NATIONAL HEAD START ASSOCIATION

Our mission is to coalesce, inspire, and support the Head Start field as a leader in early childhood development and education.

Head Start and State Early Childhood Systems:

Opportunities for Policymakers

Introduction

With decades of research documenting the **developmental and economic benefits of investment in the early years**, states continue to expand their commitment to young children and their families—with the percentage of three- and four-year-olds enrolled in preschool reaching an all-time high during the 2022-2023 school year (NIEER, 2024). But even at this peak, **state pre-kindergarten programs serve only 35%** of the nation's four-year-olds—and many fewer children aged three and under, presenting **opportunities for new, high-yield investments** in the states.

As state policymakers consider their options for optimizing early development and its associated benefits to both children and taxpayers, **Head Start offers a ready-made and time-tested model of quality**, providing both early childhood education and comprehensive family supports designed to simultaneously benefit two generations of constituents.

This resource is designed to introduce state policymakers to the Head Start model, opportunities for its improved integration within state early childhood systems, and examples of existing state-level investments to inform emerging efforts in the states.

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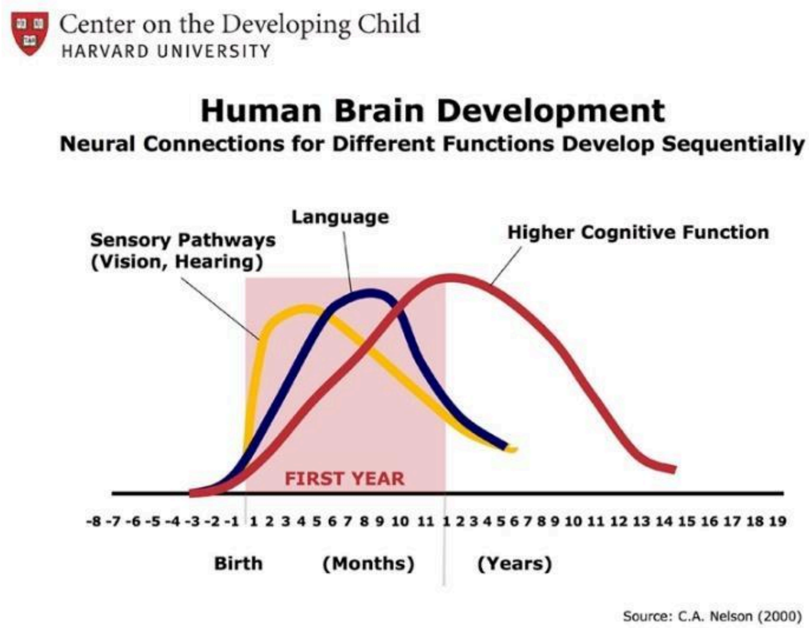
Why State Early Childhood Investments Matter

A compelling body of evidence points to the early years—and the period from prenatal to three, in particular—as humankind's most critical window of development. It is during this period that the fundamental architecture of the brain is "wired"—laying the foundations for success in school and life.

The infant brain contains an estimated 100 billion neural cells—nearly all we will ever possess. But in newborns, these nerve cells have limited connectivity across and between them. Accordingly, what we know as "brain development" is less a quantitative growth process than a qualitative one, with electrical signals known as synapses gradually connecting these cells and creating the communication pathways to support more sophisticated forms of cognition.



As depicted in this graphic from Harvard's Center on the Developing Child, not only are the primary neural pathways for sensory functions (vision and hearing), language, and higher cognitive functioning all developed during the first 12 months of life (when the brain generates upward of one million new neural connections per second), but each process finds itself already in rapid decline well in advance of entry into public kindergarten at age five.

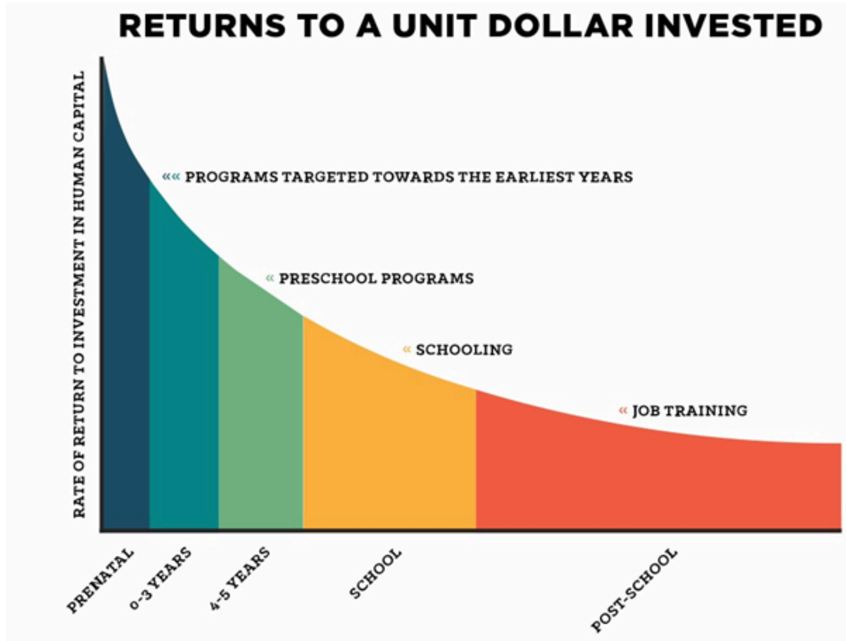
Where once we envisioned a policy landscape in which children enter kindergarten "ready to learn" (as if this is when learning begins), we now understand that learning begins in utero, with children already demonstrating a preference for the distinct rhythms and patterns of their mother's native language only hours after birth and even their early cries reflecting the accents of their mother tongue.

This recognition dictates a rethinking of our very conceptualization of the early years. For nearly a century, American public policy has perpetuated a false dichotomy between care and education, premised on the idea that learning is the function of the K-12 system, while the care provided to younger children is a support to working families—a form of industrialized babysitting.

Nothing could be further from the truth.

In reality, many of the challenges policymakers face in improving K-12 educational outcomes find their roots during the years of early childhood. As states pump untold millions into primary grade literacy interventions, for example, too few recognize that third grade reading proficiency hinges on language and literacy skills ideally developed well prior to school entry. Even fewer make investments designed to address this root cause.

The same holds true for poor health outcomes, overreliance on social services, and even interactions with the criminal justice system—all of which have been shown to be decreased (and thus improved) as a result of high-quality early childhood interventions.

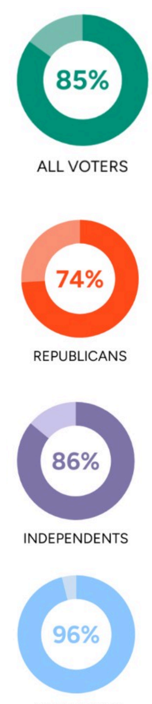


Nobel Prize-winning economist James Heckman has dedicated significant energy to tracing the long-term return on investment associated with early childhood interventions, documenting a 13.1% annual return on investment in programs serving the nation's youngest children—and steadily decreasing benefits to taxpayers associated with each subsequent age range (as depicted in the "Heckman Curve" graphic at right).

This 13.1% figure is notable, outpacing the 10-, 20- and 30-year returns of the Standard and Poor's 500, a stock market index comprising 500 of the nation's largest companies. With long-term improvements to health and education outcomes, reductions in social service utilization, and greater marital stability and adult taxpaying abilities all demonstrated as a result, high-quality early childhood programs not only pay for themselves but hold the potential to reduce the overall burdens of taxpayers.

That said, the benefits of early investment don't only accrue over decades. They also address significant, real-time challenges to state economies.

In 2023, Ready Nation—an organization of CEOs with an interest in early childhood—released a study suggesting a $122 billion annual drain on our federal and state economies resulting from a lack of high-quality infant-toddler programs, with this loss split across parents (primarily in the form of lost and foregone wages), businesses (whose productivity and profitability are diminished by the challenges experienced by their employees), and taxpayers (whose burden is increased when both parents and employers fail to generate tax revenue otherwise realized by their states).



With lack of access to high-quality early care and education diminishing workforce participation—and causing many parents to depart the workforce entirely—state policymakers increasingly recognize early childhood investments as a two-generation approach to prosperity and economic competitiveness: a support to the workforce of today (parents), that is simultaneously preparing the workforce of tomorrow (children) for success in a highly competitive global marketplace.

For an assortment of reasons, both developmental and economic, support for early childhood makes sense, which is why voters across partisan lines strongly endorse expanded public investment in high-quality early care and education programs. In 2024, polling from the First Five Years Fund pegged this number at 85% among all voters.

Introduction to the Head Start Model

Begun as an eight-week nationwide pilot program in the summer of 1965, Head Start has grown and evolved over six decades, continuing its mission to break the cycle of poverty through the provision of comprehensive, two-generation support to families in poverty.

Because the model includes the provision of high-quality preschool services to three- and four-year-olds, Head Start is often discussed alongside state pre-kindergarten programs.

These comparisons are understandable (and valid to a degree), but it's important to recognize that Head Start actually entails far more than the provision of classroom-based services. The model pairs high-quality preschool with comprehensive support to enrolled children and their families to include (among other things):

- Health, dental, and nutritional support.
- Service coordination designed to connect participating children to services that will enhance their physical, social, emotional, and intellectual development, alongside referrals to federal, state, and community-based resources to help their families thrive and achieve self-sufficiency.
- The provision of direct parental support (including the provision of direct parental support, including partnering with parents in setting goals that include building the skills and education needed for employment).

If you're a newcomer to the model, you may not be aware that "Head Start" is an umbrella term that has grown to include a number of age- and population-specific programs.

Children from birth to age five whose family income falls below the federal poverty definition are eligible for Head Start services, as are homeless families, those receiving public assistance such as TANF or SSI, and children in foster care (who are eligible independent of the foster family's income). Also, programs must reserve at least 10% of their enrollment for children with disabilities.

Head Start is delivered by public or private nonprofit agencies, including community-based and faith-based organizations and local governments, that receive direct federal funding and are monitored by the Office of Head Start to ensure quality and compliance, as outlined in the Head Start Act. These grantees must follow the Head Start Program Performance Standards, which establish comprehensive requirements for program design, management, and service delivery. This federal-to-local structure generally bypasses state agency administration unless a state agency is itself a grantee. However, each state hosts a Head Start Collaboration Office within state government, which is responsible for promoting coordination, communication, and alignment between Head Start programs and state systems such as school readiness, child welfare, and comprehensive service delivery.

The table below provides a brief introduction to four significant model variants.

Program Model	Population Served	Description
Head Start Preschool	Ages 3-5	Often referred to simply as **Head Start**, the model's original–and best known–service (now officially known as **"Head Start Preschool"**) combines high-quality early childhood education with comprehensive family supports to low-income children ages three to five. While many such programs operate in dedicated Head Start facilities, many grantees partner with school districts and other community-based programs, co-locating services at sites convenient to families.
Early Head Start	PN-3	Established in 1994 and reflecting the federal government's growing recognition of the unique importance of the developmental window from prenatal to age three, **Early Head Start** serves pregnant mothers and children ages birth to three. Like its preschool-aged counterpart, Early Head Start combines high-quality early care and education with an array of comprehensive services designed to support children's health and nutrition alongside their families' flourishing and self-sufficiency. Under the broader umbrella of Early Head Start, two notable variants are worth mentioning: • **Early Head Start Home-Based Option:** Not all Early Head Start participants receive services in center-based programs. The model's home-based option employs trained home visitors who work with parents weekly supporting both parental knowledge and robust child learning using parent-child interactions, daily routines, and household materials. • **Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships:** Recognizing the immense value of partnerships with community-based providers, the Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships model (established in 2014) delivers Early Head Start services in collaboration with existing child care providers, strengthening overall program quality and diminishing capital construction costs.
Migrant and Seasonal Head Start	PN-r	As its name implies, **Migrant and Seasonal Head Start** programs exist to support the needs of agricultural/farm worker families. Providing a center-based design, the program operates for nine to 12 hours daily, including weekends at peak harvest times to ensure the safety, well-being, and optimal development of young children whose families work in agriculture to put food on America's table. In order to qualify, a child must have at least one family member whose income comes primarily from agricultural employment.
American Indian and Alaska Native Programs	PN-5	Separately funded by the federal government, Head Start's American Indian and Alaska Native programs support indigenous children, families, and communities–supporting unique tribal needs and culturally sensitive practices, including instruction in native languages.

Head Start grant recipients are governed by the Head Start Program Performance Standards, a detailed set of performance indicators that well exceed most state licensing–and even many national accreditation requirements, ensuring exemplary quality for the children and families served. The Head Start model also deeply involves participating families in program governance itself, with governing boards of grant recipients sharing oversight with 'Policy Councils' composed of current Head Start parents and local community members.

In this sense, Head Start is more than just a program. It is a model *system*, serving as an exemplar for states and communities seeking to comprehensively address the complex needs of children and their families and demonstrating what's possible when early childhood interventions are premised on:

- Adequate public funding,
- High-quality service delivery,
- Ongoing and rigorous professional development,
- High standards, and
- Robust family and community involvement.

In short, the Head Start model is America's early childhood gold standard–combining high-quality early childhood education with comprehensive two-generation supports that distinguish it from many–if not most–state-funded pre-kindergarten investments.

Head Start Gets Results Across the Lifespan

Across decades and dozens of studies, the literature demonstrates time and again that *Head Start gets results.*

Head Start has demonstrated a wide and compelling array of positive outcomes: outcomes for children (and families) graduating from the program, outcomes throughout K-12 education, outcomes in adulthood and, most recently, evidence of benefits that span generations. The table below includes just a sampling of key outcomes at these various stages. For a more comprehensive list of Head Start outcomes visit the NHSA website.

Select Head Start Program Outcomes

Year	Study Authors/Link	Findings
	Early Education Outcomes	
2022	Melo, C, et al.	The recent study examined Head Start "dosage" and teacher interactions. Authors found an additional year in Head Start was positively associated with self-regulation in kindergarten.
2015	Lumeng et. al.	In a 2015 study published by the journal *Pediatrics*, obese, overweight, or underweight children who participated in Head Start had a significantly healthier body mass index (BMI) by kindergarten.

2010	[Head Start Impact Study]	The 2010 Head Start Impact study demonstrated statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and a non-participant control group in every aspect of children's preschool experiences studied. Head Start participants had had closer and more positive relationships with their parents (who, when exposed to the program for two years, demonstrated less authoritarian parenting styles) and outperformed peers on measures of language and literacy.
2005	[Love, et. al.]	A 2005 analysis published by the journal *Developmental Psychology* showed that three-year-old Head Start students outperformed non-participant children on measures of cognitive and language development, displayed higher emotional engagement with their parents, sustained their attention during play, and exhibited less aggressive behavior. Compared with a control group, Early Head Start parents were more emotionally supportive, provided more language and learning stimulation, read to their children more, and spanked less.
K-12 Education Outcomes		
2020	[Baily, Sun, and Timpe]	A 2020 study published by the National Bureau of Economic Research found that Head Start students were less likely to drop out of high school (demonstrating a 0.65-year increase in the duration of schooling), 2.7-percent more likely to graduate from high-school, and 39-percent more likely to complete college.
2019	[Johnson and Jackson]	The study compared adult outcomes of children who participated in Head Start and increased K-12 funding. The authors found that children who had both Head Start and access to better funded schools were more likely to complete more grades, graduate from high school, and less likely to live in poverty as adults. Findings imply that early educational investments that are sustained may break the cycle of poverty.
2016	[Phillips, Gormley, and Anderson]	A 2016 study (also published by the journal Developmental Psychology) tracking Oklahoma Head Start students into middle school showed that enrollment produced significant and lasting positive effects on achievement test scores in math and on both grade retention and chronic absenteeism.
2011	[Zhai, Brooks-Gunn and Waldfogel]	A 2011 study published by the journal Developmental Psychology found that Head Start attendance was associated with enhanced cognitive ability and social competence and reduced attention problems.

Outcomes in Adulthood		
2018	Baily, Sun, and Timpe	A 2018 study by researchers at the University of Michigan found that children who attended Head Start were 20 percent more likely to attend college than a matched set of non-participant peers, 12 percent less likely to be impoverished as adults, and 29 percent less likely to be reliant on public assistance.
Intergenerational Outcomes		
2023	Chazan-Cohen, R., et al.	Parenting support in Head Start programs contributed to children's vocabulary and cognitive development and reduced punitive parenting.
2017	Barr and Gibbs	In an analysis of Head Start's intergenerational benefits, Barr and Gibbs found that the children of former Head Start participants were substantially more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, and less likely to commit crimes or become teen parents.

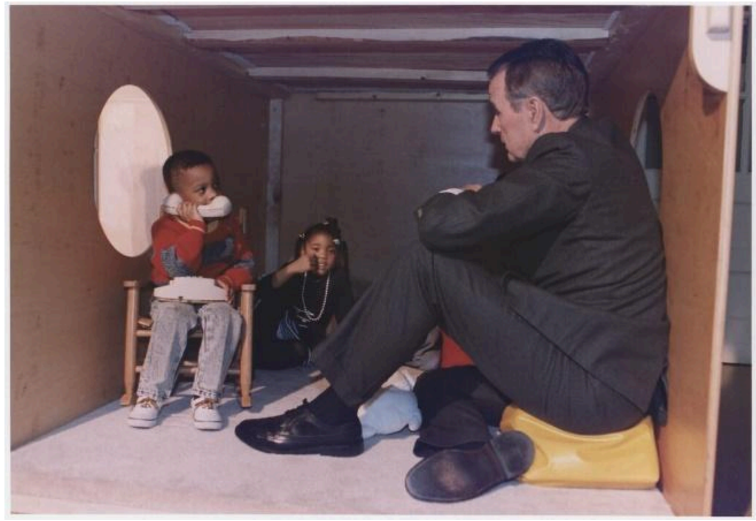
Here a note to readers may be well-advised. As with other studies of early childhood education, including state pre-kindergarten, the Head Start model's results have–across a vast body of research–sometimes varied within individual studies and across individual measures, leading some to call the model's efficacy into question. These often ideological critiques, however, tend to rely heavily on both a selective reading of the literature (focusing their attention on individual, sometimes questionably constructed studies without regard to contradictory outcomes published elsewhere) and an over-reliance on short-term measures of academic success within the primary grades (sometimes referred to as the "fade out effect") while disregarding both conflicting evidence and other significant outcomes (academic and otherwise) across the lifespan. In fact, the impacts of Head Start persist beyond the program, providing opportunities for elementary schools to build on the early learning gains.

Education research is difficult to conduct; it is time-consuming, costly, and can be unpredictable, due to human variability. Fortunately, Head Start is the most frequently researched early childhood education program with almost 60 years of data and hundreds of studies, both small and large scale, that allow researchers to identify trends over an extended period of time and highlight practice-based evidence of the positive impact Head Start has on the children, families, and staff within the program. That's why we can be exceedingly confident that investing in Head Start yields positive impacts for children and families.

Decades of Bipartisan Support

Given Head Start's robust, long-term benefits, it should come as little surprise that the program has enjoyed broad, bipartisan support across six decades. In 1982, for example, President Ronald Reagan established October as National Head Start Awareness Month, noting that:

"Perhaps the most significant factor in the success of Head Start has been the involvement of parents, volunteers, and the community. Their commitment and the services provided by dedicated Head Start staff have been instrumental in creating a quality program that truly provides young children with a "head start" in life."



President George H.W. Bush visits a Maryland Head Start center in 1992.

In 1992, President George H.W. Bush requested and received a $600 million increase in Head Start funding–the program's largest-ever increase at the time.

Congress authorized the creation of the Early Head Start model under the leadership of President Bill Clinton, while the most recent reauthorization of the Head Start Act occurred under the leadership of President George W. Bush. The administration of President Barack Obama implemented many of the substantial reforms that came from the 2007 reauthorization and investments in the program increased substantially under the administrations of Presidents Obama, Donald J. Trump, and Joseph R. Biden.

Supporting Coordination and State Investments in Head Start

While Head Start programs are created and funded by the federal government, **many states dedicate supplemental funds to expand the program's reach**. Recognizing this critical, existing infrastructure–**which is estimated to provide more than one in five of the nation's rural child care slots** –state funds are commonly used to:

- Expand access to the Head Start model for additional low-income families, delivered through local organizations via federal grantee organizations.
- Improve program quality (such as by limiting adult-to-child ratios, expanding hours of service to accommodate the needs of working families, etc.).
- Increase staff compensation to better recruit and retain high-quality teachers and staff.
- Assist programs in meeting a required 20% federal match.

2024 Supplemental State Investments in Head Start

The chart below depicts 2024 state funding in 14 states and the District of Columbia.

FOR ADDITIONAL HEAD START CAPACITY				
	STATE FUNDS		ADDITIONAL CHILDREN SERVED	
	Head Start Preschool	Early Head Start	Head Start Preschool	Early Head Start
AL	$5,046,902	N/A	1,713	–
CT	$6,583,238		1,129	8
DC	$5,000,000	$2,136,745	250	297
IA	N/A	$575,000	–	63
MN	$35,100,000		617	946
MO	N/A	$5,988,600	–	354 (30 Prenatal)
OR	$141,473,379	$39,280,245	7,070	1,435
PA	$90,800,000	N/A	6,574	–
RI	$4,390,000	N/A	130	–
WI	$6,264,100		138	114
FOR QUALITY IMPROVEMENTS IN HEAD START				
AK	$9,435,000			
MA	$17,500,000			
MD	$3,000,000			
ME	$6,140,038			
OK	$13,806,000			

*Note that not all state funds are allocated with the expectation that additional children will be served. Some states choose to supplement program quality, such as by providing wraparound services, competitive staff salaries, or a combination of uses. For this reason, the data in this table cannot be used to calculate a cost per child.

🔦 Spotlight on Alaska

Alaska makes grants to each eligible Head Start grantee to help cover the program's non-federal match required under federal law, dedicating $9.4 million for this purpose in fiscal year (FY) 24. Additional community resources required to meet the federal match requirement can be particularly difficult to come by in Alaska, especially for remote areas where Head Start is often the only early learning provider. This straightforward approach is a significant benefit to the state's Head Start providers, saving them from the challenge of securing and documenting a complex array of in-kind contributions through which to meet their required match, and providing actual dollars that enhance program quality, teacher compensation, etc.

🔦 Spotlight on Oregon

In 1987, the Oregon Prenatal to Kindergarten (OPK) program–designed to replicate Head Start at the state level–was established to serve more eligible families with children ages birth to five. The state allocates general fund revenues to fund high-quality early care and education to families who are living at or below 100 percent of the Federal Poverty Level. Historically, funding has focused on serving children ages three to five, but in recent years, the legislature has worked to expand and increase investments for Early Head Start and children from birth to age three.

In 2019, the state legislature passed the *Student Success Act*, which created a new corporate activities tax that is used to fund new investments in education. This legislation focused on increased funding for early childhood education, with the establishment of an Early Learning Account. Money raised by the tax goes to support key early childhood programs overseen by the Department of Early Learning and Care. The *Student Success Act* has provided significant new resources for both OPK and Early Head Start.

In 2023, the legislature allocated $365 million to fund the OPK program for the 2023-25 biennium. Funding came from two sources: First, the traditional direct general fund allocation of $172 million and then money dedicated to OPK from the Early Learning Account totaling another $194 million.

🔦 Spotlight on Massachusetts

Distributed through the Massachusetts Department of Early Education and Care, Head Start programs in Massachusetts received $18.5 million in state funding for FY25. Head Start State Supplemental Grants support program quality and help programs meet upcoming federal requirements to raise wages. Over 90% of state funds support staff salaries, with funds going directly to improving salaries for educators, hiring coaches and behavior support staff, and lowering teacher-to-child ratios.

Many Ways to Partner With Head Start Providers

Direct funding of the Head Start model is only one way to partner with grantees in your community. As you explore opportunities to strengthen your state's early childhood system, consider the following:

- ❓ Are Head Start programs eligible to serve as state pre-kindergarten providers within your state's mixed delivery system? If so, how many grantees are participating? If not, what legislative or administrative barriers exist that may be preventing the state from capitalizing on this existing infrastructure?

- ❓ Does your state provide funding for educational programs targeting children ages zero-to-three? While most states now maintain robust investments in pre-kindergarten (typically limited to children four years of age), fewer invest in education resources for children younger than four, despite a wealth of scientific evidence that the earliest years of life represent humankind's most critical window of development. If your state is considering expanded investment in the early years, Early Head Start presents a tested model of excellence with the capacity to expand with additional state investment.

- ❓ Does your state have an active State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care? (The federal *Head Start Act* requires the governor of each state to designate or establish a council to serve as the State Advisory Council on Early Childhood Education and Care for children from birth to school entry to ensure interagency coordination, collaboration, and the efficient and effective use of all public funding supporting children and families.) If yes, how active is this group, and how current is its membership? If not, what barriers prevent its functioning?

- ❓ Are Head Start grantees "at the table" as members of state-appointed study committees, task forces, licensing bodies, etc.?

Acknowledgment

This report, authored by Dr. Dan Wuori of Early Childhood Policy Solutions LLC, reflects his deep expertise in early childhood development and his impactful advocacy for policy change. The National Head Start Association is grateful for Dr. Wuori's ability to communicate clearly and inspire people to see the opportunities Head Start offers.
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Learn More

Would you like to learn more about how Head Start can be expanded within your state's mixed-delivery early childhood system?

The National Head Start Association stands ready to assist and connect you with Head Start providers in your community. For more information, contact **Blair Hyatt, Senior Director of State Affairs at bhyatt@nhsa.org.**