



Press Release

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NEW RESEARCH FINDS ACCESS TO QUALITY HEAD START VARIES WIDELY ACROSS THE STATES

Bipartisan Action Needed to Remedy Disparities

New Brunswick, NJ — Head Start, a federal program created in 1965 that helps children and families overcome the disadvantages of poverty, varies dramatically from state to state in funding, classroom hours, quality, and percentage of low-income children served, according to the *State(s) of Head Start* report released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER).

This groundbreaking report examines Head Start and Early Head Start data from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and six territories for 2014-2015, as well as historical data from 2007 to 2015. *State(s) of Head Start* also includes data for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start (MSHS) programs and American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) programs, which provide crucial services to populations that are particularly vulnerable. The study was conducted to provide policymakers and the public with detailed information regarding federal support for Head Start and the services Head Start provides on a state-by-state basis. It reveals widespread differences across states in funding, classroom hours, teacher qualifications and compensation, observed quality, and enrollment. Such differences arise, in part, as local programs have been forced to triage limited funding. *State(s) of Head Start* clarifies the needs in each state for additional federal, as well as state and local, support for the education of young children in poor and low-income families. This report's findings underscore the need for greater coordination between Head Start and state and local government agencies to build high-quality early learning programs with widespread reach and adequate funding.

"Our report for the first time reveals the extent of disparities in Head Start funding and coverage state by state," said NIEER Director W. Steven Barnett, Ph.D. "We urge local, state and federal policymakers to work with Head Start providers and the broader early childhood education community, including researchers, to address issues raised in this report."

Head Start is a federally funded, locally administered comprehensive child development program that provides early education and support services to children and families with household incomes up to 130 percent of poverty by federal standards (about \$33,000 for a family of four). Head Start serves children ages 3 to 5, while Early Head Start serves infants and toddlers. Many Head Start programs collaborate with child care and public preschool programs to serve eligible children, including children of migrant and tribal families. Head Start has expanded and innovated over its 50-year history, pioneering home visiting services, infant-toddler care, and raising the standard for teacher training. For example, the percent of Head Start teachers with a bachelor's degree or higher increased nationwide from 44 percent in 2007 to 73 percent in 2015, a direct result of requirements included in the 2007 Head Start reauthorization.

The *State(s) of Head Start* report is also the first to compile Head Start classroom quality by state. As this report focuses on state averages, we note that any specific Head Start provider within a state may be above or below the state average. It is to Head Start's credit that a uniform measure of classroom quality is applied to all programs as a guide to program

improvement. Like a GPS, this measure tells each program where it is on the path toward high quality. Across the country, Head Start teachers demonstrated an ability to provide strong emotionally supportive environments, and the majority of states also scored well on classroom organization. This is especially valuable as social and emotional skills are vitally important for later success in school and beyond. However, programs in just two states, Kentucky and Vermont, could be determined to score above a research-based threshold for effective instructional support. Eighteen states scored significantly below this threshold. Clearly, there is work to be done to continue improving this aspect of quality. The report also finds variation in teacher qualifications, compensation, and turnover that can create problems for providing effective programs. The report also suggests that Head Start programs are not uniformly funded at levels adequate to ensure a high quality learning and development experience and attract and retain qualified teachers while providing all the required services.

NIEER estimates that federal funding falls \$14 billion short of what would be needed to serve all eligible 3- and 4-year-olds in high-quality Head Start programs for 1,020 hours per year (at an average of \$10,000 per child). Early Head Start is even further from the funding levels needed to fulfill its expressed mission. Although Head Start grantees are expected to raise 20 percent of their total budget from non-federal sources in the form of financial or in-kind donations, these added resources do not make up for the gaps in the federal funds needed to adequately pay teachers to deliver the expected quality and hours of services.

NIEER's findings highlight the need for renewed attention to meeting the needs of young children in low-income families in every state, recognizing that Head Start is not the only program serving them. State and local government agencies also sponsor early childhood programs. Coordination with Head Start is already strong in some states and cities, but more can be done. Of course, no amount of coordination can make up for a lack of adequate resources for young children birth to age 5 across all levels of government. For example, some states do not even offer pre-K and others have poorly funded state pre-K programs with low quality standards and minimal hours.

"As Head Start is only one in a larger set of public programs supporting young children that varies greatly from one state to the next, we call for an independent bipartisan study commission to develop an action plan supporting quality education for all young children and their families, particularly the most vulnerable, in every state and territory," Dr. Barnett said.

Key findings of *State(s) of Head Start* include:

- Overall, Head Start programs cannot reach most children in poverty, even at ages 3 and 4. Even more children in low-income families above the poverty line could benefit from Head Start or another public preschool program but are not receiving any services.
- Revised and streamlined standards call for Head Start programs to provide 1,020 hours per year to provide children enough time in the program to make strong developmental gains. Today, about 40 percent of children in Head Start receive that many hours of programming. Congress provided nearly \$300 million in new funding in 2016 to support these longer hours, but additional funding will be needed to prevent declines in enrollment as programs move to provide 1,020 hours per year to all children.
- On average, Head Start teachers with a BA earn almost \$24,000 less than public school teachers with the same credentials. This discrepancy is even larger for Early Head Start teachers, who earn \$27,000 less than public school teachers with the equivalent education credentials.

The *State(s) of Head Start* report was supported with funding provided by the Bill and Melinda Gates Foundation. The findings, interpretations, and conclusions in this report are solely those of the authors. The *State(s) of Head Start* digest provides a printed narrative and summary information with charts. For more information on the *State(s) of Head Start* and detailed state-by-state profiles on quality access, and funding, please visit www.nieer.org

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The National Institute for Early Education Research (www.nieer.org) at the Graduate School of Education, Rutgers University, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research.