

May 16, 2023

Outside Witness Testimony of
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Submitted to:
Subcommittee on Labor, Health & Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies
Senate Committee on Appropriations

Addressing:
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
Administration for Children and Families
Office of Head Start
FY 2024 Appropriations

Senator Baldwin, Ranking Member Capito, and Members of the Subcommittee:

My name is Henry Wilde, and I am the Chief Executive Officer of Acelero, Inc., a Head Start and Early Head Start grantee funded to serve 991 children in Milwaukee and Racine Counties and over 5,000 children nationally. I am also a proud Beloit native, a Chippewa Falls and Wauwatosa descendent, and Madison resident. I am writing to you to express the urgent need to increase Head Start's annual appropriation to at least \$16.47 billion for FY24, as recommended by the National Head Start Association (NHSA).

Wisconsin's positive attributes are too numerous to list, but our greatest deficit is this: "In the first national assessment of students since the pandemic, Wisconsin again posted the widest score gaps between Black and white students of any state, now by even greater margins." (<https://www.jsonline.com/story/news/education/2022/10/24/naep-report-card-wisconsin-has-widest-score-gap-between-black-and-white-students/69581393007/>) At Acelero, we believe, as I think you do, that talent is equally distributed, but opportunity is not. Racial and income-based achievement gaps are the product of vastly different access to resources and opportunities to prepare children to succeed in school and in life. We know that gaps in achievement are not a fait accompli; child outcomes are the product of choices about the degree to which public investment is concentrated in programming that has the greatest potential for impact on low income children. There is no better investment than the Head Start program.

Why does investing in Head Start matter?

Research is clear on early childhood education:

1. A child's brain develops more before age five than any other time in their lives.

2. The achievement gap that we see in third grade National Assessment of Educational Progress (NAEP) scores exists before children enter kindergarten; it does not begin in primary school.
3. Access to high quality early childhood education for low income children, specifically, matters hugely to their long-term trajectories academically and economically.

More than any other program, Head Start provides the opportunity to translate this research into action and ultimately deliver positive outcomes for low income children. In our Head Start programs, we serve children ages birth-to-five; we provide robust educational experiences and comprehensive two-generational programming to support young children's development; and we serve the children in greatest need free of charge.

Our early childhood education program at Acelero Learning has demonstrated what is possible when children have access to high quality programs. In 2021, after the first year of the pandemic (during which children generally suffered significant learning losses), researchers from Brown University conducted pre- and post-assessments of children enrolled in our program. Their study concluded: "Acelero's results cannot be generalized across the field of early childhood education, but it is notable that across age groups and both learning settings [virtual and in-person], Acelero's students made significant gains in domains of print knowledge and numeracy, and children in centers also made significant gains in executive function." (<https://annenberg.brown.edu/news/brown-university-annenberg-study-shows-acelero-learning-head-start-children-made-significant>)

We know that all Head Start programs are capable of having comparable impact, which is why investment in Head Start and Early Head Start is critical. But today, in light of the evolving labor market, inflation, and the after-effects of COVID-19, Head Start programs like ours face the dire choice of eliminating services to children and families or continuing to operate understaffed and under-enrolled programs.

What is the problem we need to solve?

The immediate challenge we face is that in Milwaukee and Racine, for the past year, we literally cannot serve children, because we cannot hire and retain the staff we need to provide education and family services. At Acelero Learning Wisconsin, in March 2020, nearly 90 percent of our Head Start positions were filled. Unfortunately, as of March 2023, our staffing shortage is over 40 percent; our vacancies have quadrupled in three years. As a result of our staffing shortage, we have an outstanding waitlist of 465 children and 36 classrooms that have remained unopened all year – classrooms that could have served nearly 500 children. We have also experienced difficulty retaining our current staff.

Compensation is the greatest driver of our workforce crisis. Early childhood educators have long been underappreciated and undercompensated relative to the value they create and the importance of their work but, in Acelero's 20 plus year history, we have never experienced this confluence of factors. Teachers worked heroically through the pandemic; and perhaps more than ever, homebound parents appreciated how challenging it is to teach young children – but that

recognition did not alleviate the taxing emotional and physical burden on early childhood educators. COVID funding from federal and state governments provided temporary remuneration to account for the criticality of their roles but, since then, the supplementary funding has run out or dwindled, and the impact has effectively been pay cuts to front line staff. When you pile on top of these pay cuts the fact that Cost of Living Adjustments have not tracked with inflation, it is evident why over the past three years, Head Start employee compensation effectively took one step forward and three steps back.

The salary gap between Head Start and other employers has taken on even greater significance in the current labor market. Our employees are as mission driven and dedicated as anyone ever could be, but staff – and potential staff – must make financial decisions in the best interest of their own families, which includes seeking higher paying jobs unrelated to early childhood education in other service industries with significant hiring needs.

What is true for Acelero Learning is also true for other programs in Wisconsin and the Head Start community nationwide. In February of this year, the National Head Start Association surveyed Head Start grant recipients to determine the extent to which workforce struggles continue to be an ongoing problem. The findings mirrored our experience:

- 20% of Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms were closed, and 81% of grant recipients with closed classrooms cited staff vacancies as the primary reason.
- 19% of staff positions were vacant nationwide, and 65% of respondents cited compensation as the primary reason.
- There were an estimated 137,000 to 275,000 children on Head Start or Early Head Start waiting lists. This equates to 17 to 33% of currently funded slots.

What is the solution?

We are thankful that the President called for an increase in Head Start funding of over a billion dollars in his proposed FY24 budget, including the \$575 million to improve compensation for Head Start workers, but that is only a start. This increase would represent a 4.8 percent across the board wage increase, which certainly does not close the gap between Head Start teachers and those with similar qualifications in school district positions, much less allow us to bring all employees up to a living wage, which is our organizational goal.

The National Head Start Association is recommending funding of \$16.47 billion for FY24 – primarily to address the workforce crisis. This would allow our program and others to remain open, and more importantly, to build back our enrollment to prior levels with an underlying funding base that gives us greater assurance that we can attract and retain the workforce we need to prepare the next generation of children in our communities to be successful in school and in life. If we hope to address the yawning achievement gap here in Wisconsin, we need to not just stabilize early childhood education; we need to maximize its quality and its effectiveness.

We realize that this level of funding will require bipartisan collaboration and the engagement of other committees in Congress. We also know that the Subcommittee has the opportunity to visibly and tangibly assert and support Head Start in FY24 and to exert leadership in support of a

highly defensible and proven federal-to-local partnership. In the context of the federal budget, this increase represents a rounding error, but for the nearly million low income children enrolled in the Head Start program – and worse, those children who otherwise will not be served – this funding could be transformational.

We would welcome the opportunity to host any member of the Subcommittee – indeed, any Member of Congress – at one of our programs to speak with our parents about the program’s impact, observe our phenomenal staff, sit in classrooms with the incredible children we are gifted the opportunity to serve, and see what transformational early care and education looks like in action. As you evaluate FY24 funding requests, we hope this will be a critical data point that informs your decisions.

Thank you for your consideration of this critical request.