

STATE(S) OF HEAD START

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY



The National Institute for Early Education Research's (NIEER) *State(s) of Head Start* report is the first report to describe and analyze in detail Head Start enrollment, funding, quality, and duration, state-by-state. The report focuses on the 2014-2015 program year but also provides longitudinal data beginning with the 2006-2007 program year. Despite the fact that Head Start is a federally funded, national program, the report reveals that access to Head Start programs, funding per child, teacher education, quality of teaching, and duration of services all vary widely by state. Although in some states Head Start meets evidence-based quality standards and serves a high percentage of low-income children statewide, in other states Head Start reaches fewer of those in need, often with low-quality instruction, and insufficient hours. Despite bipartisan support, Head Start suffers from federal funding that restricts

the number of vulnerable children who can benefit from Head Start. As a result, some vulnerable children benefit less than others from Head Start participation. Yet we can think of no reason children living in poverty in one state are less deserving of a high-quality education in Head Start than those in another.

Revised and streamlined Head Start standards, released in September 2016¹, address several of the concerns spotlighted in the report, and demonstrate the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) commitment to continuous quality improvement and supporting poor children. But without Congress allocating adequate funding, Head Start programs will continue to be forced to choose between providing high-quality or school-day programs; hiring quality teachers (and paying them adequately); or enrolling more children. To be effective, Head Start

must be funded sufficiently so that it can provide high-quality learning experiences to more children for longer periods of time per day and per year.

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. The authors call for an independent bipartisan national commission to study the issues raised in this report and develop an action plan to ensure every eligible child in every state has an equal opportunity to benefit from Head Start.

HIGHLIGHTS

ACCESS

Nationwide, the number of 3- and 4-year-olds enrolled in Head Start (supported by federal funding) decreased between 2007 and 2015. Enrollment of children under 3 more than doubled between 2007 and 2015. Head Start eligibility is based on the federal poverty level (FPL) with certain exceptions. As family incomes change during program enrollment, this is necessarily imperfect. Serving low-income children above the FPL should not be viewed as a program flaw. For this reason, coverage cannot be simply measured by the number of children served as a fraction of those in poverty. Enrollment in Head Start varies widely from one state to another whether this is assessed relative to the number of children in poverty or in low-income families.²

- Head Start programs currently serve less than 40 percent of the number of 3- and 4-year-olds in poverty and less than 5 percent of the number in poverty under age 3. Programs serve less than 20 percent of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds and less than 3 percent of low-income children under the age of 3.
- At age 4, enrollment by state varies from just 7 percent (Nevada) to 52 percent (Mississippi) of low-income children, and from 17 percent (Nevada) to 100 percent (North Dakota) of the number of children in poverty.
- At age 3, enrollment by state varies from 6 percent (Idaho) to 45 percent (Mississippi) of low-income children, and from 15 percent (Idaho) to near 100 percent (North Dakota) of the number of children in poverty.
- Enrollment under age 3 varies from 1 percent (Nevada) to nearly 8 percent (District of Columbia) of low-income children, and almost 3 percent (Nevada) to 13 percent (District of Columbia) of the

number of children in poverty.

- In five states more than 30 percent of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds were enrolled in Head Start. In 11 states less than 15 percent of low-income 3- and 4-year-olds attended Head Start.
- Children's access to Head Start should be considered within the broader early childhood education context. However, even when taking state-funded preschool into account, most states only serve a small percentage of preschool-age children, especially 3-year-olds.

QUALITY

Head Start classrooms vary in quality. Quality observations reveal that they typically provide much stronger support for social and emotional development than for instruction related to language and cognitive development. Teacher qualifications vary dramatically from one state to another, as does teacher pay and the lack of parity with public school teachers with similar credentials. Since the 2007 Head Start Reauthorization that improved teacher qualifications³, substantially more Head Start teachers have a bachelor's degree or higher in ECE.

Observed Quality:

- For the Emotional Support domain of the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS)⁴, the average score on a 1 to 7 scale was 6, above the research-based threshold for an effective program of 5.5. The average score for every state significantly exceeded this threshold.
- For CLASS Classroom Organization the average score on a 7 point scale was 5.7, again significantly above the research-based threshold of 5.5. For only 1 state (South Carolina) do we have confidence that its average was significantly below the threshold, but for half the states we have statistical confidence their average scores exceeded 5.5.
- The average CLASS Instructional Support score was 2.9 on a 7 point scale. Scores averaged less than 3 in the majority of states. Scores were statistically significantly below the research-based threshold of 3 in 18 states and the territories, and across American Indian and Alaska Native (AIAN) and Migrant and Seasonal (MSHS) Head Start programs. Fourteen states averaged a 3 or above. In only two states (Kentucky and Vermont) were scores statistically significantly above 3 such that we can be confident the state average exceeds the threshold.



Head Start Staff:

- Almost 30 percent of Early Head Start teachers had a bachelor's degree (BA) or higher in ECE or a related field, a 6 percentage point increase from 24 percent in 2007. However, the percentage varied from a low of less than 12 percent in New Mexico, to a high of 64 percent in the District of Columbia.
- Seventy-three percent of Head Start teachers had a BA or higher in ECE or a related field, compared to only 44 percent in 2007. This 29 percentage point increase followed the Improving Head Start Act for School Readiness of 2007 which increased teacher qualifications.⁴ Again, states varied in increasing teacher qualifications: more than 90 percent of Head Start teachers in West Virginia and the District of Columbia had a BA or higher, while only 36 percent in New Mexico did.
- On average, Head Start teachers earned almost \$24,000 less than public elementary school teachers with the same credentials. This discrepancy is even larger for Early Head Start teachers, who earned over \$27,000 less than public elementary school teachers.
- The lack of parity can lead to high turnover and an inexperienced workforce. In some states the salary gaps were less than half the average, below \$10,000, but in others they were about twice the average with gaps exceeding \$40,000 in Massachusetts and New York, as well as in New Jersey for Early Head Start only.

DURATION

The number of hours per year of Head Start children receive varies widely across states. Nationally, 42 percent of children already receive 1,020 hours of Head Start services per year, a new standard that all programs must meet by 2021.⁵ Substantial progress is needed in most states to meet this new requirement.

- Forty-two percent of Early Head Start children were served in school-day (greater than 6 hours per day), 5-day per week programs, a decrease of 5 percentage points from 47 percent in 2007.
- Forty-four percent of Head Start children were served in school-day, 5-day per week programs. Nationally, this number has remained relatively unchanged since 2007 (45 percent) despite some small year-to-year fluctuations.
- Duration varies widely across the states, with Idaho and Wyoming serving only 1 percent in school-day, 5-day per week Head Start programs while other states serve nearly all children on this schedule.

FUNDING

Federal funding for Head Start (including Early Head Start, AIAN, and MSHS) was more than \$8.42 billion in 2014-2015. Congress allocated an additional \$570 million for fiscal year 2016, which includes additional funds to support expanded hours per year in Head Start, Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships, and expansion of Early Head Start.⁶

- Head Start and Early Head Start combined funding per child increased slightly from \$8,369 in 2007 to \$8,801 in 2015 when adjusting for inflation.
- Both Head Start and Early Head Start funding per child is highly variable across the map even after adjusting for differences in costs across the country. Adjusting for cost of living, the highest funded state received *twice as much* per child enrolled in Head Start as the lowest funded state.
- The estimated cost to fully fund Head Start to meet its expressed goals for 3- and 4-year-olds is over \$20 billion. This is about triple the existing budget. We based this estimation on serving all 3- and 4-year-olds in poverty (or half of those in low-income families) in high-quality programs for 1,020 hours per year.
- As Early Head Start serves only a very small percentage of infants and toddlers, we do not estimate the cost of expanding that part of the program.