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Taking a Look at Head Start's 2021-22 Policy Agenda



National Head Start Association Mar 9 · 7 min read



The National Head Start Association (NHSA) supports Head Start and Early Head Start programs' efforts to provide comprehensive services including health, nutrition, housing, school readiness for children, and job training for their parents and caregivers. **Over the past year, in the face of COVID-19, economic destabilization, and a reckoning with systemic and historic racism, Head Start's stabilizing services have been more important than ever.** As we look ahead, more challenges will emerge, and Head Start will continue to be there for children and families.

NHSA's 2021–22 Policy Agenda serves as a guiding document and an overview of the Head Start community's priorities on policies that impact at-risk children and their families.

There are eight principles that NHSA has adopted in driving the agenda's content:

1. Aim to **strengthen the Head Start model of support for families, children, and the community**, with additional attention to supporting children and families from disparities caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.
2. **Maximize federal and state support** for Head Start in order to secure resources to meet COVID-19 costs and recovery, invest in the Head Start workforce and infrastructure, and strengthen quality.
3. Commit to working to **expand access to Head Start** for the nation's at-risk children and families, including pregnant women, infants, and toddlers.
4. Leverage Head Start and Early Head Start to support individuals, communities, and our country in the **fight against racism and for**

equity, including through greater measurement, accountability, and intentionality.

5. Recognize the urgent need to **equitably address Head Start's workforce crisis** in a way that values experience and generates greater interest in early childhood professions.
6. Prioritize a focus on strengthening Head Start programs to **support the mental health and wellbeing of children, families, and staff**.
7. Seek to **simplify administrative procedures** to best support Head Start programs in providing efficient, high-quality services.
8. **Encourage collaboration** between Head Start and local education, health, and social service providers to support children and families.

Rooted in Equity

NHSA and Head Start are committed to anti-racism, as they serve to make opportunities more accessible to children and families from low-income backgrounds who are disproportionately Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). By using policy to increase equity, Head Start's positive impact can be strengthened. Recommendations for how Head Start should be utilized as a tool for shaping a more equitable future for children and families are detailed throughout the agenda.

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Exploring the Policy Agenda

The Policy Agenda covers topics ranging from funding to health to infrastructure. Each topic includes recommendations intended for Congress, the administration, and state policymakers. Below are some illustrative examples.

FUNDING

As Head Start supports families' recovery from COVID-19 and plays a role in shaping a more equitable future, it is important that local programs have the resources necessary to provide targeted support, high-quality early childhood services, and individualized parent and family engagement services to those most devastated by the crises facing our country.

Currently, Head Start serves less than 50% of income-eligible children, and Early Head Start serves less than 10% of income-eligible infants and toddlers. While at least 14 states supplement the federal investment by providing funding to expand access, improve program quality, and

help grantees meet their required non-federal match, there is much more that can be done to maximize Head Start's impact.

NHSA recommends that the U.S. Congress and President Biden ensure that any COVID-19 relief signed into law includes the funding necessary for Head Start and Early Head Start programs to address the costs acutely attributable to COVID-19 (20% of program funding since March 2020). NHSA also recommends that the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) and the Office of Head Start (OHS) provide guidance on blending funding across multiple funding streams to encourage more socioeconomically diverse classes.

WORKFORCE

Even though early childhood is the most rapid period of a child's development, making early intervention and education critical, early childhood educators are often paid low wages and offered minimal benefits.

The Head Start workforce has drastically changed in recent years, stemming from changes to policy in the *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007*. Since then, while the percentage of educators with degrees has increased, salary levels have remained stagnant.

Current funding levels and other factors prevent staff from earning competitive salaries, and Head Start programs often lose quality staff members to public schools. This also impacts the flow and quality of care of young learners. Supporting the needs of the Head Start workforce is one of the community's highest priorities across federal and state policy. As COVID-19 has placed additional demands and

stressors on the Head Start workforce, this need is even greater than in past years.

NHSA recommends that the Congress and the administration mitigate the growing workforce crisis by including substantial and sustained investment for local programs to improve salaries.

INFRASTRUCTURE

Some Head Start facilities are state-of-the-art, many are sufficient, and a staggering number are falling apart under decades of wear and tear. The wear and tear of facilities, outdoor spaces, and vehicles is a threat to the quality of Head Start, and these needs have been amplified by COVID-19. As many programs turned to remote operations to protect the health of their communities, technology needs for staff and families also became abundantly apparent. Addressing Head Start's need for repairs, renovations, and new space to ensure infrastructure supports quality is Head Start's single greatest one-time funding need.

NHSA recommends that Congress include funding for Head Start infrastructure in fiscal years 2022 and 2023 to meet the \$4.2 billion needs identified by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation.

ELIGIBILITY

Children and families are best served when they have access to programs that best meet their needs. For many families, however, a slight increase in income — increasingly occurring due to state minimum wage increases — dramatically reduces access to services determined by the federal poverty line. Yet, often wage increases do not sufficiently meet costs of living. In effect, the resulting benefit cliff increases barriers for working families aiming to succeed.

As one element of much-needed comprehensive reform, NHSA recommends expanded use of categorical eligibility to ensure that families who stand to benefit most in each community—for example, children in kinship care, children of veterans, those living on tribal reservations, and refugee children—have access to Head Start.

States have significant decision-making authority over eligibility for and access to programs that Head Start families often utilize, including child care subsidies. Policies like Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), state pre-K, federal special education, child welfare, and family homelessness supports, all impact which families are eligible for Head Start. There is significant interest across the Head Start community to make changes to these policies so that they better meet the needs of children and families.

HEALTH

The majority of children enrolled in Head Start receive coverage through Medicaid. Head Start programs have always incorporated a focus on child health as a part of Head Start's comprehensive approach, and this continues to be a top priority.

Recent data from the Centers for Medicare & Medicaid Services (CMS) revealed that this year, compared to the same time period in 2019, there was a significant decline in critical, time-sensitive preventative services for young children. For Head Start children and families especially, complications and fears associated with accessing health care brought on by COVID-19 pose an immense threat to children's health.

Without access to doctors for routine check-ups and specialists to identify and treat disabilities or delays, children could suffer unnecessarily for years during a critical period of development, which could undermine their full potential. Head Start programs, by and large, have successfully stepped in to support families in filling these gaps.

To support consistent access to critical health services, NHSA recommends that the Congress and President Biden take action to increase the availability of qualified infant and early childhood mental health consultants in all communities, including rural and frontier communities. NHSA also recommends that telehealth flexibilities established in response to COVID-19 remain to maximize access to services for all families.

PROGRAM OPERATION

One of Head Start's strengths is its ability to meet the needs of the individual communities that programs serve. While many states have invested in early learning, local communities remain the place where services, coordination, and effectiveness are at their best.

In order to maximize local coordination, NHSA recommends that the Head Start Act be amended to provide for the seamless operation and administration of programs in the form of prenatal-to-age-five (PN-5) Head Start grants.

QUALITY IMPROVEMENT AND ACCOUNTABILITY

Federal monitoring of Head Start focuses on ensuring that Head Start grantees have strong systems of accountability and continuous quality improvement.

As the early childhood landscape becomes more interwoven, the data that Head Start generates about the children they serve, the challenges they face, and the approaches that programs implement are important for many stakeholders to collect and analyze. Efforts concerning data should be collaborative across systems of accountability and quality improvement.

Further, NHSA recommends that the administration use monitoring data to identify and distribute information on high-performers, including grantees with significant growth or improvement, and make such information easily accessible to Head Start practitioners.

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These examples illustrate the Policy Agenda's broad scope of recommendations to strengthen Head Start and meet the needs of at-risk children and families. They will serve as a guide for NHSA as we work with federal and state governments to address current issues and look towards the future. For more information on the Policy Agenda, view it in its entirety [here](#).

Head Start

Education

Covid 19

Early Childhood Education

Teaching