Grantee Community on School Readiness

Operator: Without further ado, I'd like to turn the call over to your first speaker for today. Amanda Bryans, you now have the floor; go ahead please.

Amanda Bryans: Well, thank you. And welcome, everyone, today to our call to learn more about plans for 2012-2013 discussions on school readiness with the Office of Head Start. I'm Amanda Bryans. I'm the director of Education and Comprehensive Services in the Office of Head Start. And I'm delighted to be joined by my colleague, Damón Manning, who's a training and technical assistance program specialist.

As you all, I hope and know, know, school readiness is the authorizing purpose of Head Start. The Office of Head Start – we've defined school readiness as meaning children ready for school, parents ready to support children's progress, and schools ready for children. "Children ready for schools" means Head Start's definition of school readiness as children possessing the skills, knowledge, and attitudes they'll need for success in school and later in life. And we are committed to ensuring that all children have the very best that we – the country has to offer in terms of early education and comprehensive services. We will continue to work with our grantees to support the intentional approach to achieving school readiness results.

The purpose of our calls... As you all know, we established these calls in 2011-2012 as a way to help the Office of Head Start know more about the status of programs in regard to school readiness. This is definitely a two-way street. We wanted our Regional Offices and our Central Office to know more about each program's progress. And we also wanted to give you the opportunity to articulate your plans, your – and your accomplishments, as well as your challenges and any TA that you might need. We very expressly stated that the calls and the information we gathered on the calls were not going to be used for program monitoring.

And indeed, we can assure you that we have not used the detail that we've collected from the calls to in any way monitor program compliance. We have been able to use the information you've provided to identify strengths, needs, trends, technical assistance needs. In some cases, we've identified practices that were very promising and strong and we should consider for replication, information that could be used to help neighboring grantees with challenges they were having. And as importantly, we've used the information we collected to help the Office of Head Start prioritize training and technical assistance in resource development.

I should mention that we are transitioning to the use of the phrase "school readiness discussions" this year as the large majority of the discussions will probably take place via conference call. But in some cases, it may be that a program specialist is able to be on-site with a program and conduct the call there; or in some situations where grantees are geographically close to their Regional Offices, they may be able to go into the Regional Office and have the – the conversation face-to-face.

So, we specifically learned last year that there are some programs – a minority, but still a significant number – who are really – really struggled with the establishment of school readiness goals. And that is a concern because, by this point, we would really expect that all programs have well-articulated school readiness goals that reflect the five essential domains that are listed in the Child Development and Early Learning Framework.

We found many more programs that are still struggling to really figure out systems for aggregating and analyzing data, and we expected that. And we also have learned that many programs are making a great deal of progress in that area. And we learned that some programs are struggling to really make the use of data and data analysis a part of their continuous improvement system and – within their programs; and that's an area we're very interested in continuing to work with you on and help and provide assistance.

We wanted to tell you a little about what you can expect in 2012-2013. As I said, we're referring to calls now as discussions. We would... We heard some reports of the calls being really long and – and sometimes not terribly specific in their content, so we've – we've talked with our program offices and Regional Offices and – and provided some supports so that the calls will be structured in a way that we hope will mean they will not take longer than about 30 minutes to an hour.

The purpose of the calls continues to be to develop a shared understanding of each grantee's status, strengths, and needs, as well as to identify challenges, resources, and actions that need to be taken. We're also hopeful that programs and program specialists, along with early childhood experts, TA providers who are participating, can be pretty specific about what the needs are and the timeline for helping address those needs.

This year, you'll find that the questions that the program specialists ask you will be customized based on the information that you provided last year. So while the, sort of, content that Damón is going to discuss with you shortly will be the same across programs, the – the exact kind of level of the question and the detail that we're looking for will be different based on the progress and challenges that you had experienced last year.

And we want you to know that this is not an exercise that requires you to prepare or to submit anything advance – in advance of the call. We will tell you a little bit about the content the call would cover as a way of helping you think about and formulate some of what you might want to say, but it's nothing that should require you to write a report or send answers to anything in or provide any kind of written data.

Damón, I'd like to turn it over to you now.

Damón Manning: Thank you, Amanda. So now what we're going to do is take a look at just some of the content, if you will, of the questions that you and your program specialists will be engaging in in the upcoming calls. As Amanda said before, we're actually going to – want you to look at this as a continuation of the discussions you've had previously. And then, our discussions will actually build upon what we've talked about in the past.

So, the first area is really looking at the status of our school readiness calls – your school readiness goals. And here you have the opportunity to really talk about your progress. What we're looking at is, in the past, when you had your conversations in the first series of calls with your program specialist, you talked about how you analyzed data, how you collected data, developed your school readiness goals, and other types of priorities that were set as a result of your looking at and establishing the goals themselves. So here you have an opportunity just to provide an update on that – what types of changes that you may have made or what types of changes have come up since the last time you had your conversations with your program specialist. Amanda, anything else related to that you want to highlight?

Amanda: No, I think that really covers it. We know that many programs really – rightfully struggled a lot about, you know, the goals and the kind of level of detail they wanted. And – and I think that – that in many cases, programs have decided to make adjustments to the goals or to think differently, maybe, about some aspect of the goal. Maybe you could – you're probably going to talk a little more about that as we go on.

Damón: Okay. Thank you. Next, we're going to actually look at what has – family engagement have to do with – with school readiness. So, as we know, of course, in working with – in working in Head Start, families are – we know that families are a critical part of school readiness. And it actually also represents a good partnership between the program staff and parents in terms of how we support our outcomes for children.

So here, as we know – before in our previous discussions with you, initially we started off and we didn't have a necessarily – conversations or ask questions specifically about parents. And we knew from you and from the data and discussions that you had last year, the feedback that we received, that it was quite odd not to have the conversation about how parents are engaged in – in establishing school readiness goals.

So – and I think you shared exactly how you've been looking at engaging parents in school readiness goals and in their development and what have you. And here, provides us with, once again, an opportunity to talk about how have you been engaging parents in that process, how it's been going, and some of the benefits of that as well. So, really talking about how you feel the elevated – your engaging of families in their child's learning in your programs, and then what are other types of goals that you're looking forward to as you think about elevating the engagement of parents? Anything else?

Amanda: Absolutely.

Damón: Okay. Great. Now we'll take a look at what did you learn last year. Here, really talking about what are you doing differently as a result of looking at a lot of the data and this process, if you will, in looking at school readiness goals. So, what priorities have you set? Also, thinking about changes that you may have made or are probably still in progress in your program. Also thinking about, in terms of – just the types of partnerships that you may have established, changes in your actual training that you may have had with your teaching staff. You may have established mentoring programs. Also, thinking about the priorities that you're set or looking at setting. Also how you may have – even look at your budget and use your budget to really target those priorities as well in really accomplishing them. So here, once again, what did you actually learn as a part of that process and what changes are you going to make as a result of that discussion? Anything else?

Amanda: I think that's terrific.

Damón: Oh, great. So now, also, taking a look at how your – how your assessments are going this year. As you know, in the past – or just in general as we talk about school readiness and as we talk about assessing – assessment in Head Start, this is a critical part of our program. Actually – how we're actually establishing and collecting baseline data, as well as ongoing data throughout the year. And then, what is the process where we actually have completed that – the collection of data, we're aggregating that data and also analyzing it, and then how are we going to respond to that?

o how was that assessment process going this year? This gives you that opportunity to really, once again, talk about that. And a key part of that as well is how we're using it – how we engage in this process in a timely fashion so we're able to respond and make – make changes in our program to be able to address the needs of our children in our program, and more so in real time.

Amanda: I think that's really important, Damón. I'm – one of the things we did learn from last year's conversations and calls was that many programs were actually not completing the mid-year assessment aggregation and analysis until close to the end of the year, near – maybe six weeks out or less from the – the end of the year assessments. And the – the problem, of course – of course, with that is that the purpose of the mid-year assessment is to give us an opportunity to understand better how children are doing so that we can make corrections, improvements if we find that children are not as – progressing as expected. So, you know, we really wanted to include this question to help ensure that programs are thinking about the timing earlier so that they can make sure that those assessments get completed, aggregated, and analyzed.

Damón: Yeah. And then we know, like with – there's ongoing child assessment, and then what we're talking about here is those – those key points where we actually collect data and we have those other parts where we collect subsequent data. And – and some programs, we know – for the full-year programs that's – can be at least three times throughout the year. And then for programs that operate a – a more condensed school year, it may be two – two times per year.

Amanda: Right. For – programs that operate less than 90 days are Migrant and Seasonal programs. Of course, it makes no sense to really do a mid-point. And they – they, in that case, do it twice a year. But you bring up a good point, too. Another thing that we learned is that some programs got so concerned about the aggregation of – of data, how you group data, and – and the process for analyzing kind of that group data, that they forgot that one of the founding ideas, premises of Head Start is that we individualize the program for all children. So while you have this requirement around aggregating and analyzing it three times – at three points during the year, it in no way absolves or – or eliminates the need to be using ongoing child assessment to individualize, you know, all the time as you're going on from – from day one with children.

Damón: Thank you. So last, another area we're looking at in – is looking at how you're aggregating your data. Here, we're – you have an opportunity to talk about the assessment tools that you're actually using in your program. For many of us, if you're using an assessment system, that may be linked to data – a data package, a software package, or it may be online – and how that's actually going in your program. Or if you've made changes to the way you've been collecting data, is there training that you've decided that you needed as a result of looking at how you've been implementing it or how you can actually use it to really analyze the data a little more clearly?

Have you worked with your program to really look at the data and say, "Oh, does the data process – data collection process that we have, does it allow for us to look at different groups?" So, whether we're looking at different age groups, different classrooms, as well as dual language learners, or just things – little nuances of your program where it allows for you to be able to ask and answer questions with the collection of data. So how's that process going? Here, this – this – this is an opportunity for you to share that information and have that discussion with your program specialist. Anything else, Amanda?

Amanda: Yeah. I mean, I think that's exactly right. And I think that we're sensitive to that kind of – some of the nuances here. As you go along, you're probably learning about some of both the opportunities

that are provided by the analysis of aggregate data but also some of the risks. So, programs may be vulnerable to making erroneous conclusions if they're looking, you know, at too narrow a question. If there are too few children in the group, you may just be seeing individual child variation rather than anything significant about, you know, the program operations.

So, again, we – we expect that programs are developing increasing sophistication with regard to doing this. We – we think that it will – it's important that you have a system that is sustainable and that allows you to look at things from different points of view so that you can really understand all of the potential implications. And we also think that this is going to be a really important year for analysis of data. So, it – it may be easy to make, you know, conclusions that in fact are not always going to be the best informed based on information. When you're looking at the analysis of child data, you can never do it in isolation. There are many other kinds of program information that you also have to look at to understand what the child data is telling you.

And one example I always use that seems to resonate is, you know, programs may say, "Well, we – we looked at all of our data and – and – and we find that children are not making expected progress in mathematics." I asked this question – talked about this topic recently at a conference, and I said, "So?" Program might say, "Well, there's something wrong with our curriculum. We're going to throw it out and start again with a new curriculum that does more about mathematics." And I said to the audience, "Do you think that would be a good idea?" And lots of people said, "Yeah, that seems like a reasonable thing to do." Which it could if you don't have time to really think about the whole issue; because, in fact, in – in the case I described it could be that the curriculum is outstanding in the area of mathematics but in fact that the – the teaching staff feel very uncomfortable about math.

We've raised, for example, I think generations of – of women who don't feel like math is easy for them or that they're particularly skilled in math, and perhaps they're having trouble implementing that part of the curriculum.

So, another just as valid potential interpretation of the data is look – we have to really look at – we looked at our curriculum, and then, actually, what we need to look at is how the – the mathematics part or aspect of that curriculum is being implemented and what kinds of instructional strategies our teachers have at their disposal in order to implement that part of the curriculum. So when you look at all of that – here's the curriculum, here's information about how the curriculum's being implemented, here's the information about how the children are progressing, and maybe some professional development information you're keeping – you say, "You know, on the whole, we think our curriculum's okay, but we're really going to do something different around – maybe we'll convene a summer math institute for teachers around mathematics, or maybe we're going to ask the people who are doing regular observations in classrooms to – to focus on how teachers are implementing the mathematics curriculum. And we're going to have – we're going to devote, you know, a third of our in-services to mathematics instructional strategies." So, I think, you know, we're – again, there's a need for a fairly sophisticated view as – as we move on. And that's the kind of thing that we expect to have conversations about as – as this year continues. Damón?

Damón: Thank you, Amanda. That was great. So now what we're going to do is actually – we've actually collected a couple of questions – a lot of questions, if you will, from the field based upon our – our ECE specialists and program specialists having interactions with you, of different questions that may have come up in terms of our conversations. So, we're going to kind of tag team each other here, if you will,

and just have a – just go through some of those questions. And hopefully you'll find them very helpful and some of them will resonate with you, if you will, as we go through them.

So the first question here is: How can we present data in a way that is easy for parents, staff, and the community to understand? I'm going to take a first stab at this, so Amanda, then maybe you can jump in with me.

But as we know, data reporting is a great way of really creating buy-in and support from our – our staff, from our families, and from our community. Everyone wants to know exactly how our children are doing, what are we doing with our children and – in our – in our classrooms or in our programs, if you will, and then how we can actually make a difference. How can we actually continue to support that? So thinking about how you can involve all of those individuals in one, and actually finding out what are those things that are very relevant for them and that are priorities for them as well, and then incorporating that into the data reporting elements that you actually report out.

Thinking about great ways of using just very easy and succinct reports and charts and things of that nature. But once again, things that are very relevant and salient for our community members, our parents, and for our staff. And then having discussions about this is our data and then this is what you can do to continue to support the projectory of our children in making sure they're very successful in – in their future goals, if you will, and their development. Anything else, Amanda?

Amanda: No, I think that's terrific, Damón. I think in this regard there's always kind of a temptation to say, "Well, people aren't going to understand this." So, a good way to frame it is to think about what you understand and how things can be – what works for you in terms of looking at information. And many of us are staff and – and you know, close to a third of Head Start staff are former Head Start parents, and a lot of staff who weren't Head Start parents are – are parents themselves of children who weren't in Head Start. And I think we also all get data from various sources; we – we see it in newspapers, we get it on our smart phones. So what works for you? What kind of information – think – do a little inventory about the kinds of data that you see every day and – and figure out, well, you know, "What are the things that I've – I've received that really impress me or help me learn or inspire me to do something?" and then think about presenting data in that way.

We – we have a number of programs who send us kind of complementary copies of their – the – the reports they do to their communities, and we see some incredible displays – you know, illustrations and examples of how information can be shared. I think that when you're thinking about parents, you've got two issues. One is around individual children and how you're going to help them understand how their own child is doing in Head Start. And then there's the issue of parents in Head Start as people who are engaged in decision-making about the program, who are learning about the curriculum and learning about child development, who are contributors to the operation of the program through their volunteer time and their – their governance efforts.

So, I think you've got – when you're talking to a parent about their own child, it can be really important to show progress. You may not get – it may not be so important to show their child compared to a national norm, for example. We see children in Head Start who typically come in with – you know, on average, they have, for example, smaller vocabularies than children who are from families with higher income. On the other hand, kids in Head Start tend to make a great deal of progress in a small amount of time even if they don't reach the national norm.

So, helping think about – what we're trying to do here is engage parents in the child's continued positive developmental trajectory. So what is the way that you can give them true – you know, you're not – I'm not suggesting you whitewash it in any way, but how can you show them information in a way that really helps them become part of – of the child's continued development? I think staff often have – it's important for them – the example I used before about understanding, "Well, you know, maybe it's not the curriculum and maybe – you know, that we have professional development needs," and doing that in a way that is not accusatory. It's about – look, this is a shared challenge in our program. We want to work on children's mathematics outcomes and really using the information to engage people and – and get them involved in doing some joint problem-solving.

Damón: I thought that was great. Thank you, Amanda.

Amanda: Sure.
Damón: So – so next, what is the role of the director with regard to school readiness? Amanda?

Amanda: Yeah. I'm so glad that that was one of the questions that came in, Damón. That is a critical area and one that – a question we've heard a lot. And really, we have no chance of success in this work without the active, ongoing, permanent engagement of the director. This is not an activity that belongs only in the kind of education domain of Head Start. School readiness is the responsibility of everybody in the program, including transportation staff, nutrition staff, certainly the education staff, and all of the managers in the program.

The director plays a pivotal role in that the director works with parents, staff, and the governing bodies of the program; and all of those groups need to be fully engaged with this effort. School readiness, make no mistake about it, requires management systems that are in the program and that are operating effectively and – and efficiently so that, again, there's this constant input of information. It gets aggregated, it gets analyzed, and then there are – there's the ability to report, help make decisions, and implement change in an ongoing way.

Head Start programs will never – we're never going to get to a point where we're going to say, "That's good enough. Now we don't have to keep changing." We always are – part of our responsibility is to be the – state-of-the-art with regard to early childhood development. And therefore, we need these continuous improvement cycles where we're using, learning, improving. And that is the responsibility, largely, of the director.

Damón: It seems like it also creates – the director creates these opportunities for everyone, if you will, to be able to share information about how their children are doing, like you said before, whether it's the bus driver, whether it's the home visitor, whether it's a family service worker, or just anyone, a member of our Policy Council, people are able to talk about how our children are doing, what's – why's it very important, and the impact that we're having on the children that we're responsible for working with.

Amanda: Absolutely. And – and I mean, that just makes me remember another point we wanted to make, which is, you know, even the child assessment, one of – one of the kind of unique recognitions that Head Start has is we don't believe you can do a complete and accurate child assessment without direct input from the parent. It may not be part of the standardized instrument you're using that's valid and reliable, but you could administer that instrument and get a result that is totally inaccurate because perhaps the child is so shy that they don't – aren't able to interact with an adult they don't know and it

typically takes eight weeks before a child like that would feel comfortable. The parent has that information.

So you could be completely going down a wrong road with a child because you didn't consult the family. So, I – I think in some way that what you said just, you know, made me remember that. Again, the importance of getting all those set – setting the climate. Another thing we've heard a lot from – from programs that are really operating at a high level with regard to school readiness is that they've created some kind of a learning community that they – they have people who regularly get together, think about the information they're collecting, think about what it means, and then talk about, "Look, we – we have all of this – this – these resources that are available. You know, how – how can we kind of plug these or – or align these resources with what we're learning from our program?"

Damón: Awesome. Thank you. Thank you, Amanda. Also, next, how do you engage the community in school readiness goals? Amanda?

Amanda: Well, again, Damón, I think that is one of the probably best opportunities that we have with regard to this whole emphasis on school readiness. Ideally, we would like our children growing up in communities where there is agreement about what we want for children, what our aspirations are for children, what we hope they can know and do when they get to kindergarten, what are all the opportunities for them. I think that the world will become a much more coherent place if – if we do that well.

So, in may not be that the local education agency, Head Start, and the larger community will all have perfect agreement about Head Start school readiness goals, but opening up the doors to that conversations so that we can begin to hear, you know, what – what parents hope for, what they expect, and what – what the experiences of kindergarten teachers are with children who are coming in and what they hope for. I think we – we can only make the world a better place as we – as we continue to do that. And while I know that it's hard, again it's one – it's one of our responsibilities as – as one of the nation's leaders in early childhood education.

And Damón, here's a question for you. Many people are – really have – have struggled around Early Head Start and – and what school readiness means for infants and toddlers. Even our youngest babies in Head Start, we're talking about school readiness. And – and one of the specific questions is: How can a program select an assessment instrument for infants and toddlers?

]Damón: Well, one place to start is actually thinking about your curriculum. We know that many of the curricula that are out there have assessment that's actually attached to the actual curriculum. We know through our PIR that many of our Early Head Start programs may use High Scope, may use Creative Curriculum, and even some of our home-based programs using Parents As Teachers. Also, those instruments have – those curricula have an assessment component as a part of it, and that may be a great place for you to start. Also, the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation (OPRE) has also developed a compendium of different screenings and assessments that you may find very helpful. And here, it actually targets those assessments and screenings that are appropriate for infants and toddlers. And so, that's one place where you want to start as well.

I'd like to also think about – when we think about young children – infants and toddlers – a couple of things as it relates to assessment is realizing 1) that it is a process and that it is ongoing, and knowing that we don't think about it as this one shot or these one moments when we do this, especially with

infants. From zero to three, it's – the pace of development is – is pretty rapid. So, we want to make sure that we're always – have a system in place that allows for us to continue to look at children in that natural context where – and working within the environment with caregivers and parents. And being able to look at the assessment instrument as well that – I think as Amanda mentioned earlier, that take into consideration input and feedback from caregivers and parents as well.

[00:29:54.20]So being very – your assessment instrument that's respectful of that and provides the opportunity or the system to collect information from multiple contexts, if you will, because that's very important with infants and toddlers and looking at their relationships that they have, how they respond to those in those relationships, and how they thrive as a result of those interactions. So, that's just one thing. Anything else to add?

Amanda: No, I would probably just say that we know that finding assessment instruments across the board can be really challenging when you think about the languages and cultures represented by children in Head Start. And we've tried to provide some materials that can assist programs with that. We don't want in any way make it sound like we – we think it's easy. But, part of our – our role – again, our leadership role is that we are... Our – our demand for better instruments is – is hopefully creating an increased supply and that – and that programs have to be very good consumers, that you really have to use things such as the compendium and some other resources that we have available on the ECLKC to make the best choices among the things that are available so that you can, again, be getting really meaningful, accurate information about – about what's happening for children.

Damón: And also thinking about – talking about other resources, we have the Early Head Start National Resource Center, that's always available for you to contact them. And also, if you have more, need more questions – or have more questions related to this area, as well, that they would be more than happy to assist you. As well as, you know, using your – your ECE specialist and contacting your program specialist to also have these discussions and to be able to also be your support, if you will, in getting more information in this area.

Amanda: That's right. That's a very important point. So I think that the final question that we wanted to talk about is one that we also get a lot. And it – and it relates to something that I alluded to in my earlier story about mathematics, progress, curriculum, and professional development, and it's: How can school readiness goals drive professional development?

And again, you know, I mentioned that data always needs to be viewed in the context of other information you have about your program. The information about professional development is key. The kinds of teaching and training that your staff have received around a particular area, kind of, how does that align with what we think are the best evidence-based instructional practices in that area? And where there's a gap, being able to provide some support, some additional training and technical assistance to the staff so in fact they can more effectively provide the learning experiences and teaching that will result in the – the outcomes that you want.

So, it's – it's a really good demonstration of how we expect child assessment information to be used in the context of other information to make program improvements. It's – it's the whole point of the work that we're doing. The accountability is all on the program to make improvements based on what it's learning.

I thought I would tell you a short story that sort of exemplifies some of the things that we're talking about and really relates to the last couple of questions. I was talking recently to a regional program manager and he said to me, you know, "I've been out in a program recently," and he's – he's relatively new, and he said, you know, "I – I didn't know – I'm learning about the school readiness requirements and I didn't really kind of have it all in – in perspective. But I went to this program and I was talking to the director and talking to the staff and asking them about it, and they were talking about their struggle around school readiness goals for infants and toddlers. But then the director said, you know, 'We – we established them and the most remarkable things have been happening. I go into classrooms now and the – everybody's talking. And they're talking to the babies about what's happening and they're reading books with babies in a different way, and they're leaving more opportunities during conversations for babies to babble or, as they get older, to answer and talk.'"

They're describing what's happening and they're able to talk about why they're doing that in the context of the school readiness goals they have around early language and literacy for babies. And I thought it was a perfect example of the kind of intentionality we hope that school – we require, that this process of establishing goals and – and really understanding children's process – progress will bring to the program. I just thought it was such a great example. And also – you know, it also really, I think, is about the struggles that people have had thinking about infants and toddlers.

We always say, you know, this is not about hanging flashcards from cribs. We know that infant and toddler development happens in the context of relationships. It's about intentional practice to support children's progress in important fundamental domains of early learning that become the springboard for them to continue to succeed. And we are very careful to include things like approaches to learning and – and attitudes. Things like curiosity, problem-solving, persistence, some of the executive function areas, you know, related to impulse control, all of those are so strongly rooted in – in the earliest days and months of children's lives. Just again, this is a tremendous opportunity.

So, in summary, we want to say that Head Start programs are called upon to ensure that the nation's most vulnerable children get the highest quality services. It's been our mission since 1965 and it remains our mission today. Everything we do with regard to school readiness goals, assessing progress, aggregating, analyzing, and improvement should be with this most high calling in mind. As a national leader of early childhood education, we must use what we learn every day to continue to improve what we do.

Thank you so much for being with us today. You asked us to provide some context around these discussions, and we heard that and we really have provided this session in order to be able to do that. We're anxious to get your questions and to continue working with you. Thank you for – as – as Yvette Sanchez Fuentes, our director, says every time she speaks, "Thank you for the work you do on behalf of children and families every day."

Damón: Thank you.