



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 2023-24 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 continue to create a need that demands immediate action.

At the start of the 2023-24 Head Start and Early Head Start program year, the National Head Start Association surveyed grant recipients to determine the extent to which workforce struggles continue to be an ongoing problem. This follow-up to our series of [workforce briefs](#) over the past 18 months includes direct feedback from over 260 Head Start and Early Head Start grant recipients, representing 14% of children and families served. Key survey findings include:

- ❖ The workforce crisis appears to have stabilized, but remains a significant problem. As of October 2023, 15% of staff positions are vacant, down from 19% in February 2023. However, 65% of respondents indicate that vacancies remain higher than usual.
- ❖ The top reason for staff vacancies continues to be compensation, at 51%. Other issues include working conditions (17%), other job opportunities (15%) and other (14%, many of which specifically cite the lack of qualified candidates).
- ❖ 14% of classrooms are currently closed, down from 20% in February 2023, with 76% of those closed indicating that closures are due to staff vacancies.
- ❖ Programs are addressing staffing and enrollment challenges by applying for a “change of scope,” which enables grant recipients to adjust staffing models and the number of children served, almost always with a net reduction in slots. 55% of respondents have applied for a change of scope in the past three years. Of those, 56% were approved and 40% are still pending.
- ❖ Programs that applied for and received a change in scope have significantly higher enrollment rates (81%) than those whose requests are pending (70%).

Compensation, Competition, and Pay Gaps

Compensation continues to be the top reason why staff turnover and vacancies are an ongoing problem. It often results in being unable to open all classrooms and fully serve children, as well as other challenges.

In Mayfield, ND... “We have four classrooms closed in our highest demand location... all are specifically due to staffing. We are unable to be competitive with not only school districts (we start at \$10,000 less than they do), but other child care facilities (we start at \$3-4 dollars less than they do). **Walmart and McDonalds pay more** than I am able to for entry level positions. We need to be better funded and we need help immediately!”

In New Orleans, LA... “At the moment, we have 11 classrooms closed. Closures are due to a lack of enrollment and teacher shortages. One of the biggest challenges we face is compensation. **School systems are paying at least \$10,000 more** than we are for teachers with bachelor’s or master’s degrees. We are losing staff.”

In Las Vegas, NM... “The average salary for our Head Start teachers is \$30k and their next door school district teacher’s average is \$55k. **This is a difference of \$25k.** Our Head Start program has lost at least 50% of its staff due to compensation. Other factors are out-migration from the community, recruiting qualified staff, and retaining staff due to compensation.”

However, the 5.6% cost of living adjustment (COLA) included in the FY2023 appropriations legislation has had a positive impact on some programs' ability to hire and retain staff.

In Monroe, MI... Growing our own program is the only way to stay ahead of staffing shortages. No one is applying that is credentialed. Continued compensation increases like **the most recent COLA and quality improvement funding** have allowed us to retain most staff. If/when this ends or slows before compensation is aligned with K-12, we will lose large amounts of staff once again.

In Herriman, UT... Having the COLA be over 5% coupled with the reduction of slots to pay teachers more has really created a positive impact. **The number and caliber of people applying to work has increased.**

Reducing Coverage in Order to Hire and Retain Staff

When left with vacant positions that lead to closed classrooms, and a lack of ability to adjust salaries to respond to market forces, Head Start program leaders often face the difficult decision to downsize in order to boost salaries by readjusting the number of children they enroll. This is done through a formal "change of scope" application process with the Office of Head Start.

There has been a tremendous increase in the number of change of scope applications over the past several years—our survey showed 55% of respondents had applied for one in the past three years. Most result in a net reduction in the number of children able to be served. This approach has been encouraged by the Office of Head Start because there is simply no other way for Head Start grant recipients to keep up with labor markets without new funding appropriated by Congress.

In Park Hills, MO... We asked for the change of scope due to one center struggling to get eligible applications and to staff the center. With the change of scope and elimination of 36 slots we will be able to increase staff wages. A teacher with a bachelor's degree was starting out at \$12.75/hour. They are now starting out at \$16.90/hour.

In Rossville, GA... I decreased 153 Head Start and 96 Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership slots because we cannot staff the classrooms due to the pay. Staff were leaving and going to Walmart, Buc-ee's, and Chick-fil-A, making more than what we pay without having to meet a certain degree requirement.

In Temple, TX... We were experiencing a 67% turnover rate prior to approval of our enrollment reduction. Immediately upon approval of our plan, we were able to offer a reasonable wage for full day services and we are now fully staffed and fully enrolled. It broke our hearts to reduce the number of children served, but we were a sinking ship until we could generate enough budget to pay staff—primarily teachers, but also support staff.

The Impact of Challenging Child Behaviors

To make matters worse, in the last several years, more children are showing signs of trauma and are behind on developmental and socialization milestones. 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. Now is a time when children need more reliable support and care than ever before.

In Fayetteville, AR... We are struggling to keep staff due to a **high number of children with chronic behavior issues**. We currently do not have the resources available to provide the needed support to assist staff with managing these extreme behaviors. We are also facing a large increase in enrolled children who are being evaluated for suspected developmental delays or autism spectrum disorder. This has also been very taxing on our staff as they are not trained to support a classroom with 30 to 50% of the children having special needs.

In Jasper, IN... We need to seriously begin looking at smaller class sizes with the kinds and amount of challenging behaviors we are experiencing. **Staffs' mental and physical health is in jeopardy**. Please help us practice what you preach.

Strong outcomes for Head Start children and families depend on well-qualified staff, and compensation is a critical component to recruiting and retaining that staff. Although workforce issues have stabilized somewhat compared to two years ago, elevated turnover and vacancy rates continue to impact Head Start's ability to best serve children and families in need.

We urge Congress to focus on making impactful investments in the future by fully funding Head Start.