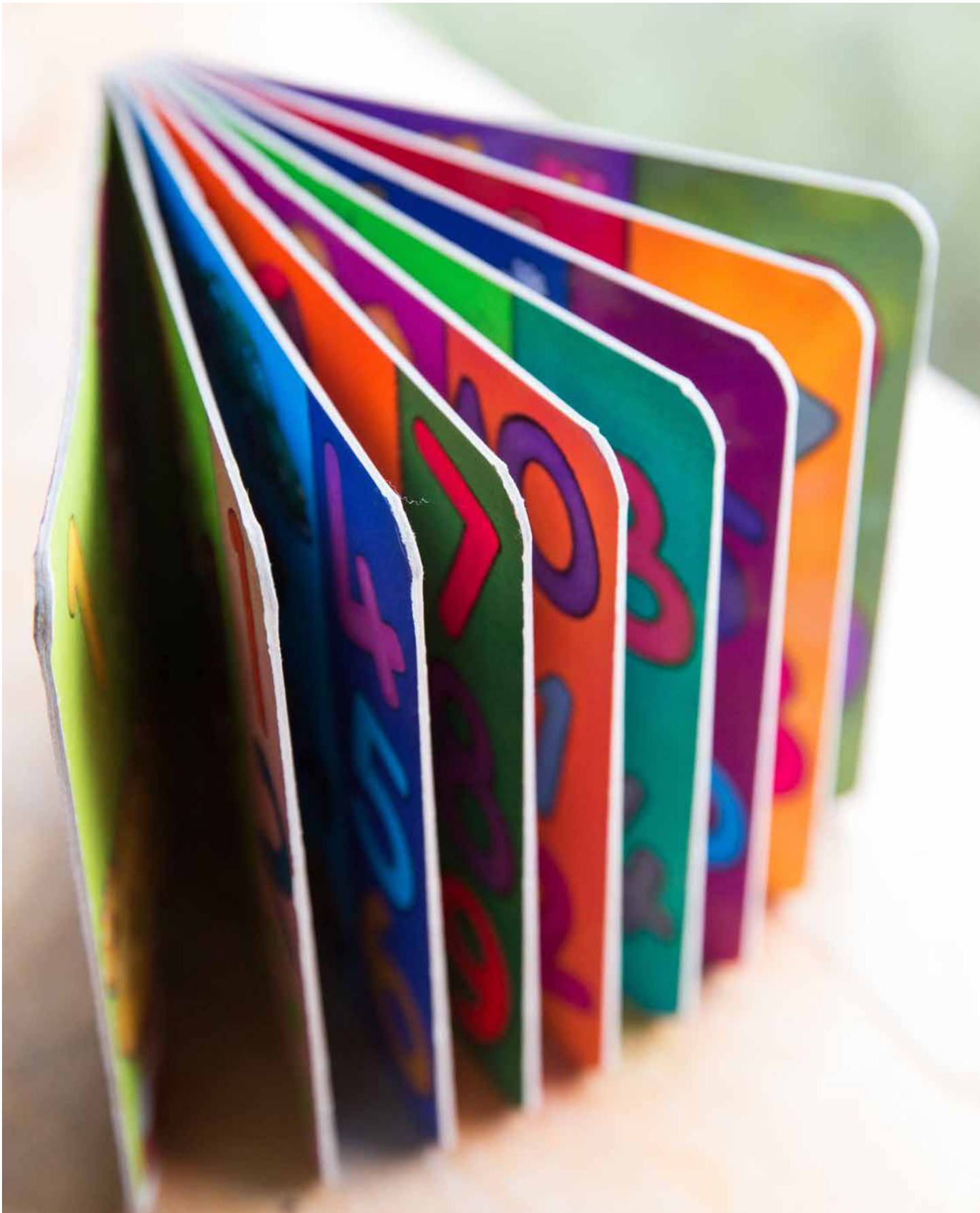
An area we don't get enough credit for is how we stimulate and drive economic growth in the communities we serve. Nearly 240,000 people are employed in Head Start centers nationwide.\*

We not only **employ members of the community to work at our centers**, whether they're teachers, professional and administrative staff, or maintenance crews, but we **contract with local service providers**, like construction companies, plumbers, or maintenance crews, we also contract with, to keep our buildings operating smoothly. The more people who are gainfully employed or provided with new business opportunities, the more that community, top to bottom, can thrive economically.

There's another important way we help stimulate economic growth: We help parents and their work or class schedules without worrying about whether their children have a safe and stimulating environment to be taught in and cared for.

In recent years, Head Start programs have been moving in the direction of extending services to provide all-day, year-round care for children. The benefits are two-fold: we can spend more time providing high-quality learning experiences to children, and we help parents manage their work or class schedules.

\*This is inclusive of all staff—not just teachers—family service workers, bus drivers, finance officers, etc. are in this total number.







Section 5

# RESOURCE LIBRARY

# SUMMARY OF WORDS TO USE AND WORDS TO LOSE

Consider keeping this summary handy as a reference guide whenever you are preparing to share a story about Head Start or tell someone about our mission.

## Our mission, in a nutshell:

**Head Start gives children from at-risk backgrounds the skills they need to be successful in school and life—supporting more kids, families, and communities on their path to success.**

children from at-risk backgrounds	Defines who we help using words that inspire action: when children are at risk, we are called to support them.
skills they need	Signals that we're delivering results: after participating in Head Start, children leave with critical skills.
school and life	Shows we're helping prepare Head Start children for kindergarten and beyond.
kids, families, and communities	Speaks to our comprehensive model.
supporting their path to success	Sums up our mission in visual, vivid language.

# KEYWORDS TO USE AND LOSE

Instead of saying this...	Say this...
We're here to lead you / inform you / offer you resources	We're here to partner with you
Low-income families	Income-eligible families
Leveling the playing field	Supporting more children, families, and communities on their path to success
Social justice	Every child deserves an opportunity to succeed
Head Start is a free program	Head Start is an investment that helps all students be ready for school
Head Start is federally funded	
 Innovative laboratories	Head Start is at our best when we apply an always-learning mindset
 No matter where Head Start programs operate, they all meet our national standards	Head Start programs ensure children receive vision, hearing, and other health screenings and referrals; require degrees and credentials for teaching staff; and mandate professional development and coaching for lead and assistant teachers
Head Start children reduce their vocabulary deficit by 38% during the program year	Head Start students are more likely to graduate high school, attend college, and receive a post-secondary degree, license, or certification

# Section 6

# WRAP UP

## THANK YOU FOR READING!

The goal of this project was to help Head Start programs across the country better communicate our value to families, communities, and policymakers, and to build important partnerships. This Language Playbook will allow us to grow public awareness and support for Head Start's mission, and is a vital component of the tools we need to have these important conversations. Later this year, NHSA will offer webinars and in-person trainings to engage our practitioners in how to use the Language Playbook and other tools we will create to tell the Head Start story.

We hope this information is useful for you and your Head Start colleagues now and in the future when communicating the many benefits of who we are and what we do. We look forward to continuing to advance our mission together, and hearing your feedback on other ways we can better help you and your programs.

To learn more, please visit [www.nhsa.org/languageplaybook](http://www.nhsa.org/languageplaybook).







NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

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