

FROM THE DESK OF
**ERNEST
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Dear Friends,

This summer, we came together with a purpose.

On June 10 and Aug. 21, leaders from across Harris County gathered at BakerRipley's Central Campus on Harrisburg to respond to a shifting early childhood landscape. With Head Start facing federal budget threats, workforce instability, and fragmented systems, we met to begin reimagining and determining what needs to be done.

These convenings were designed to do two things:

1. Identify what's essential for children and families.
2. Begin to envision a stronger, more comprehensive early childhood ecosystem that reflects our region's values and vision, and the needs of the children and families we serve.

Who Was in the Room

We were joined by a powerful mix of voices, including:

- United Way of Greater Houston
- Powell Foundation

- Cullen Foundation
- Urban Strategies
- Gulf Coast Community Services Association (GCCSA)
- Harris County Department of Education (HCDE)
- Office of Congresswoman Sylvia Garcia

We asked: "***What can we do together that none of us can do alone?***"

What Needs to be Tackled

1. **Systems Alignment & Collective Action:** We agreed on the need to paint a full picture of Harris County's early childhood landscape, avoiding duplication, building two-gen systems, and formalizing strategic planning across agencies.
2. **Smarter Data & Visual Tools:** We discussed a regional Head Start data consortium and a one-phase fact sheet to visualize service gaps, economic impact, and funding threats. We need tools that show how each part of the system fits together clearly and visually.
3. **Workforce Equity & School District Partnerships:** We named the pay disparities. A significant percentage of Head Start staff are not earning living wages. We talked about the need for shared compensation models, joint staffing, and full implementation of Texas Education Code §1882 to support co-location and integration.
4. **Policy & Advocacy Strategy:** We need to clarify funding myths, connect Head Start to socio-economic mobility, and commit to coordinated messaging, storytelling, and site visits to engage elected officials, funders, and other partners.

Dreaming – Mapping the Future

We suggested the need for a Head Start–ECE Campus Mapping Initiative to visualize access, gaps, and integration opportunities across Harris County providers and school districts. A tool like this will help us:

- Identify deserts and underserved areas.
- Align Head Start and Kindergarten transitions.
- Procure or build a centralized database beyond PIR to track provider activity, engagement, and outcomes, reducing duplication and improving coordination across early childhood systems.
- Support §1882 implementation with data-driven site selection.
- Inform policy and funding decisions with clarity.

Exploring – Our Preliminary Strategic Ask

To identify a university, regional data collaborative, nonprofit entity, or cross-agency task force that has in the past or will in the future be charged with conducting a comprehensive Head Start community assessment that will:

- Map the current landscape
- Quantify impact across education, workforce, and socio-economic mobility
- Identify service gaps and opportunity deserts
- Analyze longitudinal outcomes
- Engage stakeholders across sectors

Doing – What We Committed To

From our Aug. 21 session, we walked away with two clear priorities:

1. **One Commitment:** Deepen stronger, mutually beneficial partnerships between Head Start providers and school districts focused on pay equity, shared funding models, and campus alignment. Begin by defining what a healthy partnership looks like: clarify provider needs, understand district constraints, and co-create a vision of success that's fair, sustainable, and centered on children and families.
2. **One Ask:** Launch or identify an existing countywide Head Start assessment to guide strategy, funding, and advocacy.

We also prioritized:

- Shared messaging to demonstrate how ECE systems interlock.
- A Head Start alumni network to amplify their experience and impact.

Thank You

To every attendee, partner, and voice in the room, thank you. Your leadership is helping us move from crisis response to long-term impact. We will reconvene in late September or early October.

In partnership,

Ernest Lewis III,

Vice President, Community Impact & Vitality at BakerRipley



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