

CASE STUDY

The Head Start Professional Development and CLASS[™] Initiative: Ensuring Strong Linkages between Program Monitoring and Professional Development

Head Start is the federal government's premiere child development and early education program. When reauthorized in 2007 (The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act), Congress directed the Office of Head Start to include as part of its program monitoring process a reliable and valid research tool that assesses teacher-child interactions. To fulfill this mandate, the Office of Head Start (OHS) chose the CLASS[™], although grantees may choose to use a different assessment tool for their purposes. The OHS intends to use findings from the CLASS[™] to guide national program improvement efforts, determine individual and program technical assistance needs, and ensure programs are focusing on effective teacher-child interactions that lead to improving young children's school readiness. The Head Start Professional Development and CLASS[™] Initiative offers insights into planning for large scale use of the CLASS[™] and creating linkages between data and program improvement efforts focused on teacher-child interactions.

Implementation – Thoughtful Investment in Aligned Systems for Accountability and Improvement

Driven by an overarching focus on teacher professional development, the Head Start Professional Development and CLASS[™] Initiative consists of three carefully sequenced and interconnected components. Rather than focusing exclusively on monitoring, OHS took the time and dedicated resources to make sure that the inclusion of CLASS[™] would be accepted by programs and would ultimately produce improvements in the quality of Head Start programs nationwide.

Many Head Start grantees initially expressed reservations about another new assessment tool to which they would be held accountable. OHS addressed these concerns by investing in creating buy-in and awareness, conducting a pilot of the monitoring system through which they gathered important information with regard to how to best integrate CLASS[™], and dedicating significant resources to helping grantees make improvements in the types of classroom interactions measured by CLASS[™].

CLASS[™] Training at Scale – Creating Buy-in and Awareness Nationwide

Given the use of the CLASS[™] in its monitoring system, it is important to OHS that every Head Start grantee is familiar with the CLASS[™], understands its purpose, and connects this purpose with Head Start's mission to prepare children for school and life success. According to Colleen Rathgeb, Acting Director of the Policy and Budget Division in the Office of Head Start, "The use of the CLASS[™] signals how critical we believe the CLASS[™] dimensions are in teaching young children and how important it is for all of our programs to focus on productive teacher-child interactions."

During the 2008-2009 program year, OHS sponsored 150 CLASS[™] Observation trainings, with the goal of providing the Head Start community with an introduction to the CLASS[™]. Over 2000 Head Start education coordinators – at least one from every program - were trained on the CLASS[™] and given strategies for using assessment findings to improve teachers' effective interactions with children. Among the results: a renewed appreciation by Head Start grantees and education coordinators of the importance of intentional observations and feedback to teachers.



Approximately 20 staff attended the 5-day CLASS™ Train-the-Trainer workshop; it was these staff who led all CLASS™ observation trainings. They were supported by a CASTL staff member, who provided feedback and support to new trainers and co-led trainings in instances in which trainers requested more support. During the pilot phase for these trainings, 19 CLASS™ observation trainings occurred.

They yielded an average reliability pass rate of 60%. Trainings logistics were finalized in January 2009, with 103 additional trainings occurring between January and September 2009. These trainings yielded an overall pass rate of 70%. This effort demonstrates the feasibility of using a Train-the-Trainer approach to conduct successful CLASS™ observation trainings on a large scale.

Finding a Balance between Accountability and Improvement

By directing attention to the caliber of teacher-child interactions and shining a spotlight on the importance of the three CLASS™ domains, the OHS is striving to elevate program quality and improve child outcomes. It is well recognized by OHS that the CLASS™ does not measure all aspects of children's experiences in classrooms that contribute to their social and academic development; they believe, however, that the CLASS™ provides an important tool for focusing attention on teacher-child interactions in Head Start classrooms.

Despite many grantees expressing a desire to have the CLASS™ be used only as a professional development tool, OHS thought it was important for the CLASS™ to be a part of the monitoring system. The old adage, "What gets measured gets done" resonates with OHS staff involved in this process. By providing grantees with data on the quality of teacher-child interactions observed in their classrooms, they hope to incentivize grantees to make improvements in these areas.

The OHS began by piloting the CLASS™ with 50 grantees to learn how including the CLASS™ as part of the monitoring review process would work. OHS staff initially discussed ways in which CLASS™ scores might be used to determine grantee deficiencies with regard to program standards. During the pilot, however, OHS determined that the challenges associated with establishing cut-off scores outweighed the benefits.

For the 2009-2010 program year, a CLASS™ reviewer will be part of every program monitoring visit. During the process of CLASS™ observations, notation of areas in which a classroom is not in compliance with program standards may be made but will be reported separately. Head Start programs will not be required to meet a pre-established score on the CLASS™, however. Aggregate CLASS™ scores will be shared with grantees, but the main purpose of sharing these scores is promoting program improvement. Scores also will be shared with the relevant Head Start Training and Technical Assistance Network provider so that aggregate program scores can be analyzed and used to design teacher development opportunities for improving teacher-child interactions.

Building Capacity of the Existing Systems to Support CLASS™-based Professional Development

Going forward, a substantial investment will be made in building the knowledge and skills of Head Start Technical Assistance providers. These individuals are seen as key to the Office's efforts to improve teaching in Head Start classrooms. OHS has partnered with Teachstone to provide a variety of CLASS™-based professional development opportunities. Starting in October 2009, at least two training and technical assistance providers in each state participated in the CLASS™ Trainer of Trainers program. In turn, these staff will train other providers and grantee staff, expanding the number of individuals able to help education coordinators work with classroom teachers and mentor them. OHS is making other CLASS™ resources, such as the video library, available to Head Start teachers nationwide.

Lessons Learned

It's important to think systematically. With the overarching goal of improving teaching and learning in classrooms, the Office of Head Start systematically changed its focus from (1) information sharing and focusing teacher and staff attention on what happens between children and teachers in classrooms to (2) building capacity to assess teacher-child interactions so teachers and programs could have feedback on their performance, and most recently to (3) expanding capacity to help programs and teachers become more effective based on what their CLASS[™] scores reveal. Each of the three components is intended to build from what preceded it, creating a strong foundation for advancing teachers' and children's learning.

Programs should be allowed to choose the assessment tool of their choice for on-site efforts. Most Head Start programs receive multiple funding streams, many of which mandate some form of assessment. In light of the multiple and often contradictory demands placed on programs, the focus should be on improving teacher-child interactions, rather than on requiring programs to use a particular tool.

The functions of monitoring and technical assistance should be kept separate yet connected. It is important to maintain the integrity of monitoring and technical assistance by keeping them separate from one another in terms of personnel and oversight. Yet, information gathered through monitoring is key to providing meaningful feedback to programs and individual teachers. The two functions need to inform each other in order to ensure that professional development addresses performance data and can influence teachers' classroom practices.

Acknowledgements:

Colleen Rathgeb, Acting Director, Policy and Budget Division, Office of Head Start
Patricia McMahon, Technical Assistance Manager, Office of Head Start

Contact: Patricia McMahon, patricia.mcmahon@acf.hhs.gov