



In the wake of COVID-19, states are facing a crisis of young children living in poverty, millions of families newly unemployed, and a rising tide of childhood trauma and mental health concerns.^{1,2}

The nation's 1,600 Head Start and Early Head Start (collectively, "Head Start") programs are a ready-built solution in all 50 states and territories to support at-risk young children ages birth to five through comprehensive health, education and family support.

One of the most important ways states can support children and families from at-risk backgrounds is to [directly fund additional Head Start slots](#). However, funding is not the only support states can provide. There are dozens of no-cost and low-cost state policies that go a long way towards supporting Head Start access and quality.

This issue brief describes 12 state policies—six that promote Head Start access and six that promote Head Start quality—with broad support and precedent.

12 State Policies to Support Head Start Access and Quality

Expanding Access to Head Start	Supporting Head Start Quality
1. Coordinate Head Start and state pre-K enrollment	7. Expand mental health consultation and support in Head Start
2. Support summer programming in Head Start	8. Achieve pay parity between pre-K teachers in Head Start and those in public schools
3. Expand outreach to and prioritization of children experiencing homelessness	9. Strengthen early elementary partnerships to sustain gains from Head Start
4. Use contract child care subsidy slots to support targeted Head Start access and support child care partnerships	10. Promote blending, braiding, layering, and integration of Head Start funds with other funding sources
5. Issue state-level guidance and plans on kinship care and Head Start	11. Expand data partnerships to support collaboration with state early childhood systems
6. Expand transportation funding and partnerships	12. Codify effective and innovative Head Start and Early Head Start models

States Have Success Collaborating with Local Head Start Programs

State efforts to support and collaborate with Head Start programs are not new. State Head Start Collaboration Offices and their Directors play a facilitative and leadership role in all 50 states, Head Start is often represented on state early learning committees, and state Head Start associations organize the Head Start community in the states. Among successes to date:³

- Creation of pathways for Head Start programs to participate in Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS).
- Coordination and collaboration with state child care subsidy systems (CCDF).
- Alignment of parent, family, and community engagement standards and initiatives with Head Start's evidence-based framework.



Expanding Access to Head Start

Coordinating Enrollment with State Pre-K

Both state pre-K programs and Head Start programs serve four-year-old children and share a commitment to preparing them for Kindergarten. Head Start is also specifically built to serve the complex needs of children and families living in poverty and other at-risk populations through health services, family support, and other interventions. When states require or promote coordination of state pre-K and Head Start enrollment, children most in need of Head Start are more likely to access the comprehensive services they need to thrive and federal and state funding is maximized.

Available state policy options:

- Require and invest in state-local coordination systems, including through Preschool Development Grant efforts, that expand family education and outreach, and prioritize access for children and families from at-risk backgrounds into Head Start.
- Mandate and support the full enrollment and utilization of Head Start slots to maximize federal dollars coming into a state as a prerequisite to the use of state funds.
- Directly allocate a portion of state pre-K funds at the state level to Head Start to prioritize collaboration and ensure service of children with complex needs through Head Start.
- Invest existing capacity-building dollars to build state pre-K and Head Start capacity in alignment and coordination, with a focus on target populations and target geographies.

Michigan: Leading with Pre-K Collaboration

In Michigan's Great Start Readiness Program (GSRP), school districts work with Head Start programs and other community-based organizations to enroll children. Collaboration is essential given the overlapping eligibility with Head Start based on income, homeless status, and foster status. In the school year 2017-2018, 24% of the 2,361 total classrooms were GSRP/Head Start blended classrooms and the majority of these (309) were in community-based Head Start programs.⁴



Expanding Access to Head Start

Supporting Summer Programming

Head Start was launched in 1965 as an eight-week summer program. While many Head Start programs now close their doors during the summer to regroup, replan, and get ready for the school year, many continue to offer summer programming to combat the “summer slide”—the academic losses that come with the lack of summer enrichment for many children living in poverty.

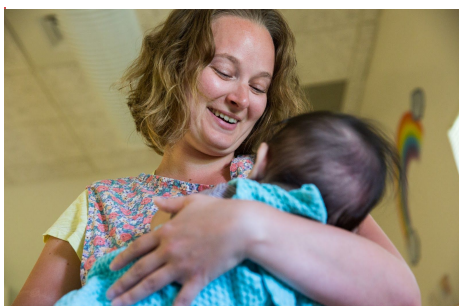
Even with a recent infusion from Congress of \$750 million in response to COVID-19, most Head Start programs lack the funding to provide summer services.

Available state policy options:

- Work with Head Start programs to develop a cost model for summer programming, which may include center-based options, as well as innovations, such as home-based Head Start and outdoor preschool models.
- Work with Head Start programs to identify priority populations for Head Start summer programming, such as children with disabilities or those who started the school year late, faced attendance challenges, or are making the transition to Kindergarten.
- Clarify eligibility of Head Start programs and at-risk children and families for state and local summer programming resources and services; conduct outreach to programs to develop a pipeline of available sites.

Washington: Addressing Summer Learning Loss Due to COVID-19

Washington’s Early Childhood Care and Education Program (ECEAP) is modeled on Head Start. In June 2020, the state allocated \$7.95 million in federal CARES Act funding to allow ECEAP programs to operate in July and August, the months they would normally be closed.⁵



Expanding Access to Head Start

Utilizing Child Care Contracts

While most child care subsidies are issued directly to families, the use of contracted slots—where the subsidy goes directly to programs—has long offered opportunities for states to target geographies, prioritize populations, promote quality and innovation, and establish a backbone of stable capacity in their child care subsidy systems. Contracting directly with Head Start offers distinct opportunities to expand comprehensive services to more at-risk children and families, including working families.

Available state policy options:

- Strengthen and expand Early Head Start Child-Care Partnerships through contracts.
- Target at-risk children and families (e.g. families with young children that are experiencing homelessness and teen parents) with contact slots in Head Start.
- Address geographic priorities where access to comprehensive services may be lacking with contract slots in Head Start.
- Contract to allow Head Start to serve children in families who make too much to qualify for Head Start (e.g. due to higher minimum wage laws), but who are on the edge of poverty and struggling economically.

Oregon: Expanding Hours & Improving Quality

Oregon's Department of Human Services has contracted with full-day Head Start programs to cover extended day hours (before and after program hours) and program closure dates at full-day, full-year Head Start programs.⁶ One of the goals is to expand hours and days to support family self-sufficiency and work.⁷ In addition, the state contracts directly with child care programs who are part of Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, including by designating a staff person to work with grantees and child care programs to assist with fiscal and other collaboration.



Expanding Access to Head Start

Reaching Children Experiencing Homelessness

There is an epidemic of homelessness that particularly impacts families with young children. In 2018, about one-third of all people who stayed in a shelter were families with children, and nearly half of children served by federal Housing and Urban Development-funded emergency and transitional housing providers were aged five or younger.⁸ Children experiencing homelessness are automatically eligible for Head Start. They're also a priority for child care subsidy. Still, numerous barriers to access exist, leaving tens of thousands of children unserved each year.

Available state policy options:

- Expand wrap-around child care for children experiencing homelessness who are enrolled in Head Start by allowing programs to enroll children in subsidy using the same presumed eligibility, moving these children to the top of eligibility lists, waiving co-pays, and allowing child attendance to count toward work or school requirements. Much of this can be done by including homeless children in the state definition of “protective services.”¹¹
- Work with Head Start partners to set a statewide goal of slots “reserved” for children and families experiencing homelessness (Head Start may reserve up to 3% of slots), while establishing a coordinated enrollment hub and process to collectively achieve that goal.
- Apply “school of origin” guidance and funding to support transportation costs for children in Head Start school-based programs who are experiencing homelessness and showing early warning signs of disengagement (e.g. poor attendance) or those who move.
- Identify and cultivate safe, community-based sites for the delivery of a “home-based” Head Start option and Early Head Start home visiting for families experiencing homelessness, including through the application of the [Early Childhood Self-Assessment Tool for Shelters](#).

Illinois: Partnerships to Coordinate Services

To support partnerships between schools and Head Start programs, Illinois has issued detailed guidance and training for McKinney-Vento liaisons in schools.⁹ The guidance covers Head Start eligibility, “school of origin” requirements when a local education agency is involved with Head Start and other issues. In addition, local McKinney-Vento liaisons regularly hold regional trainings that early childhood programs, such as Head Start, can and do attend.¹⁰



Expanding Access to Head Start

Issuing State Guidance on Kinship Care

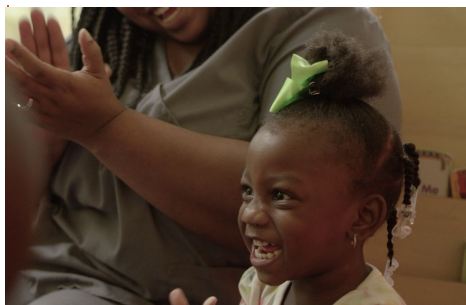
Over 45,000 children in Head Start are classified as living in “kinship care,” such as living with foster parents, grandparents, or another relative.¹² In September 2019, the Office of Head Start issued an Information Memorandum (IM) clarifying how children in kinship care qualify for Head Start.¹³ While the guidance promoted flexibility, state-level guidance, and plans focused on facilitating placement for children in kinship care in Head Start, programs are necessary to fully actualize this opportunity given the need for strong Head Start-child welfare partnerships.

Available state policy options:

- Develop a state plan and manual to implement the IM, which could include definitions, documentation needs and goals.
- Designate a staff team within the state child welfare agency to refer children into Head Start (and child care).
- Maintain a set-aside number of kinship care slots in Head Start programs, available on an as-needed for emergency placements.
- Partner with Head Start programs to layer state child care funding in service of extending the Head Start day, which is often key to meet the needs of working foster families.
- Host community and virtual forums to educate foster families about the benefits of Head Start for children in foster care, including the comprehensive services.

Georgia: Coordinating Access for Foster Children and Families

Starting in 2019, the Georgia Head Start Collaboration Office convened stakeholders to address ways to implement the kinship care IM in the state, with the goal of expanding enrollment of children in foster care in Head Start. With child welfare, they aligned around a definition for kinship care that reflected the new IM, partnered with the team in the child welfare agency who focuses on early childhood placements, and led listening and information sessions in local communities. They plan to expand educational efforts with foster families about the benefits of Head Start.¹⁴



Expanding Access to Head Start

Supporting Transportation for Children

Only 35% of Head Start programs provide transportation to students, in part due to a lack of funding.¹⁵ Access to transportation is critical to support enrollment of children who are at-risk, facilitate stable attendance, and protect child safety. Transportation is particularly critical for rural Head Start programs. According to a recent Center for American Progress report, one Montana Head Start director explained, “If we stopped providing transportation, we would end up with an under-enrollment issue. On days in the winter when you can’t run the bus, our program’s attendance drops by 50 percent.”¹⁶

Available state policy options:

- Integrate school and community-based Head Start programs into any preschool and pre-K transportation funding initiatives and regional and state-level transportation plans and policy agendas.
- Specifically recommend that local transit authorities include Head Start in their community planning efforts.
- Ensure that children experiencing homelessness and those in foster care who are enrolled in public school Head Start programs can access transportation funding when they move by applying “school of origin” guidance.

Iowa: Helping Children Get to Head Start

Over 15 years ago, the Iowa Department of Transportation commissioned a study on coordination of transit and school busing that highlighted multiple transportation partnerships with Head Start.¹⁷ Although changes to Head Start transportation rules have hindered some partnerships, others continue to flourish. As one example, for the past 10 years, the Heart of Iowa Regional Transit Agency has provided door-to-door public transportation services for Head Start children.¹⁸



Multigenerational Solutions to Education, Health and Economic Issues Facing Families

Head Start has a proud history as one of America’s first multigenerational solutions—a program that focuses on the well-being not just of young children, but their families, as well. Parents and other caregivers in Head Start are supported through job training, health services, and other supports. They are also engaged as program leaders, volunteers, and advocates.

Numerous states have embraced multigenerational solutions, including Tennessee, whose recent [Building a Thriving Tennessee Through 2-Gen](#) report outlines their focus on early childhood and family support. They reference the Porter-Leath Early Head Start Renaissance program, which provides “affordable and quality early childhood education services for children under age three in zip code 38126 and vital wraparound services for their families.”

The National Conference on State Legislatures’ [Two Generation Approaches to Addressing Poverty: A Toolkit for State Legislators](#) offers more information on multigenerational state plans,



Supporting Head Start Quality

Mental Health Consultation and Support

Childhood trauma is more than two times more likely among children living in poverty than children in families with higher incomes.¹⁹ Head Start programs are designed to provide safety, security, and support to promote child well-being, both physical and emotional. States have a critical role to play in supporting mental health consultation in Head Start programs.

Available state policy options:

- Expand direct mental health consultation within Head Start programs and other programs that primarily serve children from at-risk backgrounds.
- Support cross-sector staff training and credentialing.
- Formally recognize and celebrate mental health skills, expertise, initiatives, and outcomes among early childhood practitioners and programs, including Head Start.
- Partner with Head Start programs to collect and interpret data on adverse childhood experiences (ACEs) and other relevant data.

Arizona: Providing Mental Health Consultations

Arizona's Smart Support is an infant and early childhood mental health consultation model with promising evidence of impact.²⁰ It is funded through First Things First, a statewide agency that dedicates state cigarette tax revenue to benefit young children and families in the state. In addition to serving hundreds of child care programs across the state, Smart Support supports Maricopa County's Head Start program and Southwest Human Development's Head Start programs in Phoenix.



Supporting Head Start Quality

Compensation Parity in State Pre-K

Compensation and benefits for early educators are low, especially given the higher educational standards many are increasingly being asked to achieve, the importance of their jobs, and the critical need to maintain continuity of relationships for young children. Even within the early childhood field there are startling pay disparities between teachers in public schools and those in other settings, including Head Start programs. Few states require any form of pay parity across early childhood settings. As a result, Head Start children experience high levels of teacher turnover that disrupt teacher-child relationships.

Available state policy options:

- Require pay parity across public school settings and Head Start in state pre-K funding.
- Codify the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Power to the Profession framework—which advises the establishment of “one profession, with three designations” (Early Childhood Educator 1, 2, and 3)—to create a unified career pathway, spark compensation and benefit increases, and establish pay parity.
- Develop subsidized workforce initiatives (e.g. apprenticeships) that offer equitable pay in Head Start to early career professionals.
- Conduct or update any study on wages and fringe benefits for Head Start staff and/or the broader early childhood field, and follow up with actionable recommendations.

Alabama: Building Pay Parity into State Pre-K

Alabama’s lauded First Class Pre-K program serves children in public schools and non-public Head Start classrooms, as well as other settings. In the school year 2019-2020 the program directly funded 96 Head Start classrooms. The program requires salary parity across all settings and annual raises, which are designed to level the playing field in terms of pay with teachers of kindergarten to grade three. Because of the blended funding, in the 2020-2021 program year, the base lead teacher salary in a community-based program is \$40,873.



Supporting Head Start Quality

Elementary Partnerships to Sustain Gains

All Head Start programs and public schools are required to have agreements in place to facilitate partnership and support effective transitions for children from Head Start to kindergarten. These partnerships range widely and many times are dependent on the strength of community relationships. There are untapped opportunities to bring greater structure to these local partnerships and to focus efforts on the important goal of sustaining the academic gains of Head Start in early elementary.

Available state policy options:

- Align early learning standards and instructional practices from birth through grade three.
- Guide and support school district efforts to place Head Start children in well-funded and high-quality school districts, classrooms and programs that best meet their needs.
- Annually collect and analyze school district-Head Start local agreements and partner follow-through; facilitate a process to promote continuous improvement.
- Align parent, family, and community engagement efforts across Head Start and early elementary settings, particularly in Title I schools that predominantly serve children living in poverty.

New Jersey: Aligning Instruction through Grade Three

In addition to recently aligning early learning standards through age five, New Jersey used a federal Race to the Top grant to develop a first-through-third-grade instructional guide to help early elementary school staff provide “academically rigorous and developmentally appropriate” practices. As in other states, they are using practice guides, videos, joint professional development, and site-level support to work toward this critical outcome for sustaining the gains of Head Start and Early Head Start, which serves over 15,000 children each year in the state.



Supporting Head Start Quality

Layer Other Funding Sources

For the past decade, states have been working to provide supportive and clear state guidance and implementation support to help programs blend, braid, and layer various early childhood funding to support high-quality programming. Among the most common goals with Head Start are promoting partnerships with child care providers and extending the number of hours of in-class time provided. Many untapped funding streams and opportunities remain, particularly in the health arena.

Available state policy options:

- Promote the use of the highest standard applied through the use of blended funding.
- Use blending, braiding, and layering to promote Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS) participation by Head Start programs.
- Codify early positive results from Preschool Development blending and braiding pilots, particularly pilots that address quality for children and families from at-risk backgrounds.
- Expand state-level partnerships between Medicaid and Head Start.

New Mexico: Blending and Braiding to Raise Standards

New Mexico’s new Early Childhood Education and Care Department has a stated commitment to “coordinating a continuum of programs from prenatal to five” and specifically includes Early Head Start and Head Start in their agency scope. Even before the department’s creation, the state promoted blending and braiding of funds that resulted in higher quality. For example, Las Cruces Public Schools braids Head Start and state pre-K funding to help ensure children can attend a high-quality program near their home. Given the varying differences in standards between the two funding sources, they implemented the highest standards from each source to raise quality (e.g. the more stringent health requirements of Head Start funding).



Medicaid and Head Start Partnerships Strengthen Child Health

Head Start's focus on comprehensive services includes health screenings, mental health supports, preventative dental care, and connecting children to a medical home. Given that most children in Head Start are dually-enrolled in Medicaid due to both programs' income requirements, Medicaid-Head Start partnerships hold great promise. Among the areas that are most ripe for focus according to Nemours are partnerships to optimize child health, ensure required screening services are billed to Medicaid, and unmasking needs (e.g. lack of safe housing) that need system-level collaboration. The National Head Start Association has specifically called for policy reforms to allow Head Start programs to directly bill Medicaid.



Supporting Head Start Quality

Data Partnerships to Support Collaboration

Data partnerships between Head Start and states are critical, given the federal-local nature of Head Start grants, the fact that Head Start programs serve so many children from at-risk backgrounds, and the expansion of other state-funded early childhood programs. However, data partnerships are a work in progress, particularly when it comes to linking child-level data.

Available state policy options:

- Link child-level Head Start data to early childhood data systems; only seven states do so.
- Account for state-funded Head Start services in state-level data; 14 states provide direct funding for Head Start or Early Head Start.
- Support data collection on the Head Start workforce and use it to promote higher compensation, benefits, and equity across settings.
- Share data trends and other information about categorically-eligible populations—such as children experiencing homelessness or in foster care—with local Head Start programs in ways that allow for stronger local and state agency partnerships to flourish.

Minnesota: Leading the Way with Integrated Child-Level Data

Minnesota has a wide array of investments in young children’s well-being. The state’s Early Childhood Longitudinal Data System includes child-level data from both federally and state-funded Head Start programs. According to a 2019 report, Minnesota and Pennsylvania are the only two states to include both. Both states have sizable state investments in Head Start; for example, Minnesota allocates \$50 million in state general funds each budget cycle to both Early Head Start and Head Start.



Supporting Head Start Quality

Codify and Reward Effective Models

Head Start has a long history of evidence-based innovation to better serve children ages birth to five and pregnant women. Among the program innovations is Early Head Start, an evidence-based program with a proven, positive impact on a wide range of cognitive and social skills, as well as parent-child relationships, home environments, and child welfare involvement. In recent years, programs have also especially innovated around serving children facing childhood trauma and families facing substance use disorders.

Available state policy options:

- Align state infant and toddler policies with the evidence-based elements of Early Head Start, including ratios, group sizes and health requirements.
- Invest additional evaluation resources to study promising Head Start models.
- Create forums for research-based exchange among program leaders, teachers, and agency staff, including Head Start program directors and staff.
- Formally recognize and award evidence-based models that yield positive outcomes over time for children and families from at-risk backgrounds.

Leading States: Codifying Early Head Start Standards to Improve Infant and Toddler Care

According to Zero to Three’s State of Babies 2020 report, it is a best practice for states to require adult-child ratios and group sizes for infants and toddlers in child care that mirror the Early Head Start program. With respect to adult-child ratios, 35 states meet or exceed the adult-child ratios for Early Head Start for children at age 11 months, 14 states at 19 months, and two states at 30 months. With respect to Early Head Start group size, 23 states meet or exceed the requirement for one of the ages (infants), seven states achieve it for two ages (infants and toddlers), and only one state achieves it for all three ages. These quality alignment efforts can help to improve overall quality of infant and toddler care in a state and promote Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships.

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Continue the Conversation: Three Ways to Partner with NHSA

1. [Become a member](#) of NHSA, and join our State Affairs network.
2. [Register for our policy conferences](#) held in September and January in Washington D.C.
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Contact Kent Mitchell, Director of State Affairs, to learn more or explore partnership (kmitchell@nhsa.org).