



The Head Start Policy Agenda

2025-26 Federal 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, and managers, and state/regional Head Start Associations—as well as Head Start alumni and the children and their families who participate in Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start programs each year.

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, remains the most pressing policy issue. New compensation requirements in the updated standards are positive steps, but funding to achieve the workforce requirements will be necessary.
- **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 qualified for the Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (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 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 Federal Priorities

The list of federal priorities and policy changes below is not exhaustive, but serves as guidelines for when legislative and administrative opportunities arise.

Head Start Funding

- include funding for Head Start in fiscal year (FY) 2025 and 2026 at the highest level possible and build on those investments in FY 2027 based on community needs assessments:
 - include a cost of living adjustment each year not less than the consumer price index.
 - mitigate the ongoing workforce crisis by addressing the key fiscal barriers to hiring and retention.
 - dedicate funding for quality improvement, including staff salary and benefits, trauma-informed care, and the needs of children in classrooms.
 - include a distinct funding source for Head Start infrastructure improvement, including relocation to high-needs communities, in any broader budgetary agreement.
 - address internal funding inconsistencies which have resulted in wide disparities among grant recipients in per-slot funding.

Workforce

- create professional pathways such as provisional credentials and/or flexibilities that would allow staff who are in the process of obtaining a required credential to work in that job with supervision, including those participating in a registered apprenticeship.
- address workforce needs through additional targeted legislative approaches, such as *the HEADWAY Act*, *Head Start for Our Future Act*, *Early Educators Apprenticeship Act*, and *Early Childhood Workforce Advancement Act*.

Eligibility

- modernize the method for setting the federal poverty line to one which accounts for local and regional differences in the cost-of-living, such as Area Median Income used by the Department of Housing and Urban Development.
- adopt categorical eligibility for children whose families are eligible for the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) nutrition program, as well as those in informal kinship care settings and children moving from foster care to adoption.

- expand resources for the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C services to facilitate early identification and enrollment of more eligible young children with disabilities.

Trauma-Informed Care

- include additional funding for Head Start programs to implement multi-tiered positive behavioral interventions, supports, and other trauma-informed care models of support for children and their families.

Transportation and Infrastructure

- address overdue rebuilding, renovation, maintenance, and repair of Head Start facilities projected by OHS to cost in excess of \$3.8 billion in FY 2015 by OHS (now estimated to exceed \$5.1 billion based on inflation alone).
- include funding to address the challenges facing rural communities and other programs facing a significant gap between their transportation needs and ability to provide equitable access to all children.

Training and Technical Assistance

- support high level, leadership-driven content that enables program leadership and staff to access high-quality training and technical assistance that is based on research-supported best practices.

Supporting Local Communities

- support the continued local design of Head Start programs and reject any proposal to move Head Start funds to states.

Monitoring and Quality Improvement

- improve monitoring—most notably for Risk Assessment Notification (RAN) reviews—by providing a more transparent and timely process, including rapid resolution of straightforward incidents, improved communication throughout the review process, and clarity around full corrective actions the grant recipient must take.
- reassess the RAN process through the lens of safety science, examining whether penalties for errors are proportional to the violation and whether a climate of fear and mistrust is hindering the ultimate goal of improving child health and safety.