



# Head Start Infrastructure

Addressing Head Start's Long-Recognized Facilities Needs

A well-known adage in early education holds that the environment is the third teacher, and yet, one of the most pressing, commonly cited needs among Head Start grantees is funding to address **deteriorating, out-of-date, sometimes crumbling facilities**. Head Start and Early Head Start programs need additional classroom space, updated heating, cooling, and ventilation systems, and retrofitted spaces to fully serve currently enrolled children in safe, vibrant classroom environments.



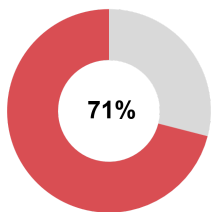
Based on a [U.S. Department of Health and Human Services report](#), updating and renovating Head Start facilities is estimated at **\$4.2 billion**, when indexed for inflation.

57,127

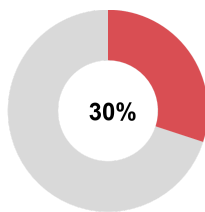
Classes Operated

8,126

Buses Owned by Head Start



71% of programs surveyed reported their facility was **in need of renovation**



30% of programs surveyed identified facilities as **a top funding need**

## The Link Between Physical Environment and Child Outcomes

The physical environment of an early childhood program (the building, facilities, bathrooms, sinks, playground, acoustics, spatial layout, and even color placement) is central to providing a safe, clean, and stimulating early education experience that **promotes healthy child outcomes**. High-quality physical environments are vital to mitigating negative external factors, such as poor long-term memory, reading and concentration difficulties, headaches, drowsiness, childhood obesity, and exposure to bacteria and viruses that have been shown to hinder children's cognitive development. Additionally, investing in facilities can reduce exposure to noise pollution, toxins in air and water, and other factors that negatively affect development.

## Current State of Facilities



**Above:** This is Fort Peck Tribes Head Start center in Frazer, Montana.

According to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services’ [2015 report to Congress](#), 61% of Head Start centers evaluated, or 2,201 of 3,603 centers, were identified as needing improvement to their physical infrastructure. The buildings in which Head Start and Early Head Start programs operate are often older, leading to long overdue repair needs: fifty percent of the centers assessed were 50 years of age or older (1,667 centers were constructed before 1979). Many had systemic issues requiring major renovations, and a few required rebuilding due to exposure to severe weather, leaky roofs, and old boilers.

**Despite these findings, Head Start has not received dedicated funding to address dire facilities needs and wholly support our youngest learners.**

The Head Start facilities in need of repair require updates and renovations to solve significant structural issues (e.g., holes, cracks, and water damage in the foundation of walls of buildings, ceilings, and sidewalks), improve poor ventilation and sanitation (e.g., reduce the presence of highly toxic industrial compounds and address unsanitary bathrooms and unusable sinks), and renovate playgrounds, structures, and furnishings (e.g., remove rusted, broken equipment and worn or unstable furnishings). Preparedness for fire and other emergencies requires upgraded sprinkler systems, added fire extinguishers, and provision of emergency lighting. These repairs and renovations are critical to child safety and health.

### Hear from the Fort Peck Tribes Head Start Program

“We are the homelands of two tribes Assiniboine (Nakoda) and Sioux (Dakota). Our program stretches across 65 miles of rural land in Montana. The majority of our Head Start buildings were constructed between 1955-1960s, from what I know...

- floors, walls, and ceiling separating from each other
- heating/cooling systems outdated
- floors sinking
- roofs falling apart
- plumbing issues
- windows barred from the outside (fire hazard/security risk)
- sewage gasses
- mold gathering
- sidewalks pulling away from the foundation
- chipped flooring

**These buildings were not created for children, and it shows.** My heart is filled with sadness, embarrassment and anger, that my tribal members have to start their educational journeys off in buildings that are decrepit and unhealthy, with multiple safety issues at hand.”

“I imagine buildings designed specifically for early childhood, with access to technology, life skills, classrooms that promote safety and creativity while supporting their educational and health needs. **I want our children to have a safe, creative and inviting environment that ignites excitement to learn and grow.**”

- Hilary Gourneau, Program Director

High-quality, vibrant, and safe early childhood facilities are equally important for their role in contributing to **positive child outcomes** and **mitigating short- and long-term adverse health effects**.

Examples of elements of high-quality early childhood facilities include:

- Safe playground and outdoor spaces that connect children with the outdoors and offer potent protection against child obesity, depression, and attention deficit disorder.
- Strong HVAC systems to mitigate asthma attacks, allergies, and the spread of disease—factors that can negatively affect children and adults alike, and if unattended to, lead to increased student absenteeism and decreased academic performance.
- Regular testing of water quality and timely prevention and intervention efforts that ensure availability of clean drinking water.
- Proper classroom acoustics support attention, memory, and academic achievement.
- Child-sized sinks and toilets to build independence, competence, and good hygiene practices.
- An organized learning environment with clear delimitations of common areas for creative play and targeted learning (e.g., reading or STEM) to support children’s academic and socio-emotional learning.

When early childhood facilities are able to move beyond “good enough” toward high-quality and thoughtful learning spaces, positive child outcomes increase.

## The Outstanding Need

**The total cost of addressing overdue maintenance and renovation is estimated at \$4.2 billion.** For the one million children from birth to age five who spend so much of their days in Head Start, this funding is essential to supporting their health, well-being, and potential. Providing Head Start and Early Head Start with the funding needed to enhance their facilities is a targeted approach that invests in our youngest learners from at-risk backgrounds in every community and state across the country.

Head Start’s strong presence and direct line into local communities make it a high-potential lever to address often overlooked infrastructure needs in low-income neighborhoods. Head Start programs have established relationships within the community and have a developed understanding and respect for local needs; they buy and hire from local businesses and prioritize meeting the needs of children and families from at-risk backgrounds. Leveraging these relationships to address Head Start programs’ dire facilities needs stands to benefit children and whole communities.