

An Update on Head Start’s Ongoing Workforce Challenges

A survey three months into the 2024-25 program year shows the Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start workforce remains fragile. Though staffing has begun to stabilize, chronic low compensation, challenging classroom conditions, and opportunities with employers who offer greater compensation continue to create a need that demands immediate action.

In November 2024, the National Head Start Association surveyed Head Start grant recipients to determine the extent to which staffing and enrollment continue to be pressing issues for their programs. This latest in our series of [workforce briefs](#) over the past three years includes direct feedback from approximately 300 Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start programs, representing 13% of children and families served nationwide.

“Head Start has proven to be a tool in school readiness and [future success]. The return on investment to our communities and society as a whole should be valued. Now is the time to provide us the resources we need, not to strip our programs.” – **Waterloo, Iowa**

The workforce crisis that has challenged programs nationwide is beginning to show signs of stabilizing.

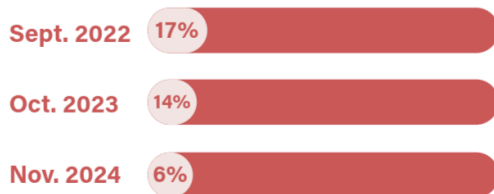


When asked how staff vacancies compared to the prior program year, **42%** said it was lower, **44%** said about the same, and just **14%** said higher.

The top reason for staff vacancies continues to be



Percentage of classrooms that are currently closed



Among programs with at least one classroom closed, staff vacancies remain by far the top reason for closure at 71%.

Current enrollment is at 90% overall



The average waitlist is 23% the size of a program's funded enrollment.

The Head Start workforce is stabilizing, with improvements in average staffing levels compared to the past three years. Nonetheless, these workforce improvements remain precarious. Programs must be creative to find qualified staff, juggle current roles to cover classroom teacher absences, and redirect focus and resources from one area to another to secure staff and serve as many children as possible.

“We began this year in much better shape (94% staffed). We are over 97% enrolled in both Early Head Start and Head Start. Even still, we have a handful of stubborn vacancies and quite a few staff out on paid family/medical leave that means a number of site directors are regularly in the classroom. We have very limited substitutes. This lack of sufficient coverage makes it difficult to stay open when staff are ill and hard to provide time for planning and reflective supervision.” – **Northampton, Massachusetts**

“Our program has been able to remain fully enrolled and maintain at least 10% enrollment for children with disabilities. It has been difficult to find qualified staff due to the limited eligible workforce. We are seeking ways to fully develop a career track for potential employees and provide ongoing educational opportunities to “grow your own” within the program.” – **Pocahontas, Arkansas**

Compensation and a competitive job market are continued threats to stabilization. Low compensation remains the primary reason for staff turnover, forcing programs to balance salary improvements with cuts elsewhere, as noted above. To better support their own families, staff have sought better paying employment elsewhere, leaving the early childhood education field or moving to local school districts.

“I hope that our country does decide that early childhood care is worth a living wage.”
– **Dover, New Jersey**

“Our teachers make \$6 less an hour starting than a local school district paraprofessional with no education or experience. This is after we reallocated funds with the [slot reduction]. We are recruiting across the county to try and fill teacher slots but still cannot get them all full.” – **Bayfield, Wisconsin**

“We were awarded a slot reduction in the spring that allowed us to increase salaries which enabled us to attract and hire for many openings we had. We are still not close to parity with school districts who are our main competitors. With anticipated flat funding or cuts we will fall further behind their compensation threshold.” – **Gloucester, Ohio**

Many programs have been forced to reduce the number of children they are able to serve in order to find the necessary budget flexibility to improve salaries to recruit or retain staff. This “change in scope” process has been a driving force in workforce stabilization, but most times comes at a cost.

Half of respondents said they have been approved for a change in scope in the past three years, while another 13% have an application pending. And over one-third who have gone through the change in scope process anticipate having to apply for another slot reduction in the absence of additional funding. Of those who received a change in scope approval:

- all reduced Head Start Preschool slots,
- nearly 20% decreased Head Start Preschool but increased Early Head Start slots, and
- one-third decreased both Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start slots.

“Staffing vacancies have decreased since the increase in compensation and lower class sizes after the successful change of scope.” – **Clarksville, Tennessee**

“The change of scope and a few other cost cutting measures allowed us to raise wages by nearly \$5.00 per position. It has taken some time to rebound and reduce vacancies, but it is working.” – **Piqua, Ohio**

“We are giving up about 50+ pre-k slots to serve 16 infants and toddlers. We have tried for expansion funding to avoid this but did not get awarded.” – **Virginia, Minnesota**

After compensation, challenging working conditions remains the second highest reason for staff vacancies and turnover. Staff report feeling stretched to meet the needs of children with behavioral challenges, and administrators struggle to hire qualified staff to support classroom teachers. Increased behavioral and developmental delays increase the identification and service requirement demands, often resulting in exhausted, burned out, and, at times, injured staff.

“It is hard to balance the immense needs of the families (full day, full year needs), the needs of the children and the needs of the staff and keep everyone mentally strong.”

– **Cincinnati, Ohio**

“The challenges due to behaviors have also increased. The developmental level of the children is at least a year behind... The program has many supports in place, such as social emotional specialists and mental health consultants. Yet, we have had six worker's compensation claims in the first 30 days of class due to children being dysregulated. Even though we are almost fully staffed, we lost these six teachers for 2-10 weeks due to concussions, knee and jaw injuries, it is hard to keep all the classrooms fully staffed.”

– **Oshkosh, Wisconsin**

Waiting lists, especially for infant and toddler care and for full-day services, reflect the ongoing high demand for Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start. Head Start operates more than 17,000 centers across the country, including in child care deserts, enabling parents to go to work, stay at work, or pursue their education goals.

Currently, all full day classes are filled. There are 70 families on the waiting list for full day classes only. 26 are on the part day waiting list in hopes of getting in to later secure a full day class. The families have consistently pushed for full day classes and continue to do so as documented in monthly reports since October 2022. – **Anchorage, Alaska**

Our site can provide care for 55 children but we are currently only serving 25 due to funding shortages and lack of staffing. Our waiting list is full. With inflation being so high, the cost of living raises don't compare. We have children on a waiting list but cannot find high quality teachers at the pay we can afford to offer. – **Gallatin, Tennessee**

Learn more by reaching out to the National Head Start Association at advocacy@nhsa.org.