

## Confronting Head Start's Workforce Crisis

The Head Start and Early Head Start workforce is in crisis. Chronic low compensation, challenging job conditions, and better opportunities with employers who pay more are combining to create a vortex of spiraling need that demands immediate action.

At the 2022 National Head Start Annual Conference, the National Head Start Association polled attendees on workforce issues in their programs. In addition to direct feedback and quotes from over 900 respondents, which can be found throughout this brief in the gray boxes, key survey findings include:

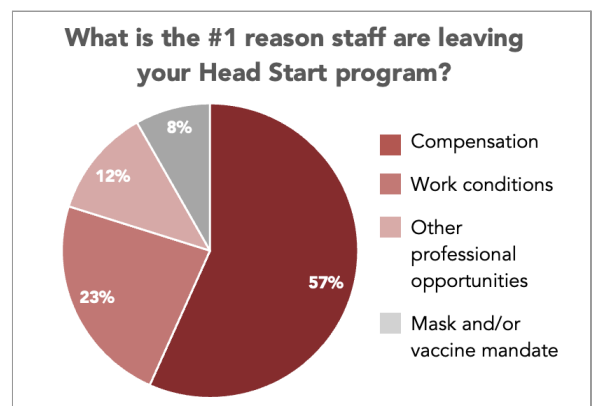
- 57% of respondents indicated compensation is the number one reason for staff leaving
- 85% of respondents indicated staff turnover is higher than in a typical year
- 90% of respondents' programs have closed classrooms permanently or temporarily due to lack of staff
- An estimated average of 30% of staff positions are currently unfilled

## Congress Must Act

For too long, early childhood education has relied on the benevolence of workers willing to overlook compensation that puts them among the very lowest of paid professions. Workforce data indicate early educators face severe pay penalties for working with younger children in all states, with poverty rates an average of 7.7 times higher than teachers in the K-8 system.<sup>1</sup> The Head Start and Early Head Start workforce—a corps of dedicated professionals committed to the mission of serving the most vulnerable children and families—has been pushed to a breaking point. Congress must act now to improve baseline compensation for the Head Start workforce **by at least \$2.5 billion per year** to address these systemic and urgent shortcomings.

## Compensation-Related Resignation

The salary gap between Head Start and other employers has taken on new significance in the current tight labor market. Staff—and potential staff—are making financial decisions in the best interest of their own families and seeking higher paying jobs unrelated to early childhood education. This turnover includes not only lead teachers—whose expertise and credentials make them particularly suited to move to the public school system—but also other Head Start staff who are leaving for entry-level jobs that pay more and offer better benefits.



<sup>1</sup> Center for the Study of Child Care Employment. (2020). Early Childhood Workforce Index. University of California Berkeley. [cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/the-early-educator-workforce/early-educator-pay-economic-insecurity-across-the-states](https://cscce.berkeley.edu/workforce-index-2020/the-early-educator-workforce/early-educator-pay-economic-insecurity-across-the-states)

**While compensation is the number one reason why staff are leaving, working conditions, which relate to understaffing, is number two.**

Fifty-seven percent of survey respondents indicated compensation is the top reason why staff are leaving and 23% indicated workplace conditions, which in many instances, includes compensation as well as burnout exacerbated by staffing shortages.

One West Virginia Head Start leader shared: “Our state minimum wage is \$8.75, which is also the typical starting wage for Head Start staff. Full-time work at \$8.75 is well below the federal poverty line. It is not surprising that workers are choosing other options that better support their own families. Locally, Sheetz pays \$15 per hour with a \$3,000 signing bonus, and school districts pay teachers double what we can afford to pay.”

At the Tulalip Tribal Head Start program in Washington State, wages are considerably higher yet still lag behind local employers substantially enough to impact their ability to fill positions. “The minimum wage is \$14.49. We offer an entry-level position for \$18.60 per hour, but still get no applications. Many people in the tribe have the skill to teach in Head Start but other companies are able to offer more wages and have fewer requirements for their employees.”

***In Their Words...*** “We need liveable wages. We are losing young people beginning their careers and with great potential as well as experienced people that love Head Start, its vision, and the people they work with and for, but are forced to leave because we cannot live and support our families with the wages we are currently paid.”<sup>2</sup>

“People are not even applying for open positions and at times we are having to choose between not filling a position or filling it with an under-qualified or non-ideal candidate.”

**There is a large, growing pay gap between the early learning and public sectors as school districts adjust salaries and expand hiring flexibilities to attract staff.**

Across the country, the median elementary school teacher earns [\\$61,350 per year](#). For Head Start teachers—who are subject to federal bachelor’s degrees requirements—the mean hourly wage is \$19.10, which equates to \$34,073 per year.<sup>3</sup>

As reported in the *New York Times*, “On March 1, Gov. Michelle Lujan Grisham of New Mexico [signed a bill](#) that her office said would increase base salary levels for K-12 teachers by an average of 20 percent. Later that month, Gov. Ron DeSantis of Florida announced the state would funnel \$800 million [into the state’s budget](#) to raise the starting salary for teachers to \$47,000. And shortly afterward, Gov. Tate Reeves of Mississippi [signed off](#) on the largest pay raise for the state’s teachers in decades: an average increase of \$5,100 that will raise salaries by more than 10 percent.<sup>4</sup> This is undoubtedly good news for public school

<sup>2</sup> All quotes in gray boxes throughout this document are from the May 2022 NHTSA survey.

<sup>3</sup> U.S. Dept. of Health & Human Services Administration for Children & Families. (2022). Program Information Report. ECLKC. [eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/data-ongoing-monitoring/article/program-information-report-pir](https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/data-ongoing-monitoring/article/program-information-report-pir)

<sup>4</sup> Heyward, G. (2022). In Several States, Teachers Get Their Biggest Raise in Decades. *The New York Times*. [nytimes.com/2022/04/14/us/teacher-salary-pay-raise.html](https://www.nytimes.com/2022/04/14/us/teacher-salary-pay-raise.html)

employees, but—especially when coupled with relaxed qualification requirements—it has meant an increased number of Head Start staff and potential staff choosing K-12 jobs instead.

***In Their Words...*** “The public schools in our area are also struggling for staff and have lowered the requirements for their paraprofessional and teacher positions. Our staff has been attracted to their higher pay and summers off. We are struggling to find teachers who meet Head Start qualifications or who are willing to work toward the requirements. We have very few applicants for open positions.”

“We serve Rural Alaskan communities and we don’t provide adequate pay for the staff where living costs are exorbitant and the school district pays much more than we do. In Anchorage, Walmart pays more than we do at Head Start and they don’t require any kind of credentials to work there.”

### **Private sector employers are boosting entry level pay to attract workers and provide other incentives to attract workers for jobs that come with less stress and responsibility.**

Across the country, employers are making headlines for the compensation they are offering. Private sector employers often have a different level of flexibility to boost pay in order to respond to market forces compared to early childhood education programs.

Private sector entry level jobs starting at \$15 per hour have become commonplace and in many places have been surpassed; indeed, Target has announced starting wages as high as \$24 per hour while others include signing bonuses worth thousands of dollars. More than half of Costco’s hourly workers are paid above \$25 an hour, and all employees are paid a starting wage of \$16 per hour.<sup>5</sup>

***In Their Words...*** “Area compensation begins at \$18-20 per hour for unskilled workers. Our unskilled entry level starting wage is \$10.83. We need a dramatic and swift pay increase so we can reopen fully and with stable and mentally strong staff. How can you give your all to children when you are worried about your own family’s food security? This leads to seeking employment elsewhere and absenteeism and not being focused on children and the program.”

---

<sup>5</sup> Smith, K. A. (2021). 8 Big Companies Raising their Minimum Wages During Covid. Forbes Advisor. [forbes.com/advisor/personal-finance/companies-paying-15-an-hour](https://forbes.com/advisor/personal-finance/companies-paying-15-an-hour)

## Open Positions, Fewer Children Served

Difficulties filling open positions equals fewer children served. It also puts greater pressure on remaining staff, which leads to increased turnover. In the NHSA workforce survey survey, over 90% of respondents indicated their program has closed classrooms—either permanently or temporarily—due to a lack of staff.

Survey results also revealed that the second most common reason why staff are leaving Head Start is work conditions, including burnout.

***In Their Words...*** “We consider it a crisis that we are unable to serve hundreds of children on our waitlist because we have 20 classrooms closed due to lack of staff.”

“We are planning to permanently close 3+ more classrooms before the new school year. Staff are leaving in droves and some of the remaining are so burned out [from] working low-staffed, they likely will leave also.”

A lack of available substitutes or floater aides is leading to random classroom shutdowns when a teacher or aide is sick. This has disrupted parents who rely on Head Start services while they are at work, causing some to seek alternative care arrangements that are more reliable.

***In Their Words...*** “All of our managers have worked daily in classrooms since Thanksgiving break so that we can keep classrooms open. We have one classroom that has not opened all year due to lack of staff. The others were closed temporarily because we were not able to meet child/staff ratios due to staff sickness or family sickness where they were needed at home.”

“The constant need to close programs has highly impacted the development of our children and has created hardships for our hardworking families!”

“We have not had to permanently close classrooms, but must run a modified schedule to keep classrooms in ratio. For example, we close three classrooms twice a week to use those teachers in other classrooms. The children are virtual for the day. Parents are not happy but understand the need.”

## Staff Turnover Impacts Child Outcomes

In the NHSA workforce survey, 85% of respondents report that staff turnover is higher than usual. The impact of turnover is more than an academic exercise—it has been shown to disrupt child-teacher relationships, which are particularly important for those from the most vulnerable backgrounds.

According to research cited in a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis<sup>6</sup> a “break in the child-teacher relationship due to teacher turnover can disrupt the benefits of positive child-teacher interactions, which include early language and literacy skills, social development, and inhibitory control.”<sup>7</sup> The report goes on to note a recent study of Head Start participants found “kids who experienced higher teacher turnover during the school year had smaller gains in vocabulary and literacy and higher levels of parent-reported behavior problems than peers who had more continuity with their caregivers.”

**One impact of the pandemic has been higher needs children entering Head Start, adding to stressful working conditions and curtailed services beyond shuttered classrooms.**

Teachers are seeing developmental and socialization delays caused by pandemic-related isolation and trauma. One teacher notes the presence of children who are not potty-trained in her classroom of four year olds. More children are engaging in disruptive behavior, including striking out towards classmates and teachers. Not only has this had a cumulative effect on staff, but it is coming at a time when children need more reliable support and care.

***In Their Words...*** “Once new staff are in the thick of things, they quickly realize they can make more money doing something a lot less stressful and challenging. Classrooms are overrun with children exhibiting challenging behaviors, social-emotional needs, trauma, etc. The entry-level positions seem to be the ones that have the most turnover.”

“Staff are sharing that kids are coming in with higher needs and we don’t have enough staff to cover everything to support them and maintain high-quality programming. Staff are sharing that they can go work for Amazon for higher wages and less stress.”

“Due to the lack of staff, we’ve been unable to offer extended care and transportation to many of our sites and are unable to serve many children whose parents applied for it this year.”

<sup>6</sup> Grunewald, R., Palmer, V., and Nunn, R. (2022). Examining teacher turnover in early care and education. Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis. [minneapolisfed.org/article/2022/examining-teacher-turnover-in-early-care-and-education](https://minneapolisfed.org/article/2022/examining-teacher-turnover-in-early-care-and-education)

<sup>7</sup> Hamre, B., Hatfield, B., Pianta, R. and Jamil, F. (2014), Evidence for General and Domain-Specific Elements of Teacher–Child Interactions: Associations With Preschool Children’s Development. *Child Dev*, 85: 1257-1274. [doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12184](https://doi.org/10.1111/cdev.12184)