



Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.



Head Start

A Proven Model for Serving Children and Families on Their Paths to Success in School and Life

40 million

Nearly 40 million children supported on their paths to success

60 years

60-year history of success, leading innovation

754,819

Head Start Slots

48,697

Classrooms

17,711

Centers

250,823

Staff Employed

Frequently Asked Questions

Since its inception in 1965, Head Start’s locally-run programs have been at the forefront in partnering with families and communities, providing children and their families from underserved backgrounds the skills and resources they need to succeed. Data-driven innovations and a multi-generational support model have fueled six decades of success—reaching nearly 40 million alumni, with over 250,000 dedicated staff and 48,000 classrooms at 17,000 centers operating in every corner of the United States. Head Start programs are simultaneously flexible enough to adapt to the needs of individual children, families, and communities while also adhering to outcomes-focused standards that promote a uniform level of high quality nationwide. This has allowed Head Start to maintain strong public and bipartisan political support.

Who does Head Start reach?

Head Start serves over 700,000 children ages zero to five and their families each year in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. Families living below the poverty line, experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care are eligible for Head Start.

What is Head Start?

Head Start is a federal-to-local program that has been proven to break intergenerational poverty. Early Head Start serves families from pregnancy to age 3 and Head Start Preschool serves children ages 3-5 and their families; both programs are collectively referred to as “Head Start.” Depending on both community and family needs, services may be delivered in a center, at a family child care home, or through a home visiting model. There are four elements to Head Start’s comprehensive, high quality approach.



Education

Leaning on decades of brain science, Head Start staff work with children to build the brain connections and self-confidence necessary for success in kindergarten and beyond.



Health

Providing dental, health, and mental health services and referrals, as well as healthy eating based on current nutritional best practices, and early identification of health problems, Head Start addresses critical health and nutrition needs so that children are fully ready to learn and grow.



Parent Engagement and Support

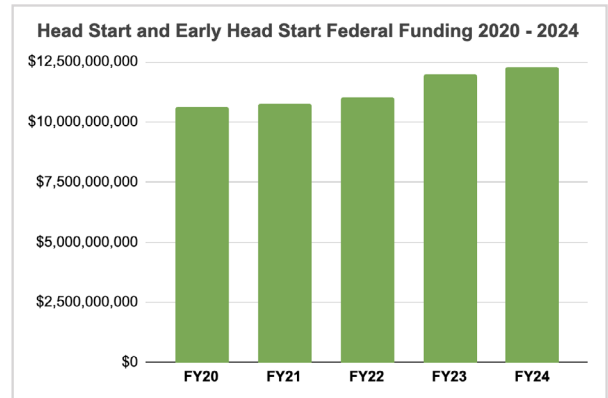
Believing that parents are a child’s first and most important teachers, Head Start requires parent involvement in major program decision-making. Further, Head Start works with parents to put them on a path of economic self-reliance through goal setting, parenting training, and genuine engagement, enabling parents to join the workforce and stay working.



Local Design

Acknowledging that each community has different strengths, resources, and challenges, each program is designed to reflect the traditions, priorities, and cultures of the community.

How is Head Start funded?



Federal grants, administered by the Office of Head Start (OHS) in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are awarded directly to local government, nonprofit, for-profit, and faith-based organizations. All Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start grants are for five years, with a system for grant redetermination at the end of the five year period. Each grant recipient is allotted the same base grant each year and is required to provide a 20% non-federal financial match. Each fiscal year, Congress enacts an overall appropriation for Head Start. As outlined in the Head Start Act of 2007, funding levels are adjusted proportionately if the yearly federal appropriation is less or more than the previous year.

In 2014, Head Start’s infant-toddler services were expanded through Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, which leverage the strengths of Early Head Start—flexible, high-quality care—to expand and improve quality in child care settings.

What does local governance mean?

Head Start’s founders understood that parents are essential partners in educating young children. They felt parents should help decide how Head Start services can most benefit their family and other families in their communities. Head Start created Policy Councils as a formal leadership and policy-making role for parents. Today, every Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start program must have a Policy Council as part of its leadership structure. Through the Policy Council, parents have a voice in decisions about how the program spends money, what children do in their classrooms, and how the program works with community partners.



What is Head Start's impact?

Extensive research proves positive outcomes in the short, intermediate, and long term for Head Start children and families, and long term savings for taxpayers, including:

- enhanced kindergarten readiness
- less grade repetition by 8th grade
- diminished chronic absenteeism in middle school
- improved high school graduation rates
- lower foster care placement rate
- increased higher education enrollment and completion rates
- heightened parental involvement (including more father engagement)
- decreased reliance on public assistance
- lower likelihood of experiencing poverty

Research has also shown Head Start access is linked with the disruption of intergenerational poverty, as evidenced by increased maternal educational attainment, reduced likelihood of teen pregnancy, and less involvement with the criminal justice system.

Learn more about the research: go.nhsa.org/advantage

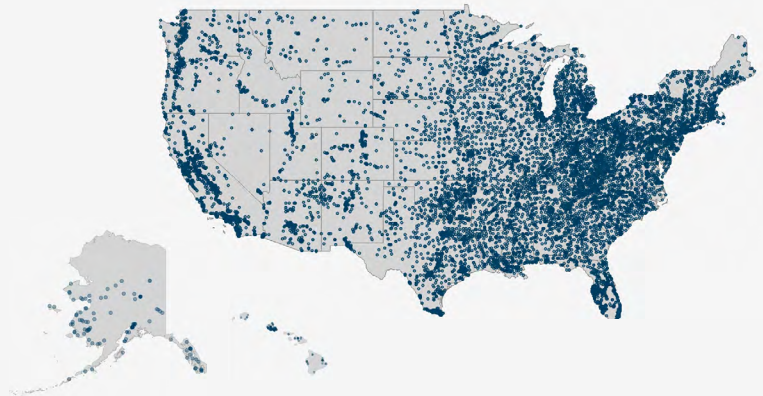
How are high standards of quality maintained nationwide?

The federal Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) govern everyday program practice. These standards, last updated in 2024, set robust outcomes-based expectations around staff education, professional development, and data-informed continuous improvement of program services, while also including flexibility to encourage innovation at the local level. While every Head Start program is unique and locally designed, each must meet a certain level of quality education, health, nutritional, social, and other services.

OHS regularly monitors all grantees for performance and ability to continuously improve services according to rigorous monitoring protocols. Prior to the end of each five year grant, OHS is required to determine if a program qualifies for an automatic renewal or would be required to re compete for its funding. Any program that receives two deficiencies during its five year project period is required to compete with other eligible entities for the new five year grant. This process of determining whether a program should receive an automatic renewal or be required to re compete was mandated by Congress to ensure communities receive Head Start services from the most qualified local agency.

Where is Head Start offered?

Head Start services are delivered by more than 1,600 local grant recipients operating more than 17,000 centers across the country. American Indian and Alaska Native grants are awarded to tribal governments, and Migrant and Seasonal programs serve across state lines and adapt Head Start to the specific needs of the agriculture workforce.



Head Start has been serving America's most vulnerable children, families, and communities for six decades. It has changed the life trajectory of millions of Americans and continues to build on our nation's shared belief that every child in America deserves the opportunity to succeed no matter their circumstances at birth.

Questions? Contact NHSA at advocacy@nhsa.org.