



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



Head Start & Early 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

59 years

59-year history of success, leading innovation

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 to give young children and their families from systemically underserved backgrounds the skills they need to succeed in school and in life. Data-driven innovations and a multi-generational support model have fueled six decades of success—impacting nearly 40 million alumni, 248,445 staff, 16,217 centers, and 49,992 classrooms operating in every corner of the United States.

Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start are simultaneously flexible enough to adapt to the needs of individual children, families, and communities while also adhering to a framework of outcomes-focused regulations that promote a uniform level of high quality nationwide. This has allowed Head Start to maintain strong public and bipartisan political support in all corners of the country.

808,095

Head Start and Early Head Start Slots

Who does Head Start reach?

Head Start serves children and families age 0-5 each year in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and the territories. Families who are living below the poverty line, eligible for public assistance, experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care are eligible for Head Start.

49,992

Classrooms

What is Head Start Preschool?

Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start are federal programs that has been proven to break intergenerational poverty. Collectively referred to as Head Start, Early Head Start serves families from pregnancy to age 3 and Head Start serves children families ages 3 - 5 and their families. Depending on both community and family needs, services may be delivered in a center, at a family child care home, or as a home visiting model. Regardless of the model, there are five high-quality elements that are the essential elements of Head Start's comprehensive approach.



Education

Built on research-based curriculum and social-emotional learning in order to achieve kindergarten-readiness through developing literacy, exploring numeracy, and establishing a love of learning.



Nutrition

Addresses child and family hunger by providing access to daily food, developing connections to other benefit programs, such as SNAP and WIC, and educating families about nutrition at home.



Health

Includes mental health and dental health, ensuring that children have access to health insurance, regular screenings and check-ups, and medical and dental primary care providers. Programs work with families to streamline the process for accessing necessary medical attention, prevention, and intervention services.



Multigenerational Approach

Addresses the needs of parents and caregivers—from job training and English as an Additional Language courses, to leadership skill development and financial planning—to bolster long-term outcomes for both children and their families.



Local Governance

With roots in the civil rights movement, Head Start programs are governed by a system of joint governance that is designed to promote maximum feasible community participation including prominent oversight roles for parents and caregivers.

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 the Policy Council 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. Children, parents, and the program all benefit when parents take on leadership roles. Children learn more and experience healthier development at school and at home. Parents can become more confident, gain skills, and connect with other parents and staff. Program staff learn about the strengths, interests, and needs of the children, families, and community they serve.

"I first learned about Head Start while studying child and family studies in college and knew it's where I wanted to work. While working for Head Start, my son was able to attend because of his IEP for speech and social delays. In one year with his wonderful teachers and speech therapist, his speech improved greatly and he started playing with other kids. I am thankful for Head Start professionally, and in my life as well."

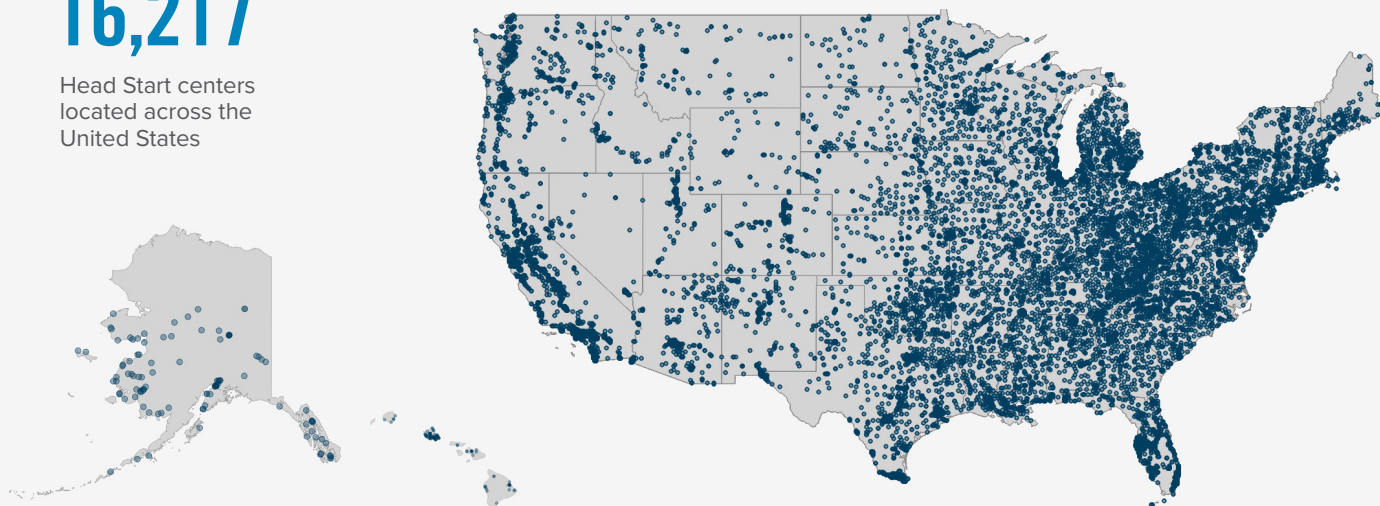
Jamie Steetle, Pennsylvania

Where is Head Start offered?

Head Start services are delivered by more than 1,600 local grant recipients operating more than 16,217 centers across the country. American Indian and Alaska Native grants are awarded to tribal governments and Migrant and Seasonal programs serve across state lines.

16,217

Head Start centers
located across the
United States



Is Head Start effective?

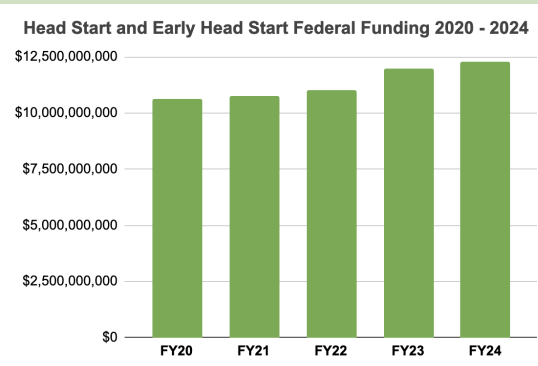
Extensive research proves positive outcomes for the children and families who participate in Head Start in the short, intermediate, and long-term, including:

- 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 is Head Start funded by the federal government?



Federal grants, administered by the Office of Head Start (OHS) within the Administration for Children and Families at the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, are awarded directly to local government, nonprofit, for-profit, and faith-based organizations. Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start grants are all five-year grants with a system for redetermination of grants at the end of the five-year period. Each fiscal year, Congress enacts an overall appropriation for Head Start. Each grant recipient is allotted the same base grant each year and required to provide a 20% non-federal financial match. As outlined in the Head Start Act of 2007, funding levels are adjusted proportionately in the event that 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 grounded in cultural and social values—to expand and improve quality in child care settings.

How are high standards of quality maintained nationwide?

The federal Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) govern everyday practice. These regulations, last updated in 2024, set robust 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 to enrolled children and their families. OHS regularly monitors all grantees for performance and ability to continuously improve services according to set, rigorous monitoring protocols.

Since 2011, Head Start grants have been awarded for a limited project period of five years. Prior to the end of the five year project period for each grant recipient, OHS is required to make a determination if a program would receive an automatic renewal or would be required to recompete for its funding. Any program that receives two deficiencies during their five year project period is required to compete with other eligible entities for the new five year grant. This process of making a determination whether a program received an automatic renewal or was required to recompete was mandated by Congress to ensure the community was receiving Head Start services from the most qualified local agency.

Head Start has been serving America's most vulnerable children, families, and communities for nearly six decades. It has changed the life trajectory of millions of Americans and continuing 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's Senior Director of Government Affairs Bob Bissen: bbissen@nhsa.org



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