

VOICES FROM THE FIELD

Head Start Policy

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Service Perspective

In Saskatchewan, Head Start is currently available in 79 distinct First Nations communities. Each one serves only about 15 children and is run with the unique needs of the community it serves in mind. In this light, these Head Start programs differ significantly from the large, often multicultural Head Start programs typically seen in major U.S. cities. The CEECD Encyclopedia articles on Head Start policy focus on research done in the Head Start programs based in large, disadvantaged urban centres.^{1,2} Still, they do offer some insight that can be useful for programs based in small Saskatchewan First Nation communities.

The CEECD Encyclopedia articles are encouraging in that they provide empirical evidence for what many workers in the field know instinctively to be true – that the Head Start programs are cost effective² and offer positive long-term results^{1,2}. Zigler also highlights the fact that it is difficult to produce meaningful, multifaceted, long-term change with only a few months of intervention,³ which is information field workers can bring to policy makers to support requests for funding for extended programs. Currently, Saskatchewan Head Start programs in small First Nations communities offer only a one-year program for children aged three, but a future goal is to expand it to a two-year program that would serve children starting at a younger age.

Importantly, in small Saskatchewan communities consisting primarily of First Nations people, the goals of the Head Start programs differ from those set up in large urban centres. Poverty is not necessarily the only or even primary concern. Rather, preserving culture and language are key mandates. Also, the programs focus not only on the direct needs of the children they serve but also the adults' needs in the community who care for these children.

Gaps between research, policy and practice

The Head Start programs serving First Nations communities in Saskatchewan employ members of the community, often the parents or relatives of the children who participate in the programs. The programs, therefore, serve as an employer as well as a resource for teaching parents and other caregivers healthy and appropriate life and parenting skills. These programs also act as a hub for providing families with other services and a screening tool for early identification of children with special needs. These key benefits are not discussed in any of the CEECD papers.

Still, many of the CEECD Encyclopedia papers do cover some of the challenges faced in small Saskatchewan Head Start programs. These include proper teacher training for small and often remote and isolated communities, and the need for funds to pay well-trained professionals.^{1,3} Currently, the staff at each Saskatchewan Head Start program require at least a one-year certificate or two-year diploma in early childhood development, but ideally the minimum requirement would be a bachelor's degree.

The CEECD Encyclopedia papers provide a summary and critique of the various assessments of Head Start programs and policies conducted to date.^{1,2} While the studies themselves have been conducted on Head Start programs that differ dramatically from those serving First Nations Communities in Saskatchewan, the critique of the studies provides insight on how such assessments should be conducted in any community. In Saskatchewan, the tracking process for the benefits of Head Start programs consists primarily of parents filling out short questionnaires and has yielded positive feedback to date. Informal qualitative feedback from parents and teachers has also been positive. A more formal analysis of the benefits of these programs, however, would be beneficial for setting future goals and directing policy. The CEECD Encyclopedia papers suggest that such an analysis is complex and requires a certain level of expertise.^{1,2,3} The Canadian government could take the lead on implementing such research in partnership with First Nations (participatory action research) , as they have access to the appropriate expertise and resources.

When tracking the benefits of Head Start programs serving First Nations communities in Saskatchewan, it is important for researchers to understand the communities' focus on the whole child as part of a multigenerational community. Assessing benefits should include such factors as culture and language retention as well as the improved health status of children, their parents and their community. Documented evidence of benefits such as these is helpful for attaining community support and government funding. Narrow outcomes such as school readiness simply do not capture many of the important features of programs aimed at small First Nations communities.

Comments recorded by Alison Palkhivala

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