



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

Head Start

A Launchpad for
Future Leaders and
Strong Communities



40 million

children supported on
their paths to success

60 years

60-year history of success,
leading innovation

685,296

Head Start Slots

47,666

Classrooms

14,373

Centers

252,706

Staff Employed

Frequently Asked Questions

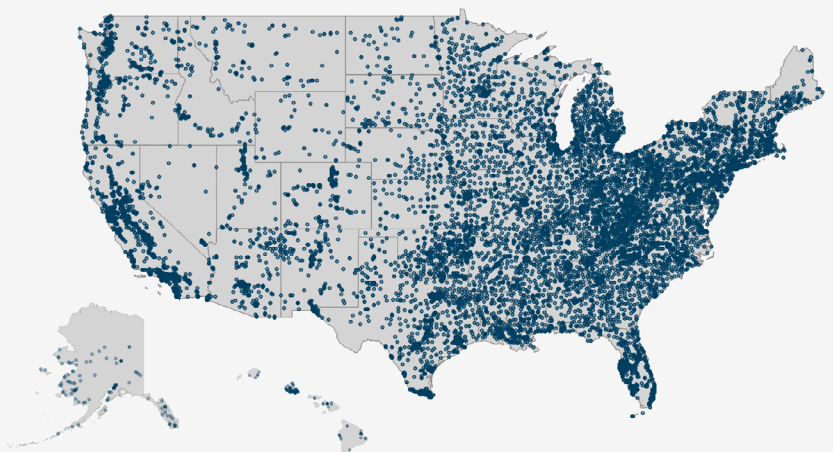
Since its inception in 1965, Head Start's locally-run programs have been at the forefront in partnering with families and communities, providing children and their families the skills and resources they need to succeed. Data-driven innovations and a multi-generational support model have fueled six decades of success—reaching nearly 40 million alumni, with over 250,000 dedicated staff and 48,000 classrooms at 14,000 centers operating in every corner of the United States. Head Start programs are simultaneously flexible enough to adapt to the needs of individual children, families, and communities while also adhering to outcomes-focused standards that promote a uniform level of high quality nationwide. This has allowed Head Start to maintain strong public and bipartisan political support.

What is Head Start?

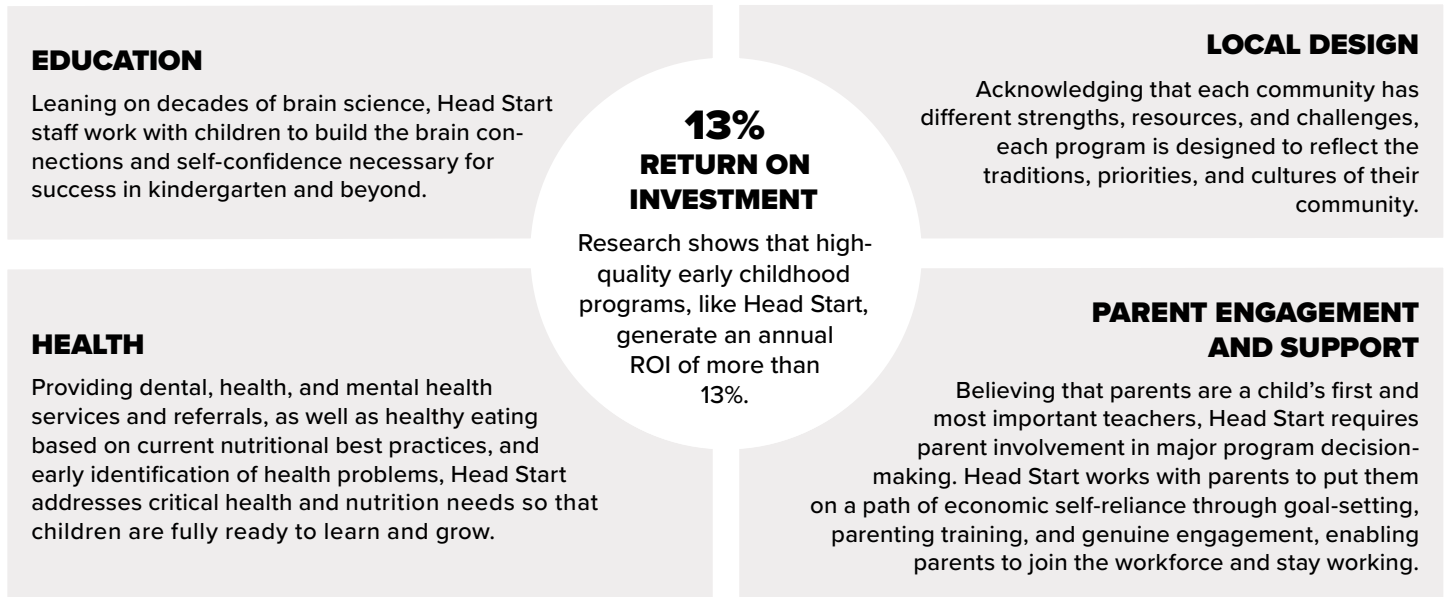
Head Start is a federal-to-local program that has been proven to break intergenerational poverty. Early Head Start serves families from pregnancy to age 3 and Head Start Preschool serves children ages 3-5 and their families; both programs are collectively referred to as "Head Start." Depending on both community and family needs, services may be delivered in a center, at a family child care home, or through a home visiting model.

Who does Head Start reach?

Head Start serves nearly 700,000 children ages zero to five and their families each year in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and U.S. territories. Families living below the poverty line, experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care are eligible for Head Start. Head Start services are delivered by more than 1,600 local grant recipients. American Indian and Alaska Native grants are awarded to tribal governments, and Migrant and Seasonal programs serve across state lines and adapt Head Start to the specific needs of the agriculture workforce.



The Head Start Model: A Proven Success



What does local governance mean?

Head Start's founders understood that parents are essential partners in educating young children. They felt parents should help decide how Head Start services can most benefit their family and other families in their communities. Head Start created Policy Councils as a formal leadership and policy-making role for parents. Today, every Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start program must have a Policy Council as part of its leadership structure. Through the Policy Council, parents have a voice in decisions about how the program spends money, what children do in their classrooms, and how the program works with community partners.

How are high standards of quality maintained nationwide?

The federal Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS) govern everyday program practice. These standards, last updated in 2024, set robust outcomes-based expectations around staff education, professional development, and data-informed continuous improvement of program services, while also including flexibility to encourage innovation at the local level. While every Head Start program is unique and locally designed, each must meet a certain level of quality education, health, nutritional, social, and other services.

OHS regularly monitors all grantees for performance and ability to continuously improve services according to rigorous monitoring protocols. Prior to the end of each five year grant, OHS is required to determine if a program qualifies for an automatic renewal or would be required to recompet for its funding. Any program that receives two deficiencies during its five year project period is required to compete with other eligible entities for the new five year grant. This process of determining whether a program should receive an automatic renewal or be required to recompet was mandated by Congress to ensure communities receive Head Start services from the most qualified local agency.

What is Head Start's impact?

Extensive research proves positive outcomes in the short, intermediate, and long term for Head Start children and families, and long term savings for taxpayers, including:

- enhanced kindergarten readiness
- less grade repetition by 8th grade
- diminished chronic absenteeism in middle school
- improved high school graduation rates
- lower foster care placement rate
- increased higher education enrollment and completion rates
- heightened parental involvement (including more father engagement)
- decreased reliance on public assistance
- lower likelihood of experiencing poverty

Research has also shown Head Start access is linked with the disruption of intergenerational poverty, as evidenced by increased maternal educational attainment, reduced likelihood of teen pregnancy, and less involvement with the criminal justice system.

Questions? Contact NHSA at advocacy@nhsa.org.