



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

An Update on Head Start's Ongoing Workforce Crisis

A survey at the beginning of the 2022-23 program year shows the Head Start and Early Head Start workforce remains in crisis. Chronic low compensation, challenging job conditions, and better opportunities with employers who pay more continues to create a need that demands immediate action.

At the start of the 2022-23 Head Start and Early Head Start program year, the National Head Start Association surveyed grant recipients September 6-9, 2022, to determine the extent to which workforce struggles continue to be an ongoing problem. This follow-up to our [May 2022 brief](#) includes direct feedback from 378 Head Start and Early Head Start grant recipients, representing 24% of recipients. Key survey findings include:

- 17% of Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms were closed the week of September 6
 - Of those with closed classrooms, 77% cited **staff vacancies as the primary reason**
- 18% of staff positions were vacant nationwide
- 77% of respondents report that staff vacancies are higher than usual.
 - 79% cited **compensation as the driving force behind vacancies**
 - 66% noted a **lack of candidates with required qualifications**
- As a result of this ongoing workforce crisis, current enrollment relative to funded enrollment, as of September 9, was approximately 73% for Head Start and 77% for Early Head Start.

Compensation, Competition, and Pay Gaps

Compensation continues to be the top reason why turnover and vacancies are an ongoing problem. This takes different forms in different communities.

In California... "With increasing expectations to earn college degrees, we are now paying our teachers with degrees **less than those walking dogs, manning toll booths, and serving fast food**. Our employees' incomes are low enough that they qualify for our programs. Something has to change, and increased wages would go a long way to helping folks out of poverty. Our teachers earn poverty wages."

In Nebraska... "Our certified staff is currently getting paid more than **\$10,000 less** than their counterparts in the school district. Oftentimes, they are teaching right next door to a school district employee making more money than the Head Start or Early Head Start teacher."

In addition, 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.

In Arkansas... "We lose people to fast food and other places of employment because they have a hiring bonus and pay an average of **\$6-\$11 dollars more** an hour than we can pay."

In New York... "Our local hospital has **250 open positions**, our local schools all have at least 50 openings in each school. All local businesses are all hiring as well. The impact of COVID is far from over for all of us who are struggling."

There is a **large, growing pay gap** between the early learning and public sectors as states and localities adjust salaries and expand hiring flexibilities to attract staff for school district positions. With early childhood education ranking in the bottom 10% of professions in terms of compensation, it is difficult to compete and early childhood staff continue to depart early learning programs to receive higher salaries in school districts.

In Wyoming... "While our enrollment remains full, our staff are leaving at a rate I've never experienced. We are still serving all children but not for the required number of hours... We cannot find qualified applicants and we live in an area that has an extreme housing crisis. There is nowhere to live so no one can move to the area for a job. The **school district pays new teachers \$69,000** to start and now has an apprenticeship program so they can hire people without degrees. There is no way to keep up with the competition."

In West Virginia... "This year has been beyond frustrating with the hiring of staff. We have no applications at all. We have been posting for teachers since April 2022. We had a teacher resign after starting the year because she was **offered a position in another state for more money** and fewer required responsibilities. Open Early Head Start positions took between 2 and 6 months to fill. We have multiple bus driver positions open also."

Working Conditions and Staff Burnout

While compensation is the number one reason why staff are leaving, working conditions, which relate to understaffing, is another contributing factor.

In Iowa... "At this point we feel as though **we are between a rock and a hard place**. We need to serve our children, families, and community; however, we physically cannot because we have no one to work. Staff are mentally and physically tired, we have seen more turnover due to challenging behavior, and staff just do not want to deal with it anymore when they can just work at a fast food place for \$15."

In Massachusetts... "Currently, our position feels precarious. Typically we have assistants, floaters, and substitutes who can fill in gaps when staff are out or when there is a vacancy. Our current situation is that we do not have that 'cushion,' which means **if someone calls out or takes a vacation we have to close that classroom**. There is incredible daily tension between creating stable programming for families and creating work conditions that promote retention of staff. Every time a teacher resigns, it impacts everyone. From the loss of a beloved colleague, to the re-mixing of teaching teams and children to stabilize, it is so very upsetting for everyone. Primarily, **this is horrible for children**. The last thing we want to do for our at-risk children and families is to disrupt their caregiver and peer attachments, but we are often left with no other choice. Knowing the impact on children adds additional stress to the staff and administrators. The work we do has always been difficult, but as the feeling transitions to burdensome, there is a sharp awareness that this moment requires a dramatic change."

Children are also showing signs of trauma and are behind on developmental milestones.

In Ohio... "**All children in our program have experienced some sort of trauma**. We see more frequent behavior issues and family struggles which compound the stress on staff. If we want to attract and keep staff we must have the flexibility to provide services that not only benefit children but also support our staff."

In South Dakota... "The amount of physical aggression children are exhibiting along with lack of impulse control is driving many staff from the profession and field. Numerous children are still in diapers at the age of 4 or even 5. We have had excellent new **teachers 'retire' from the field in a few years' time due to the behavior challenges**."