



The Head Start Policy Agenda

2025-26 State Policy Select Priorities

The Head Start Policy Agenda serves as the guiding document for the government affairs-related efforts of the National Head Start Association (NHSA). It reflects the input and priorities of its members—including program directors, educators, managers, and state Head Start Associations—as well as those of Head Start alumni and the children and their families who participate in Head Start and Early Head Start programs each year.

The Policy Agenda includes an overview of Head Start's positions and priorities on policies affecting children and families from at-risk backgrounds, and includes federal legislative, regulatory, and state policies. This document summarizes **state-level policy priorities** contained within the overall Policy Agenda.

These highlights are a small selection of the many recommendations in NHSA's full [Policy Agenda](#). For further exploration of these recommendations or for questions, please contact advocacy@nhsa.org.

Current Context

As Head Start enters its 60th anniversary year, Head Start is facing an uphill road. Our traditional deep bipartisan support will be tested in the next two years with key leaders fighting for significant cuts to federal spending in general, as well as to specific programs, including Head Start. Our challenge and mandate to overcome the complicated road ahead will be to take advantage of our community's strengths in order to maintain bipartisan support and withstand both structural and targeted threats.

While no one can predict how the new Congress will work together or how state legislatures will prioritize early care and education, Head Start's critical role is clear: to continue to advocate in a bipartisan way on behalf of children and families in need of Head Start services. As articulated by those in the Head Start field, our pressing issues include:

- **Workforce recruitment and retention**, which reached crisis levels several years ago, remain the most pressing policy issue. New requirements in the updated standards will require funding to achieve the workforce compensation mandates.
- **Funding issues** remain front-and-center, with pressures from a tight labor market as well as a challenging political climate presenting significant concerns for the next two years.
- **Eligibility** remains a challenge, although recent changes in the new Head Start rule along with eligibility for families eligible for SNAP have improved local program flexibility.
- **Trauma** continues to have a deep and wide ranging impact on Head Start children and families. Children are presenting significant needs and increased signs of trauma. In addition, the high percentage of children presenting with disabilities or developmental needs impacts the classroom environment.
- **State pre-K** continues to expand in many states. While we support high quality early learning opportunities for all children, the Head Start community also recognizes that many children need the additional supports provided by the Head Start model in order to achieve success. There remains a crippling shortage of high-quality infant and toddler care as embodied in the Early Head Start model.

Select State Priorities

The topics and recommendations outlined below represent key priorities for the Head Start community. While each state faces its own unique challenges, finding common threads that unify our efforts is essential to support and strengthen Head Start. There is no one-size-fits-all approach to this work. The variety of approaches across states and local communities remains one of Head Start's greatest strengths. These recommendations are intended as a flexible framework for policy action within your state.

Funding

- provide dedicated state supplemental funding to federal Head Start and Early Head Start grant recipients to expand access to more children, improve workforce compensation, strengthen program quality, reduce barriers to access, or help grant recipients meet their required federal match.
- ensure grant recipients are explicitly eligible to directly access or compete for other state funding, including pre-K, child care, home visiting, workforce, facility, transportation, and other grants and funding.
- provide in-kind support to grant recipients in the form of free or reduced rent, professional development, quality coaching, and other forms of support.
- provide funding to implement or sustain proven or promising trauma-informed care and early childhood mental health models.

Workforce

- create compensation scales for early childhood professionals that pay at least a living wage for all staff, as well as pay that is comparable to similarly-credentialed workers in the K-12 system, in a way that doesn't result in significant slot loss.
- dedicate a portion of funding to the early childhood workforce, including Head Start Preschool/Early Head Start, in the event of increased per-child child care subsidies, state pre-K funding, or other funding streams.
- maximize flexibilities, including on a temporary basis, to support grant recipients who are struggling with workforce recruitment and retention.
- work with higher education, including community colleges, and through dual enrollment high schools to recruit more early childhood professionals with linguistic and cultural competencies relevant to the communities they serve, expand scholarships and loan forgiveness, and assist with guaranteed job placement.

- work with higher education to improve the acceptance of transfer credit applying directly towards an early childhood degree or certification.
- offer Head Start staff and other early childhood professionals the opportunity to access affordable child care and health and retirement benefits.

Eligibility

- develop supportive agreements with the Head Start community to maximize enrollment in Head Start and Early Head Start via SNAP categorical eligibility.
- expand access to Head Start via existing Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) categorical eligibility and prioritize the use of TANF funds for child care to enable enrollment in Head Start and Early Head Start programs.
- ensure that families seeking a child care subsidy or state-funded pre-K slot also be evaluated for Head Start Preschool or Early Head Start eligibility, be given the option to enroll if deemed eligible, and a referral notification be sent to the applicable provider for follow-up.
- adopt Head Start's more expansive eligibility definitions for children in kinship care and children experiencing homelessness in child care, state pre-K, and home visiting.
- include Head Start programs in any state or local online enrollment portals as an eligible parent choice or referral option.
- provide funding and policy supportive of helping Head Start programs enroll and serve children with disabilities.

Monitoring and Quality Improvement

- include in state Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS) a clear and simple path for Head Start programs to enter at an advanced level of quality recognizing the standards, monitoring, and services that Head Start programs already provide.
- leverage Head Start leadership and expertise in refining and improving the QRIS by including the Head Start community's recommendations on quality indicators, improvement strategies, technical assistance, and serving low-income families.
- avoid duplication and unnecessary administrative costs by recognizing alternative documentation for certain quality indicators, such as Head Start's federal monitoring reports.
- design QRIS to focus on improvement over accountability and provide the necessary coaching and financial strategies to effectively assist programs in moving up rating system levels.

Supporting Local Communities

- involve the Head Start community, including parents and families, in the design and ongoing implementation of other early childhood initiatives, including statewide longitudinal data systems, licensing requirements, Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), Preschool Development Grant (PDG) efforts, the Maternal, Infant, and Early Childhood Home Visiting (MIECHV) program, and childhood health. Fully implement federal coordination requirements by:
 - ensuring state Head Start collaboration directors have the resources and positional and decision-making authority necessary to drive their required priorities,
 - including Head Start representation on State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Care and Education (SACs), and
 - providing cross-agency support and leadership to facilitate Head Start-public school partnership and transition to kindergarten agreements.
 - elevate Head Start's leadership role within state agencies specifically created to support young children and their families.
 - adopt standards that ensure that learning multiple languages is viewed as an asset, that assessments are performed in children's primary languages, and that parents are engaged in linguistically and culturally sensitive ways.

Child Care

- make greater use of child care contracts, rather than vouchers, in order to build and sustain the supply of high-quality care in underserved communities.
- set reimbursement rates at levels that reflect the true cost of care through an alternative market rate methodology, such as a cost estimation model, to ensure child care providers have sufficient resources to offer high-quality care.
- set family-friendly eligibility policies, such as including income redetermination no less than every 24 months.
- allow for and encourage local programs to layer subsidy funds with Head Start funds both to increase the quality of child care and allow providers to offer services that meet the demands of working families.
- expand infant-toddler set-asides to address the overwhelming need and demand for high-quality infant-toddler services, prioritizing the expansion of Early Head Start services, which are the current gold-standard care, through Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships funding, increased home-based options, and other means.

Coordination and Collaboration With Public Schools

- align state early learning standards with Head Start's high standards to help facilitate stronger partnerships, improve quality, and increase the ability of early learning programs to leverage a variety of funding sources.
- utilize a mixed-delivery approach that builds on existing high-quality providers, such as local Head Start programs, in state preschool systems, inclusive of direct funding of Head Start.
- develop coordinated state and local recruitment and enrollment strategies across programs serving children to ensure that the most at-risk children, who are likely to benefit the most from the Head Start model, have access to Head Start's services.
- institute accountability for full enrollment and coordination requirements, monitor implementation, and set benchmark data to promote continuous improvement in local collaboration.
- ensure that children with disabilities enrolled in Head Start in partnership with public schools are receiving appropriate levels of paraprofessional support and other required supports.