

POLICY ISSUE BRIEF: EARLY LEARNING AND PREKINDERGARTEN (PRE-K)

Issue at a Glance

High-quality early learning and prekindergarten (pre-K) are essential public investments with far-reaching impacts in a child's life. Children who attend early learning programs before kindergarten are not only more prepared for elementary school, but also 12% more likely to enroll in a two- or four-year college or university, according to Georgetown University's Center for Research on Children in the United States. Students who attend early education programs are also less likely to enter the criminal justice system, with one study finding that children enrolled in high-quality pre-K in Chicago were 70% less likely to be arrested for a violent crime by the time they turned 18. Yet programs that ensure that early education is available and accessible to all children are consistently underfunded, and long-term sustainability is not guaranteed.

Additionally, early childcare and education are a matter of family economics which can be an unrealistic and unmanageable expense for families who most need it. The National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) maintains a list of baseline quality standards that ensures effective, high-quality, and state-funded universal care and preschool for all. Key NIEER Quality Benchmarks for pre-K:

- **Curriculum:** Must be comprehensive, aligned with early learning standards, and evidence-based.
- **Teacher Credentials:** Lead teachers should hold a bachelor's degree, with specialized training in early childhood education.
- **Assistant Qualifications:** Assistants should have a Child Development Associate (CDA) or equivalent credential.
- **Professional Development:** Minimum of 15 hours per year, including coaching.
- **Class Size:** Maximum of 20 children per classroom for 4-year-olds.
- **Staff-Child Ratio:** Maximum ratio of 1:10.
- **Screening and Referral:** Comprehensive services for health, vision, hearing, and nutrition.
- **Continuous Quality Improvement (CQI):** Programs must have a system in place to monitor and improve quality.

The Head Start program administered within the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) has provided comprehensive and high-quality early childhood education and development childcare services to low-income children since 1965. The program promotes school readiness through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social, and other services for children and families from systemically underserved populations each year; Head Start Preschool, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MS), American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start Preschool, and AIAN Early Head Start are collectively referred to as "Head Start."

The Head Start Act was last reauthorized in December 2007. Though the authorization has lapsed, funding has been provided each year since. Typically, grantees must contribute a 20% nonfederal match (cash or in kind) to receive their full award. The Act also reserves the same dollar amount or shares of funds each year for state collaboration grants and program set asides (e.g., training/technical assistance, research/evaluation, and costs associated with program monitoring and corrective actions).

According to the National Head Start Association (NHSA), social development and trauma continue to have a deep and wide-ranging impact on Head Start children and families. Children are presenting significant needs and increased signs of trauma. In addition, a research review, “The Effects of Nutritional Interventions on the Cognitive Development of Preschool-Age Children,” highlighted the importance of adequate nutrition during preschool years, and the crucial role sufficient nutrition plays in cognitive development.

While pre-K continues to expand in many states to support early learning and nutrition opportunities for all children, additional supports including services for a high percentage of children with disabilities or developmental needs impacts the classroom environment. At the same time, the current model has a crippling shortage of high-quality infant and toddler care within Early Head Start.

Children whose families are in poverty, eligible to receive public assistance, in foster care, or experiencing homelessness are eligible. Most Head Start participants are 3 or 4 years old, but since 1995 a growing number of infants, toddlers, and pregnant women have been served in Early Head Start (EHS) programs. In the 2022–23 school year, Head Start and Early Head Start served over 800,000 children and families.

Since the presidential executive orders of 2025, there have been efforts by the Trump administration to dismantle Head Start, including withholding grant money, closing administrative offices, and eliminating staff with expertise in these areas. While Head Start previously received more bipartisan support, the administration collectively, closed offices serving nearly 800, or 41%, of Head Start grantees and nearly 318,000, or 44%, of funded slots for children across 22 states and five U.S. territories.

Fully funding federal programs like Head Start and Early Head Start is essential to ensure all children have access to the high-quality early education necessary for success in school and in life.

NASSP Position

- NASSP believes in providing all young children with a fair and full opportunity to reach their full potential by establishing and expanding programs to create universal, comprehensive childcare and early learning programs that are available to all young children.
- NASSP believes in:
 - Providing a learning environment that supports children’s growth in language, literacy, mathematics, science, cognitive abilities, social and emotional functioning, creative arts, physical skills, and approaches to learning.
 - Developing provisions for children and their families to sustain health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services that are determined, based on family needs assessments.

- Ensuring that families can access affordable, high-quality childcare and early learning programs regardless of circumstance.
- Promoting the school readiness of all young children by enhancing their cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development.
- Supporting the critical importance of early learning childhood development programs like Head Start/Early Head Start which prepare children for kindergarten, improve family economic mobility, and promote overall health and well-being.
- Opposing the closure or delay of grant funding for regional Head Start offices which play a key role in ensuring that local programs have the resources needed to continue offering early learning and developmental services that are tailored to community needs.
- Supporting increases to Head Start/Early Head Start annual appropriations requests above \$12 billion as program funding helps to prepare children to succeed in school by providing early learning, health, and development services to families with children from birth to age 5; approximately close to 800,000 children.
- NASSP has additional policy issue briefs on [Comprehensive Literacy Education](#), [Mental Health](#), [Poverty and Its Impact on Students' Education](#), [School Safety](#), [Supporting Principals as Leaders of Special Education](#) and [Trauma-Informed Schools](#) that offer additional recommendations and resources.

Recommendations for Federal Policymakers

- Create career pathways such as provisional credentials and/or flexibility that would allow staff in the process of obtaining a required credential to work with supervision, including registered apprenticeships.
- Implement universal or reduced fee childcare by enacting legislative proposals such as the Child Care for Every Community Act which provides funds to HHS for comprehensive affordable childcare and early learning programs.
- Address increased access and funding for health and mental health through the Medicaid and Children's Health Insurance Program (CHIP) which provides free or low-cost, comprehensive health coverage to uninsured children.
- Provide family supports through Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) (cash assistance/work programs), Social Services Block Grants (SSBG), and Community Services Block Grants (CSBG) (poverty alleviation) to provide essential, flexible, and state-administered funding to help low-income families achieve economic self-sufficiency, safety, and stability.
- Address workforce needs through additional targeted legislative approaches, such as the HEADWAY Act, Head Start for Our Future Act, Early Educators Apprenticeship Act, and Early Childhood Workforce Advancement Act.
- Increase annual appropriations for Head Start each fiscal year to build on those investments based on community needs assessments including:
 - Addressing fiscal barriers to hiring and retaining teachers and school leaders, and dedicating funding for quality improvement of the program.
 - Developing trauma-informed care and addressing the needs of children in classrooms.

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- Addressing internal funding inconsistencies which have resulted in wide disparities among grant recipients in per-student funding.
- Provide for child nutrition accounts and programs:
 - Ensure eligibility for families who qualify under the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) and improve local program flexibility.
 - Adopt categorical eligibility for children whose families are eligible for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, as well as those in informal kinship care settings and children moving from foster care to adoption.
 - Increase the nutritional meal reimbursements through the USDA's Child and Adult Care Food Program (CACFP).
- Expand resources for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C services to facilitate early identification and enrollment of more eligible young children with disabilities.
- Modernize the method for setting the federal poverty line to one that accounts for local and regional differences in the cost-of-living, such as Area Median Income used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- Include additional funding for Head Start programs to implement multi-tiered positive behavioral interventions, supports, and other trauma-informed care models of support for children and their families.
- Address overdue rebuilding, renovation, maintenance, and repair of Head Start facilities projected by the HHS Office of Head Start to cost an excess of \$5.1 billion based on inflation alone.
- Include funding to address the challenges facing rural communities and other programs facing a significant gap between their transportation needs and ability to provide equitable access to all children.
- Conduct an analysis and publish information about per-slot inconsistencies across grant recipients, as was noted in a Government Accountability Office (GAO) report in 2024.

Recommendations for State Policymakers

- Provide dedicated state supplemental funding to federal Head Start preschool and Early Head Start grant recipients to expand access to more children, improve workforce compensation, strengthen program quality, reduce barriers to access, or help grant recipients meet their required federal match.
- Ensure grant recipients are explicitly eligible to directly access or compete for other state funding, including pre-K, childcare, home visits, workforce, facility, transportation, and other grants and funding.
- Provide in-kind support to grant recipients in the form of free or reduced rent, professional development, quality coaching, and other forms of support.
- Provide funding to implement or sustain proven or promising trauma-informed care and early childhood mental health models.
- Invest in workforce recruitment and retention, which reached crisis levels several years ago.
- Provide new compensation requirements in the updated standards attached to funding to achieve the workforce requirements.
- Dedicate funding to Head Start for quality improvement, including staff salary and benefits, trauma-informed care, and the needs of children in classrooms.

- Provide quality improvement for monitoring Risk Assessment Notification (RAN) reviews.
- Mirror standards with an acknowledgement that each community has different strengths, resources, and challenges as each program is designed to reflect the traditions, priorities, and cultures of their community.
- Work with higher education, including community colleges, and through dual-enrollment high schools to recruit more early childhood professionals with linguistic and cultural competencies relevant to the communities they serve, expand scholarships and loan forgiveness, and assist with guaranteed job placement.

Recommendations for District Leaders

- Include a distinct funding source for Head Start infrastructure improvement, including relocation to high-needs communities, in any budgetary process.
- Offer leadership-driven content that enables program leadership and staff to access high-quality training and technical assistance that is based on research-supported best practices.
- Provide parent engagement and support empowering parents as a child's first and most important teachers. Because Head Start requires parent involvement in major program decision-making, districts should create opportunities for parent engagement programs to include goal setting, parenting training, and engagement, enabling parents to join in collaboration.
- Provide fluidity of recruitment and retention of high-quality teachers and school leaders to prevent further gaps and coverage for the early learning workforce.
- Provide socio-emotional supports to reduce trauma and challenges faced by students and/or families.
- Provide program supports for children with disabilities and developmental needs in collaboration and engagement with families.
- Develop partnerships with higher education institutions, including community colleges, and through dual-enrollment high schools to recruit more early childhood professionals with linguistic and cultural competencies relevant to the communities they serve; expand scholarships and loan forgiveness, and assist with guaranteed job placement.

Recommendations for School Leaders

- Advocate for increased support and resources for early learning systems and funding of Head Start/Early Head Start, IDEA, SNAP, WIC and other federal and state childcare programs.
- Provide parent engagement and support empowering parents as program decision-makers. Work with school district leaders to develop parent engagement opportunities to include goal setting, parenting training, and engagement, enabling parents to join in collaboration.
- Work and advocate with state and district leaders and higher education partners on recruitment and career pathway programs to recruit and retain more early childhood professionals with relevant linguistic and cultural and special education competencies.
- Increase awareness and engagement with parents/guardians to provide assistance and resources in health, nutritional, social, and other developmental services for underserved children and families.