

An Update on Head Start's Ongoing Workforce Crisis

A survey midway through the 2022-23 program year shows the Head Start and Early Head Start workforce remains in crisis. Chronic low compensation, challenging classroom conditions, and opportunities with employers who pay more continue to create a need that demands immediate action.

In February 2023, NHTA surveyed grant recipients to determine the extent to which workforce struggles continue to be an ongoing problem. This follow-up to our [May 2022](#) and [September 2022](#) briefs includes direct feedback from almost 200 grant recipients, representing about 10 percent of children and families served nationwide. Key survey findings include:

- **20%** of Head Start and Early Head Start classrooms are currently closed.
 - Of those with closed classrooms, **81%** cited staff vacancies as the primary reason.
- **19%** of staff positions were vacant nationwide.
 - The top reason for staff vacancies continues to be compensation, at **65%**.
- **81%** of respondents report that staff vacancies are higher than usual.
- There are an estimated 137,000 to 275,000 children on Head Start or Early Head Start waiting lists. This equates to **17 to 33%** of currently funded slots.
- As a result of this ongoing workforce crisis, current enrollment relative to funded enrollment, as of February, was approximately **79%** for Head Start and **81%** for Early Head Start.

The Big Picture

From top to bottom, the Head Start workforce crisis is impacting children, families, and staff. Children are showing up with greater behavior challenges and developmental delays, resulting in a more challenging classroom. A lack of staff closes some classrooms, while others are open but just barely—a sick teacher can mean the difference between a classroom being open or closed, and children and families having the care and education they are counting on. A lack of qualified job candidates to fill critical roles places current staff under greater stress. And of course at the heart of these challenges is compensation—while not entirely driving turnover in the Head Start workforce, it is certainly the primary factor.

In Massachusetts... “We have a wonderful and dedicated core group of staff. The burden of the staffing crisis on them has been tremendous. Vacancies have disrupted teams and resulted in relational losses for both staff and children. Having fewer classrooms open has meant that the highest needs children are concentrated in our classrooms, resulting in extraordinary levels of child and educator stress. We are working hard to support our educators, but the needs of children and families we are seeing currently are unprecedented. Despite aggressive and creative campaigning, we have been unable to recruit staff, especially those with college degrees. With our current funding, we simply cannot compete with the private sector, which often pays more and involves less stress.”

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. 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.

In Alabama... “We are continuing to have staff take other job opportunities to improve and increase their pay. We are constantly seeking means to increase their pay, but low pay and an increase in medical insurance has caused us to have a mass exodus of employees.”

In Arkansas... “It is difficult to recruit and retain qualified staff when you are not able to provide a living wage. Our area has a lot of competition from other non-child care agencies that can pay \$4 to \$5 per hour more and not be expected to meet the stringent requirements that come along with caring for young children.”

In North Carolina... “In our county, you can go to work for Chick-Fil-A for \$19 per hour. Our pay for four-year degree jobs starts at \$15 per hour. Early childhood providers are way more important than fast food servers.”

Competition with School Districts

There is a **large, growing pay gap** between the early learning and public education 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 Head Start staff continue to depart for the higher salaries in school districts.

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.¹

In Tennessee... “Our competition for staff is the school system. Each month we have been losing one or two due to public schools being able to pay more. There is also pending legislation to increase teacher salary even more for public schools. Our teachers [will] have even more reason to leave Head Start for higher paying opportunities.”

In Louisiana... “We are having to utilize managers, transportation staff, as well as other staff to sub in classrooms due to shortages. We are continuing to advertise for open positions and encourage parents to volunteer or become paid subs that could lead to permanent employment. We have provided incentives to staff; however, a permanent increase in funding will allow Head Start programs to increase compensation that will compete with local school system wages.”

¹ 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

In Vermont... “While we are fully operational in opening all classrooms, we are relying on substitutes and other program employees to take on additional work. Although we continue to raise wages, it is still not enough to keep teachers from leaving to go to the public schools.”

Child Need

Children are also showing signs of trauma and are behind on developmental milestones. Teachers are seeing developmental and socialization delays caused by pandemic-related isolation and disruption. Some teachers have noted the presence of children who are not potty-trained in their classrooms of four year olds. More children are engaging in disruptive behavior, including striking out at 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 Pennsylvania... “Staff and student ratio as well as the volume of Individual Education Plans (IEP) and challenging behaviors in a room contribute to high levels of burnout and added stress. Many rooms look like reverse inclusion rooms with more than 50% special needs and no resources in the community to provide them. We are becoming the catch-all and many families’ only resource.”

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 Texas... “Our program has been experiencing staff shortages and with this obstacle, we have seen mental health issues increase. Our staff are also stressed working with the increase of children with challenging behaviors/special needs in our classes. These two combinations have been steadily increasing since the pandemic.”

In Florida... “We have been short two teachers going on three years now, and are also short one home visitor. I am worried our experienced coordinators will soon start looking for higher compensation and less stressful work, because we are always filling in for teacher, cook, absences, and break coverage. It is hard to move the program forward when you are always putting out fires.”

In Wisconsin... “A problem for us is that there is a school district located every eight miles on all sides of our Head Start locations. Lucky for them as they can recruit our well trained and licensed staff. It has been very difficult to avoid teacher burnout because we serve well over our 10% of children with a disability. At the time of this writing we have 36 students with an IEP in place with 16 referrals sent to the districts awaiting qualification status. Our classrooms are overloaded and teachers are stressed. Our plan is to write for a reduction in enrollment so that we can still best serve the needs of our children but at the same time compensate staff fairly.”

Impact on Services and Quality

A lack of staff is impacting the services that programs can provide, impacting child and family stability and child outcomes, as well as increasing staff burnout. According to research cited in a report by the Federal Reserve Bank of

Minneapolis² 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.”³ 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.”

In California... “Because of our high number of vacancies, we are frequently having to close classrooms providing inconsistent operations for children and families. This is increasing the number of challenging behaviors in the classroom, increased stress and burnout for staff, which then causes staff turnover. It’s a vicious cycle. The fact that they can get better compensation elsewhere is causing people to leave, furthering the problem. Our children are having a difficult time and parents are dropping their children for other, more stable and consistent opportunities.”

In Kansas... “We have switched six full day classrooms to three half-day classrooms to allow us to serve more children with reduced classroom staff.”

In Connecticut... “We are down four positions and have a very limited sub pool, so when staff are sick we have had to close classrooms for a few days at a time. Having limited staff causes extra stress on all staff.”

In Missouri... “We have closed several centers and classrooms due to sickness and staff shortage. We had over 75 (over half our workforce) spaces to fill before the beginning of the 2022-23 program year. We have managed to fill all but 12 but it seems half of the 75 we are continually hiring for at all times. Our central office spends more time hiring than doing the other parts of their jobs.”

Closed Classrooms Means Long Wait Lists

Not being able to operate at full capacity due to lack of staff and resulting closed classrooms had led to long wait lists. The demand for Head Start and Early Head Start services far exceeds supply.

In Alabama... “Our waitlist is currently 567 children for Early Head Start and 598 for Head Start—demand far exceeds what we are able to support, and staffing challenges have made it worse. We have not been able to open four classrooms (for about 65 children) due to staffing. It’s been very difficult hiring teachers and family service staff especially.”

² 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

³ 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