

Getting a Head Start on the Oregon Trail

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Head Start Performance Standard 1302.50 Family Engagement.

- (a) Purpose. A program must integrate parent and family engagement strategies into all systems and program services to support family well-being and promote children’s learning and development. Programs are encouraged to develop innovative two-generation approaches that address prevalent needs of families across the program that may leverage community partnerships or other funding sources.

How does your program meet this performance standard? Child Start, Inc. of Kansas created a resource with original characters, a fully-illustrated story, and an Oregon Trail themed outdoor activity book with the help of community partners and generous grant support. Child Start, Inc. is offering this resource through a Memo of Understanding to other Head Start programs, preschools, and families.



In May of 2017, I attended a conference named “Let’s Move Outside!” at the Wichita Botanic Gardens. Participants discussed Richard Louvre’s book Nature Deficit Disorder, favorite outdoor childhood memories, and reasons why less children and families play outside today. At the close of the conference, we were all challenged to find creative ways to introduce more families to Wichita’s 140+ public parks.

I wondered how a Head Start program might meet that challenge. I wanted to create a family game with short activities promoting Physical Activity, Creative Free Play and Mindfulness, all centered around nature and including nutrition. After completing a group of activities, kids would earn a sticker with a fun name. For the long-term goal, I decided on a 100-hour outdoor challenge to simulate a walk along the Oregon Trail.



I proposed my idea to Child Start's 0-5 Program Director and Assistant Directors, who tasked me with forming a team to develop the idea further. Not every company will grant staff an opportunity to develop a new idea like this, but all should in the right instance. Google famously allows staff to use a portion of their hours on passion projects. Some excellent new ideas come from that policy. It also helps Google retain top employees. I recruited staff from as many departments as I could, including anyone with special skills that might prove useful. I collected optimists, artists, deep thinkers and anyone with ambitious to do more. For example, I found a training specialist with a graphic design degree and an administrative assistant with a side hustle as a writer.

Any Head Start program will surely employ people with similar hidden talents. Learning about interests and skills of peers or those you supervise will help to get projects done when your program needs a flier, poster, poem, song, or anything else out of the ordinary. Sparing a few hours for an employee to work in an area of interest can restore energy and spirits, but carefully define limits. The routine monitoring, filing, teaching and outreach need to take priority!

The Oregon Trail project hit some bumps and took some turns along the way. Many details and steps required more time, work and effort than planned. Some original team members moved on to other jobs. We applied for several grants before securing funding, once finishing a close runner-up for a local grant presentation at the Chamber of Commerce on "the next big, outside-the-box idea in health and wellness". There were multiple attempts at a story, several iterations of characters, near-connections with authors, and many drafts of activity book pages to edit and parse.

After two years of work, Getting a Head Start on the Oregon Trail is now a published, fully illustrated bilingual children's book and outdoor activity book, which includes a full color map and sheet of stickers. We are thrilled with the final materials completed in partnership with a local graphic design studio. Child Start staff passed out the first print run to Head Start parents the week before Spring Break in 2020. The response was positive, and we were exploring further partnerships with local organizations. Then a little thing called COVID-19 caused a major disruption.

Child Start staff are currently learning how to optimize these materials for use with mobile education apps in a post-pandemic Head Start world. I cannot offer much evidence of merit through feedback and

data yet, but you can check out the materials to use with your Head Start program or family or to just get ideas at <http://childstart.org/oregon-trail-project>.

Think your Head Start can do something similar or better? Give it a try. Pick out a performance standard or some other challenge, build a team, and try to work out a creative, innovative and collaborative solution. Head Start staff are usually busy, but they are also passionate and talented. Your staff may relish the chance to try something new, the result may prove worth all the extra effort, and the process may feel like a breath of fresh air, rather than more work!

