

September 1, 2021

The Honorable Senator Patty Murray
Chair, Committee on Health, Education, Labor
and Pensions
U.S. Senate

The Honorable Representative Bobby Scott
Chair, Committee on Education and Labor
U.S. House of Representatives

The Honorable Bernie Sanders
Chair, Committee on the Budget
U.S. Senate

The Honorable John Yarmuth
Chair, Committee on the Budget
U.S. House of Representatives

cc: The Honorable Charles E. Schumer, Majority Leader, U.S. Senate
The Honorable Nancy Pelosi, Speaker of the House, U.S. House of Representatives

We are organizations that represent young children, their families and the early childhood programs, workforce and communities that support them. We are uniformly supportive of universal access to child care and pre-K to support children and families prenatally to age five. **We are calling on your committees to use the reconciliation opportunity to integrate the Head Start model into the foundation of this expanded early childhood system, thereby ensuring equity, high-quality services and accountability for children and their families with low-incomes in all 50 states.**

We believe that the Head Start model can serve as an essential ***backbone of a universal system and a safety net for children and families in historically marginalized, under-resourced communities***, especially children whose parents earn low wages and are Black, Hispanic, and Native American.

It is critical to use this reconciliation opportunity to unambiguously build on the existing legislative and regulatory framework of Head Start, including: the [Head Start Act](#), the Head Start [Program Performance Standards](#), Head Start [quality improvement language](#) and [State Advisory Councils](#).

Background on the Head Start Model

For 55 years and across 37 million alumni, **the Head Start model (inclusive of Early Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, Head Start, American Indian Alaska Native Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start) has embodied the core values and components of an equitable, high-quality and accountable prenatal-to-five early childhood system** by focusing on:

- Child development and school readiness services grounded in a research-based curriculum and assessment;
- Health services and supports to address impediments to healthy growth and development, including through early identification of disabilities; and
- Family strengthening and support through a 2-generation approach, including robust connections to community resources, job training support and parent engagement and leadership.

Racial and economic equity is a core focus of the Head Start model. This includes an effort to close school readiness gaps that are persistently high among Black, Hispanic, Tribal and farmworker children with low incomes and provide culturally-competent services. In Head Start:

- Nearly all families served live at or near poverty.
- 67% of children are Black or Hispanic.
- Children experiencing homelessness and in foster care are automatically eligible.
- Tens of thousands of children with disabilities receive appropriate early intervention services.
- Hundreds of thousands of children have the opportunity to learn English as they continue to develop their home language.

“Equitable learning systems provide access to resources, opportunities, and experiences to children and families that result in positive outcomes that are not associated with children’s demographic characteristics. They actively and continuously identify and intentionally eliminate manifestations of systemic racism and other forms of oppression.”

- Children’s Equity Project 2020 report, “[Start with Equity](#)”

The Head Start model is well-suited to a mixed delivery system. Head Start’s model is already offered by over 1,600 grantees in a diverse range of community-based settings, including public schools, local nonprofits, through tribal governments, faith-based agencies, child care providers and community action agencies. Grants are administered by counties and cities, tribes, school districts and nonprofits large and small. Multiple program options are available with various staffing and service delivery models flexible enough to adjust to shifts in supply and demand and shifting workforce availability.

The Reconciliation Opportunity

The movement toward universal access to child care and preschool is a critical opportunity to expand the Head Start model to more children and families. Despite serving over 750,000 three- and four-year olds each year, only one in three income-eligible children currently access Head Start preschool through federal funding. Reaching more children in a landscape of universal access will mean scaling the model through new partnerships, state alignment with the Head Start Program Performance Standards and an intentional focus by states and localities to identify and reach children and families who need the Head Start model of support the most.

Intentionally integrating the Head Start model into an expanded early childhood system, offers a clear opportunity to **efficiently build on the example of leading states that have chosen to develop true mixed-delivery systems with Head Start playing a key role.** In [West Virginia](#), 58% of pre-Kindergarten communities collaborate with Head Start. In [Michigan](#), 18% of children in the Great Start Readiness Program receive services in a blended Head Start/GSRP model. [Alabama](#)’s First Class Pre-K offers dedicated funding for Head Start programs, enabling services to 1,693 children across 94 classrooms.

Recovery from COVID-19 for children, families and communities will be significantly aided by centering the Head Start model. Families, especially in communities of color, are reeling from COVID-related loss: of jobs, economic security, learning opportunities and loved ones. The most important task ahead for an early childhood system is to support families through a whole child-whole family, 2-generation approach that addresses the holistic needs of families with young children.

Head Start has proven its strength and resilience by:

Keeping families safe from COVID-19 ...	“Since the COVID-19 pandemic started, Head Start and Early Head Start programs successfully implemented CDC-recommended mitigation strategies and applied other innovative approaches to limit SARS-CoV-2 transmission among children, teachers, and other staff members by allowing maximum program flexibility and allocating financial and human resources.”	2020 CDC report
Helping children make school readiness gains despite the pandemic ...	Head Start and Early Head Start programs run by Acelero Learning “made significant gains in domains of print knowledge and numeracy, and children in centers also made significant gains in executive function.”	2021 Brown University study
Addressing food insecurity ...	66% of programs provided food for pick-up, 63% sent food home with children; 59% partnered with local food banks; 56% delivered food to homes (see also these stories from the field)	2021 NHSA field survey of over 350 programs

Head Start Supports Economic Recovery

A [University of Texas study](#) from 2020 concluded, “States with higher rates of Head Start enrollment had a smaller increase in family poverty during the Great Recession and a more stable recovery than states with lower Head Start enrollment.”

Our Recommendations

We recommend that an expanded focus on the Head Start model center on Slots, Equity and the Workforce.

SLOTS - *reaching additional underserved children and geographies with Head Start’s model of wraparound support for children and families with low incomes and with risk factors in a variety of settings.*

There are multiple ways to achieve this goal through reconciliation, but the most important principle is requiring alignment with the proven [Head Start Program Performance Standards](#). With this foundation, options include:

- **Directing funding** to new and existing Head Start grantees and partnerships through the Office of Head Start, including with and through public schools, child care providers, cities and counties;
- Requiring states to **ensure a set percentage of new state preschool slots include the Head Start model**;
- Requiring state preschool systems to **offer a “comprehensive preschool option”** funded at a per-child rate that allows for comprehensive services; and
- Requiring federal rules and technical assistance to **facilitate easy cost-allocation and layering of the Head Start model with pre-K, child care, special education and Title I funding**.

EQUITY - *strengthening the quality and accessibility of early childhood programs for families with low-incomes.*

Families with low incomes face unique needs and barriers to access that should be addressed through reconciliation. In particular, **hours of service, outdated facilities and lack of transportation impact access in the neighborhoods in which they live.** In a recent survey by the National Head Start Association of over 2,500 Head Start stakeholders, a lack of transportation to programs was cited as the #1 access barrier for income-eligible families.

As Congress has repeatedly supported through investments in Head Start quality and as was included in the Child Care for Working Families Act and the American Jobs Plan, additional resources are needed for early childhood programs to:

- Expand **hours of service** to better meet the needs of working families with low-incomes;
- Improve outdated **facilities**, ensuring quality and accessible learning environments; and
- Expand **transportation options**, so more of our most asset-constrained families can access programs.

We hope that the committee attends to these significant barriers to access and believe [the Quality Improvement language in the Head Start Act offers a clear legislative pathway forward](#) and should be referenced through reconciliation.

We also recommend dedicating resources to:

Focus states on **equity-based planning through State Advisory Councils (authorized through the Head Start Act) OR other state bodies** inclusive of diverse state, local, provider and family voices. As President Biden's American Families Plan stated, universal preschool must "[first prioritize high-need areas](#)". State Advisory Councils appointed by Governors are legislatively tasked with evaluating "the availability of high-quality pre-kindergarten services for low-income children in the State," promoting "collaboration and coordination among Federally-funded and State-funded child development, child care, and early childhood education programs and services" and expanding "outreach to underrepresented and special populations." It is critical for states to take ownership of equity-focused planning as universal preschool and expanded child care access take root, including ensuring robust and high-quality infant and toddler care is available, such as Early Head Start.

Fund state and local efforts to enact and study the efficacy and scalability of **alternatives to suspension, expulsion and other forms of discipline in preschool**. There is a crisis of discipline in preschool that has disparate impacts on Black children, in particular. The federal government should fund a bold multi-state/multi-community effort to end this crisis through new research-to-practice partnerships.

WORKFORCE - *raising compensation for the Head Start workforce and all early childhood staff to support staffing and retention, including necessary staffing diversity and language competency, and staff health and wellness supports.*

The Biden Administration has noted that through the [American Families Plan](#), "All employees in participating pre-K programs and Head Start will earn at least \$15 per hour, and those with comparable qualifications will receive compensation commensurate with that of kindergarten teachers." The President's most recent budget also called for \$25.7 billion over 10 years to increase Head Start teacher salaries.

Yet, it is not clear that the current construct of universal preschool and child care access would address the urgent workforce needs in Head Start. It is essential that the needs of the Head Start workforce, inclusive of Head Start, Early Head Start, American Indian Alaska Native Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, be addressed through reconciliation either directly or through inclusive pay parity and workforce funding language.

The current status quo is unsustainable. It is negatively impacting enrollment this school year. Left unaddressed, Head Start will continue to train and support credentialing of teachers and other support staff, but lose them due to noncompetitive wages and benefits. The children and families of Head Start will suffer the most, losing essential continuity of care and high-quality, dedicated staff.

Further, given the broad diversity and changing demographics of U.S. children and the ongoing effects of the pandemic and long-standing inequities by race and ethnicity, it is critical that investments in the early childhood workforce be flexible enough to support and incentivize:

- **Developing a diverse, multilingual and culturally-competent workforce; and**
- **Staff health and wellness**, including early childhood mental health consultation, trauma-informed care and other support systems.

Investing in and incentivizing intentional expansion of the Head Start model in a world of universal access will ensure children and families in *all* 50 states and communities have access to the comprehensive services and support they need to succeed in school and in life. It will help to correct generations of disinvestment and neglect in communities with lower socio-economic status. As you consider this once-in-a-generation opportunity that reconciliation presents, we hope that you will make expanding access to the Head Start model a priority.

Sincerely,

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