

This year marks the 50th anniversary of Head Start, a federal program designed to give children from low-income families a boost in development so that they are ready for kindergarten.

Head Start's academic and social/emotional development components increase the likelihood that these children will be just as prepared for school and life as those from families with the means to pursue an expensive education.

In Allegheny County, outside the city of Pittsburgh, the Allegheny County Intermediate Unit operates Head Start with support from the Department of Human Services (DHS). Over the past 10 years, about 16,500 children have participated in the County's Head Start classroom or home-based programs.

We at DHS know that academic success can lead to life success, and Head Start is an important program paving the way to both.



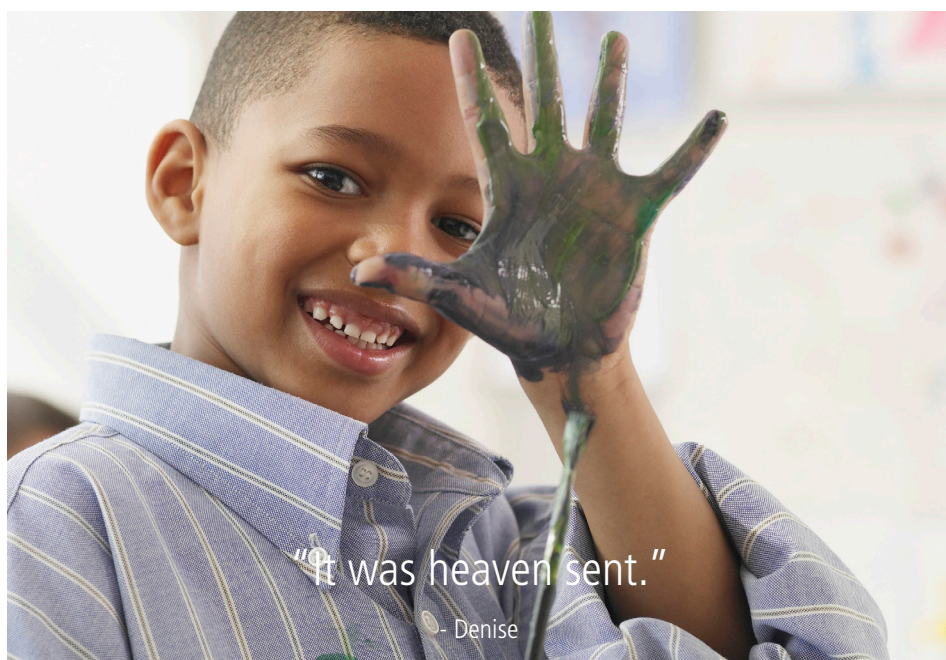
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DHS MAKING AN IMPACT

Head Start



"It was heaven sent."

- Denise

Denise

You might say Denise literally stumbled upon Head Start.

Walking to the store one day, she passed a window with a poster about Head Start, a federal program to give children from low-income families a boost in social and academic development so that they are ready for kindergarten.

Her son, Aidan, 3, had for a while been asking to go to school like his older sister. But private preschools can be expensive. Denise decided to apply for Head Start. "It was heaven sent," she says, relating the circumstances that led her to it.

Now Aidan is in kindergarten and doing very well.



Before Head Start, there were no children his age in the neighborhood with whom to interact, and, he wasn't learning to take turns or cooperate.

He also didn't play outdoors and develop gross motor skills – kicking a ball around, skipping – as much as he should, because the family lived on a busy street.

In Head Start, Aidan not only learned basics such as math and reading skills, he learned how to cooperate and share, and how to jump rope and skip.

Denise can't rave enough about Head Start, both for Aidan and herself.

"It's a great program. It's not just for the kids. It's for the families," she says, relating how she has become a member of Head Start's Policy Council, composed of parents, and expanded her own education by taking classes in family advocacy. She now has a goal of becoming a teacher's assistant in a Head Start classroom.

"This is a career choice I would never have thought of in a million years," she said.

Allegheny County Department of Human Services & Head Start

Children beginning Head Start must be two years away from attending kindergarten, so most are 3- and 4-year-olds, although some 5-year-olds are eligible.

Teachers facilitate and practice with children and parents a broad range of skills. Those include social/emotional, language, physical, cognitive, literacy, math, science, technology, social studies and creative arts skills – anything listed in Pennsylvania Early Learning Standards developed by the state Department of Education and the Office of Child Development and Early Learning. The classes use curriculums and assessments that have been tested and are recognized by experts nationally.

Head Start has a substantial family engagement component to bring parents not only into understanding and practicing the developmental skills their children need, but also to guide the course of the Head Start program.

Head Start's parent-fueled Policy Council participates in decision making.

The Allegheny Intermediate Unit (AIU) operates Head Start in Allegheny County outside the city of Pittsburgh under a contract with the Department of Human Services. The program uses two models, one that offers in-home services and the other, classrooms.

For the home-based program, an early learning consultant works with the child and family for 90 minutes once weekly. Two times a month those families meet with other in-home participants for socialization.

The AIU operates 58 classrooms as well following a school year/day model. Classes are held Monday through Thursday beginning in September through the first week of June. Each classroom is operated by a qualified teacher and a teacher assistant.

Andrea

Andrea was looking for support as a single mother. She had wanted to get her son into a preschool program but didn't know where to start. A friend suggested Head Start.

For her son, Head Start's in-home program proved a good fit. As a child with autism spectrum disorder, Brady needed additional developmental assistance at ages 3 and 4, so Head Start personnel linked Andrea with the Discovery, Assessment, Referral and Tracking (DART) program as well. Brady has attended both and has learned the alphabet,

numbers, how to tie his shoes and follow directions and much more that makes Andrea confident that, now having turned 5, Brady will do well in kindergarten.

For herself, Andrea says Head Start proved to be a boon. "I definitely acquired more leadership skills and professional skills," she says, noting she learned how to express herself and become an advocate for herself and her son.

"I try to tell everyone I know about Head Start," Andrea says.