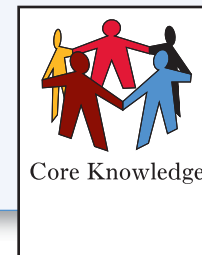


VII. Campfield Head Start Baltimore County, Maryland



Preschool

Enrollment: 75

Low-Income: 100%

Non-White: 99%

Amidst the small, worn-at-the heels houses in this blue-collar neighborhood just outside Baltimore, Maryland, a quiet revolution in the Head Start program is taking place. Situated in its own building adjacent to a local elementary school, Campfield is the largest Head Start center in Baltimore County, with four classrooms and about 80 students, all of whom are low-income and almost all of whom are African American. Five years ago Campfield joined the rest of the county's Head Start system in adopting the Core Knowledge Preschool Sequence.

Like many preschools, Campfield had previously relied on a curriculum focused almost exclusively on social and emotional development. "I've been with Head Start now for 20 years," says Herona Sewell, a classroom teacher. "And when we first started, they talked about social skills. That's what it was all about—getting the children to follow directions and to get along with each other. Then we were introduced to Core Knowledge. To tell the truth, I was like, 'Oh my gosh, how am I going to do this, how am I going to get this across?' It seemed like too much. I was really rattled."

With support from two local foundations, the Core Knowledge Foundation was able to provide Ms. Sewell and her fellow teachers with extensive support, including a series of two-day training sessions addressing each of the 13 areas in the Preschool Sequence. The Foundation also supplied mentor teachers who visit each classroom for two hours twice per month and offer advice and encouragement as needed. For example, Alissa Cornette helps Campfield develop detailed monthly teaching plans based on the Sequence.

The support has paid off. "It really works," says Ms. Sewell. "I really have to smile sometimes with how it works, because it has taught me to teach."

Her colleagues echo that enthusiasm. Ms. Cornette says an 11-year veteran of the Head Start program told her, "I used to be paid to love the children. That's all I had to do. Now I'm paid to actually teach them." She says the introduction of Core Knowledge has helped Campfield's teachers feel more like professionals. "They used to be seen as babysitters, now they're seen as teachers."

Heather Callister, the director of the project to implement Core Knowledge in Baltimore County, explains why the Sequence generates such enthusiasm from veteran Head Start teachers: "One thing that has been very empowering for our teachers is that they know where they are going. They have been opened up to the idea that everything a child is doing in a classroom is a precursor to an essential skill being developed, and Core Knowledge gives an understanding of how to take a child to the next level. I'd go so far as to say that all other preschool curricula I've seen are random. They see the child performing, and then decide what they want to do about it, as opposed to knowing where they want to get the child and helping the child get there."

So far the approach has paid astonishing dividends. Ellen Biederman, the director of Campfield Head Start, says, "Now, when we transition kids from any of our Head Starts in Baltimore County

into kindergarten, these kindergarten teachers, they all want them, they want our kids. I understand they fight over them, because they know what they're getting."

Assessment data support that claim. From 2002 to 2005, the percentage of Baltimore County Head Start students judged "fully ready" for kindergarten skyrocketed from 24 percent to 57 percent, starting out well below and ending up substantially ahead of the statewide Head Start average.

The next step, says Heather Callister, will be to institutionalize the changes. She wants to provide training for all of the other adults employed by Head Start, including administrators, health care workers, family workers, and transportation coordinators. "Now that we're seeing these great results, we need to share both the accountability and the success more broadly across the entire system," she says. "We can't just reserve it for the classroom staff. It needs to be embedded in the management system, particularly as teaching staff turns over. Everyone has to have buy in and a knowledge base to support this work."

Indeed, she hopes the hard-won victories in Baltimore County can help point the way for many other Head Start programs, and even the early childhood field itself. She points to a recent newsletter published by the education school of a prestigious Northeastern university, in which an early childhood expert worries that a specific, competency-based curriculum will dampen young children's enthusiasm for learning.

Such outdated notions of "developmentally appropriate practice" should be discarded, she insists. "One of the things we've had to grapple with is that people will maintain that children should be playing when they are three and four. We don't disagree. But children also love to master skills. And if the development of those skills is placed in a package that's appropriate, then children will learn and have fun. But it isn't just play that's fun. Learning, if it's designed and planned for effectively, is equally fun."

Ayanna McLean, a parent of a three-year-old-daughter would seem to agree. Last year Campfield began providing parents with "homework packets" tied to the competencies being developed in classrooms that month. "She likes the activities so much that she wants to do them in the car as soon as I pick her up. We have to do it in the parking lot before we leave!"

