



October 6, 2026

The Honorable Robert F. Kennedy, Jr.
Office of the Secretary
U.S. Department of Health and Human Services
200 Independence Avenue, SW
Washington DC 20201

Submitted Electronically via Regulations.gov.

**RE: Comment on Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs (RIN: 0970-AD30;
Docket ID: ACF-2026-0595)**

Dear Secretary Kennedy:

The Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) and the National Women's Law Center (NWLC) appreciate the opportunity to provide comments regarding the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM, or the Proposed Rule) titled *Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs* (RIN: 0970-AD30; Docket ID: ACF-2026-0595, published August 7, 2026). As national policy and advocacy working to advance legal and policy solutions that support families with low incomes, we strongly oppose the Proposed Rule's attempt at eliminating the vast majority of the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS, or the Standards). The proposed changes will weaken Head Start; diminish the quality, scope, and type of services that Head Start families receive; and undermine the ability of Head Start programs to meet the diverse needs of their communities.

The Center for Law and Social Policy is a national, non-partisan, anti-poverty organization that has advocated for policy solutions that support the needs of people with low incomes for over 50 years. CLASP develops practical yet visionary strategies for reducing poverty, promoting economic security, and advancing racial equity. CLASP works at the federal, state, and local levels and has deep expertise in child care and early education, immigration, postsecondary education, public benefits, and job quality policies, including those that impact the early childhood education workforce.

The National Women's Law Center fights for gender justice—in the courts, in public policy, and in our society—working across the issues that are central to the lives of women and girls. NWLC uses the law in all its forms to change culture and drive solutions to the gender inequity that shapes our society and to break down the barriers that harm all of us—especially women of color, LGBTQ people, and low-income women and families.

Our organizations offer a deep expertise on Head Start and in early childhood education and related federal programs, and in the public support programs that help families and communities foster economic stability. CLASP and NWLC work in partnership with program administrators, advocates, parents, child care providers, and Head Start teachers and see first-hand, through many perspectives, how the impacts of Head Start on children, families, and providers make a difference for individuals, communities, and the economy. We bring data, extensive knowledge, and a commitment to centering economic, racial, and gender justice. Through our expertise and

partnership, we recognize Head Start as an essential program that supports children's development and early learning and provides families services to help lift them out of poverty.

Head Start has been a powerful force in improving outcomes for children with the lowest incomes because the Program Performance Standards ensure every Head Start program uses research-based practices to provide comprehensive services, include children from all backgrounds, and provide services that meet their diverse needs, empower parents, and provide pregnant women and their infants the resources to support healthy development. This is essential to Head Start effectively meeting its statutory purpose in promoting the school readiness of the children and families it serves. Today, Head Start serves nearly 800,000 children birth to five and pregnant women in 20,000 locations across every state in the country as well as territories and Tribal Nations.¹

The Proposed Rule will cause harm to the children, families, educators, employers, communities, and other stakeholders that have depended on the quality, scope, and range of Head Start services since the program's inception. Collectively, the HSPPS are the key building blocks to ensure Head Start programs are high quality and promote the well-being of Head Start families and their communities. Through its removal of core provisions, the Proposed Rule will lead to fewer children and families receiving the high-quality early education and comprehensive services that have been proven to help promote children's school readiness and improve their well-being. It will lead to Head Start teachers and service providers losing their jobs, and families being left without the core support on which they depend, and could even result in some program closures. Destabilizing Head Start will have cascading effects on the child care and early education infrastructure of each state, state budgets, and local economies—particularly those in rural and frontier areas where Head Start is the only source of child care. The Proposed Rule threatens to destroy Head Start through gutting the very regulations that make it successful.

CLASP and NWLC have many concerns with the Proposed Rule, including how many of these changes may violate the statutory requirements of the Head Start Act. Yet for the purposes of this comment, we will focus on the following areas that demonstrate the most direct impact on children, families, gender equity, and economic justice:

- I. Reducing the quality of Head Start services will have dire effects on children who are most marginalized, namely children of color, children with disabilities, and children experiencing homelessness.
- II. Loss of access to services and information will have a direct effect on gender equity as the proposed changes will create inconsistencies for pregnant women, young girls, and mothers enrolled in the program.
- III. Proposed changes and new requirements, such as English-only instruction, will have an adverse effect on immigrant and mixed-status families.
- IV. Weakening Head Start standards will worsen workplace conditions for Head Start's majority-female educator workforce, which will further destabilize Head Start and the early education and child care infrastructure.
- V. Undermining Head Start will have cascading harms to other beneficiaries, stakeholders, and broader communities.

¹ Office of Head Start, Office of Head Start - Services Snapshot: National All Programs (2024–2025) (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), accessed October 5, 2026, [headstart.gov](https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/PIR%20Links/All%20Programs%20(2024-2025).pdf).
[https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/PIR%20Links/All%20Programs%20\(2024-2025\).pdf](https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/PIR%20Links/All%20Programs%20(2024-2025).pdf).

Below, we detail our concerns for each area, demonstrating the wide range of harmful impacts from this Proposed Rule. Therefore, **we strongly urge the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS, or the Department) to withdraw the proposed regulation in its entirety.**

- I. **Reducing the quality of Head Start services will have dire effects on children who are most marginalized, namely children from families with the lowest incomes, children of color, children with disabilities, and children experiencing homelessness.**

The Proposed Rule undermines one of the core elements of Head Start: prioritizing children from families with the lowest incomes to help them succeed in school and in life. That core element requires tailoring Head Start's services to the needs of different children, including children from diverse cultural backgrounds, children who are dual language learners, children with disabilities, children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and children whose families work in agriculture. The HSPPS establish expectations for how Head Start programs can and must effectively serve all of Head Start's diverse children.

Weakening or eliminating existing evidence-based educational HSPPS threatens the overall quality of the services offered in Head Start programs, and risks undermining the positive learning and developmental outcomes evident in children participating in the program. These adverse effects will be even more pronounced for the most marginalized children, who stand to gain the most from Head Start's support. The proposal eviscerates these important HSPPS—making it less likely that services will be tailored to the needs of diverse children—and it adds new requirements that are diametrically opposed to the goal of meeting the different needs of Head Start children. The Proposed Rule would also eliminate the vast majority of existing HSPPS concerning personnel policies that help to support children of diverse backgrounds and their families.

- A. **The Proposed Rule eliminates critical, specific requirements supporting children with disabilities:** More than 119,000 children in Head Start (15.3 percent of children in the program) have disabilities.² Early intervention has been shown to lead to better outcomes,³ yet children from families with low incomes are often identified later than children from families with higher incomes.⁴ Currently, the HSPPS require that every child receives a developmental screening within 45 days of attendance, and staff are required to work with families to connect them to additional evaluation and services as needed. The Proposed Rule strikes this requirement, meaning fewer children will receive these important screenings, fewer developmental delays and disabilities will be identified early, and fewer children will receive the early intervention services that are so impactful on their developmental trajectories, learning, and academic achievement. The Proposed Rule also eliminates all guidance for supporting children with disabilities, meaning Head Start children with suspected or confirmed developmental delays and disabilities will be left without needed supports, and staff will not be required to receive the necessary

² Office of Head Start, Office of Head Start - Services Snapshot.

³ Goode, S., Diefendorf, M., & Colgan, S. (2011). The Importance of Early Intervention for Infants and Toddlers with Disabilities and Their Families. Chapel Hill: The University of North Carolina, FPG Child Development Institute, National Early Childhood Technical Assistance Center.

⁴ Katharine E. Zuckerman et al., "Racial, Ethnic, and Language Disparities in Early Childhood Developmental/Behavioral Evaluations: A Narrative Review," *Clinical Pediatrics* 53, no. 7 (June 2014): 619–31, <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC3955219/>.

training to serve them.⁵ Additionally, the Proposed Rule could make it more difficult for families of children with disabilities to find care since it would no longer prohibit programs from denying care for children with disabilities or chronic health conditions.⁶ The benefits of Head Start are clearly evident for children with disabilities, which is particularly important at a moment where schools are seeing an increasing number of students with individualized special needs. Head Start participation has been demonstrated to significantly reduce the need for special education services in elementary school as compared to students without quality early childhood experiences.⁷

- B. The Proposed Rule would make it more difficult for children experiencing homelessness or in foster care to enroll:** Head Start children experiencing homelessness will face additional barriers if the HSPPS that ensure they are served are rescinded. The proposed prohibition of self-attestation will make it harder for unhoused families to apply for the program, who are less likely to have the documentation needed for eligibility determination. These changes will impede Head Start agencies' ability to meet their statutory obligation to prioritize these families. The Proposed Rule also eradicates the HSPPS which require Head Start programs to identify and prioritize children experiencing homelessness. This change would mean programs are no longer required to locate and recruit homeless children, programs are no longer allowed to reserve spaces for homeless children, and programs will no longer guarantee that a child experiencing homelessness can remain enrolled in Head Start if they move.⁸ As a result of longstanding economic inequities, families experiencing homelessness are disproportionately Black and Latino, meaning the families harmed by the rule are more likely to be families of color.⁹

Further, the proposed changes to the HSPPS will make it harder for children in foster care to access critical services. Under the Proposed Rule, Head Start programs will no longer be required to make specific efforts to locate and recruit children in foster care,¹⁰ prioritize those children for enrollment,¹¹ or make efforts to maintain a child's enrollment

⁵ Carrie Gillispie, "Current Head Start Program Performance Standards Protect Children with Disabilities," New America, September 18, 2026, <https://www.newamerica.org/insights/current-head-start-program-performance-standards-protect-children-with-disabilities/>.

⁶ U.S. Government Accountability Office, Child Care Accessibility: Agencies Can Further Coordinate to Better Serve Families with Disabilities, GAO-24-106843 (Washington, DC: GAO, 2024), accessed October 5, 2026, <https://www.gao.gov/products/gao-24-106843>.

⁷ Huafang Zhao and Shahpar Modarresi, Evaluating Lasting Effects of Full-Day Prekindergarten Program on School Readiness, Academic Performance, and Special Education Services (Montgomery County Public Schools, Office of Shared Accountability, 2010), accessed October 5, 2026, <https://ww2.montgomeryschoolsmd.org/departments/sharedaccountability/reports/2010/10.04.30%20Pre%20K%20report.pdf>, archived at <https://perma.cc/Q34S-45YV>.

⁸ Proposed Rule removes 45 C.F.R. § 1302.15(b)(3).

⁹ U.S. Interagency Council on Homelessness, "Racial Equity: An Essential Component of Our Nation's Homelessness Response," USICH, September 11, 2017, <https://www.usich.gov/news-events/news/racial-equity-essential-component-our-nations-homelessness-response>; Yung Chun et al., "Racial and Ethnic Disparities in Housing Instability During the COVID-19 Pandemic: The Role of Assets and Income Shocks," *Journal of Economics, Race, and Policy* 6, no. 2 (2023): 63–81, doi.org. <https://pmc.ncbi.nlm.nih.gov/articles/PMC9716543/>; Molly K. Richard, "Homelessness and Race: The Impact of Structural Conditions on Black, White, and Latine Homelessness," *Social Problems* 73, no. 4 (October 2026): 1138–57, <https://doi.org/10.1093/socpro/spaf044>.

¹⁰ 45 C.F.R. § 1302.13.

¹¹ Id. § 1302.14(a)(1).

even if the child moves. Head Start agencies will no longer have the authority to reserve spots for children in foster care, cumulatively resulting in reduced access for a population with the highest need.¹²

- C. **The Proposed Rule jeopardizes positive outcomes for children of color:** For Black and brown children, who face racial and economic barriers to accessing quality care, the Proposed Rule will threaten proven positive outcomes in academic achievement and overall well-being.¹³ High-quality early childhood education is linked to improved outcomes for all children, and especially for Black and Hispanic children.¹⁴ And Head Start has been shown to narrow racial disparities in educational achievement, particularly for Black children.¹⁵ Research also shows that Head Start supports positive social, emotional, and behavioral development that becomes evident in adulthood measures of self-control, self-esteem, and positive parenting practices for all participants, particularly among Black families.¹⁶ Head Start is essential for children of color, who face racial stereotyping and implicit bias and who benefit from learning environments that reflect the cultures of their homes. Any weakening of HSPPS that ensure the quality and cultural responsiveness of Head Start programs could undermine Head Start's benefits for children of color.
- D. **Changes in the Proposed Rule could widen inequities in suspensions and expulsions for children of color and children with disabilities:** The Proposed Rule eliminates the prohibition on programs expelling children based on behavior, and prohibition or severe limitation on the use of suspensions for behavior.¹⁷ Research finds that harsh punishment and exclusionary discipline are diametrically opposed to child well-being and emotional and psychological safety.¹⁸ Studies and federal data show that suspensions and expulsions are applied disproportionately to boys, Black children, American Indian and Alaska Native children, and children with disabilities.¹⁹ Eliminating these protections from Head Start, combined with the elimination of the requirements for mental health services and teacher training on addressing challenging behaviors, means children will be more likely to be cast out from the program that is most able to help

¹² Id. § 1302.15(c).

¹³ Abigail N. Walters, Pamela Joshi, and Leah Shafer, Who Can Afford Child Care? A National and State Analysis of Affordability for Working Parents, research brief (Boston University School of Social Work, Institute for Equity in Child Opportunity & Healthy Development, 2026), <https://www.diversitydatakids.org/research-library/research-brief/who-can-afford-child-care-national-and-state-analysis-affordability>

¹⁴ Nadra Nittle, "Study Shows Excellent Preschool Experience Can Narrow Racial Achievement Gap," The Imprint, July 12, 2020, <https://imprintnews.org/featured/study-shows-excellent-preschool-experience-can-narrow-racial-achievement-gap/45195>

¹⁵ Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach and Lauren Bauer, The Long-Term Impact of the Head Start Program (Brookings Institution, August 19, 2016), <https://www.brookings.edu/research/the-long-term-impact-of-the-head-start-program>, archived at <https://perma.cc/62QU-Y7ZY>.

¹⁶ Schanzenbach and Bauer, Long-Term Impact of Head Start.

¹⁷ 45 C.F.R. § 1302.17.

¹⁸ Shantel Meek et al., Harsh Punishment and Exclusionary Discipline in the Early Years: Data, Research, and a Policy Comparison Between Head Start and States (The Children's Equity Project at Arizona State University, September 2026), <https://cep.asu.edu/resources/harsh-punishment-exclusionary-discipline-early-years>.

¹⁹ Meek et al., Harsh Punishment and Exclusionary Discipline.

support their developmental, behavioral, and learning needs to best prepare them to succeed in an elementary school environment.

- E. **The Proposed Rule significantly weakens comprehensive services that are the most critical for families with the greatest need:** The Proposed Rule eliminates most required health, mental health, dental, and parent support services. The Head Start Act requires Head Start grantees to “provide such comprehensive health, education, parental involvement, nutritional, social, and other services as will enable the children to attain their full potential and attain school readiness.”²⁰ Core to the Head Start program is its “whole child” approach, built on scientific research²¹ showing that children’s health, social and emotional development, and the parent-child relationship are all important aspects for subsequent development and that they have complementary and mutual influences that support cognitive development.²²

Health, mental health, and oral health services are a critical component of the comprehensive services Head Start programs provide in service of school readiness. Head Start’s comprehensive services are grounded in the idea that children thrive most when their holistic needs are addressed, acknowledging the key connection between health and learning.²³ Every year, through following the HSPPS, Head Start programs improve health outcomes for hundreds of thousands of families.²⁴ These services have a demonstrated impact on child health outcomes such as increasing children’s access to preventive care and dental check-ups, increasing healthy eating, and improving mental health.²⁵ By removing the HSPPS on health, the Department undermines the quality of a core component of Head Start’s comprehensive services model. Under the Proposed Rule, it is more likely that children will be off-schedule with critical well-child visits and other medical services, health and developmental screenings that would identify health

²⁰ 42 U.S.C. § 9833; *see also* 42 U.S.C. § 9831.

²¹ 42 U.S.C. § 9832(23), (22) (defining the terms “scientifically valid research” and “scientifically based reading research”).

²² The evidence is robust that cognitive stimulation, preventive health care, and nutrition early in life are critical for long-term skill development and positive health outcomes. *See, e.g.,* Jack P. Shonkoff and Deborah A. Phillips, eds., *From Neurons to Neighborhoods: The Science of Early Childhood Development* (National Academies Press, 2000). Research about early childhood interventions across multiple sectors (i.e., health, nutrition, education, child protection, social protection) supports the importance of multi-faceted interventions that address multiple areas and risk factors simultaneously. *See, e.g.,* Pia R. Britto et al., “Nurturing Care: Promoting Early Childhood Development,” *The Lancet* 389, no. 10064 (January 2017): 91–102.

²³ Administration for Children and Families, Office of Head Start, Overarching Competencies 1, 2, 3, and 7: Fundamental Values, Knowledge, and Skills to Manage Health Services, National Center on Early Childhood Health and Wellness, Head Start Health Services Competencies Course Transcript (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), accessed July 23, 2026, <https://headstart.gov/sites/default/files/learning-modules-resources/fundamental-values-transcript.pdf>, archived at <https://perma.cc/7MJS-CWF>.

²⁴ For example, in 2024, the Program Information Report shows 102,478 families received mental health services, 37,404 received training on substance abuse prevention and 9,746 families received substance abuse treatment, 372,851 families received education on preventative medical and oral health, 110,395 families received education on health and developmental consequences of tobacco product use, 347,160 received education on nutrition, and 36,739 received education on postpartum care. *See* Office of Head Start, Office of Head Start - Services Snapshot.

²⁵ Taryn Morrissey, “The Effects of Early Care and Education on Children’s Health,” Health Affairs Health Policy Brief, April 25, 2019, <https://www.healthaffairs.org/content/briefs/effects-early-care-and-education-children-s-health>.

conditions or developmental delays will be delayed, health disparities will be exacerbated, and inconsistency in information and supports for families will be created.

All of these changes amount to the greatest harm for the families with the highest need, including rural families where access to other services can be challenging, families who require stronger wraparound health and mental health services, families of color, and families of children with disabilities who already face greater barriers to accessing and affording care.

II. Loss of access to services and information will have a direct effect on gender equity as the proposed changes will create inconsistencies for pregnant women, young girls, and mothers enrolled in the program.

Head Start and Early Head Start are essential programs for pregnant women, children, and families and are critical for advancing gender justice and women's economic security in the United States. Early Head Start supports pregnant women and children from birth to three years old, and Head Start serves children ages three to five, with both programs providing comprehensive services for families including health, dental, mental health, and nutrition. This approach has demonstrated long-term impact for participating girls and women, especially those from disadvantaged backgrounds.²⁶ While the Office of Head Start (OHS)'s fact sheets tracking enrollment demographics do not separate enrollment by gender, the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is a longitudinal study funded by OHS that provides insight into demographic characteristics, including gender. Based on the 2019 FACES study, half of participating children are girls and over 80 percent of participating family members are mothers.²⁷ Based on 2024-2025 data, more than 13,000 pregnant women participated in Early Head Start.²⁸ Women and girls benefit significantly from Head Start, a program whose success is largely driven by the majority-female educator workforce.²⁹

A. The Proposed Rule threatens positive outcomes and long-term benefits for young girls who participate in the program: Through statute and the HSPPS, the Head Start program ensures that as many children as possible have access to high-quality early learning and supportive services. The cognitive, social, and personal development that comes from Head Start's early learning and holistic support boosts participating girls' ability to reach their full potential. Participating in Head Start has been shown to: reduce chronic absenteeism; reduce adult poverty by 23 percent; increase the likelihood of completing high school; increase the likelihood of enrolling in college; and help girls living in poverty score higher in reading and math.³⁰

²⁶ Ashley Kopack Klein et al., Descriptive Data on Head Start Children and Families from FACES 2019: Fall 2019 Data Tables and Study Design, OPRE Report 2021-77 (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 2021), 31, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED613786.pdf>.

²⁷ Tutang Nguyen et al., Child And Family Experiences in Head Start FACES Programs in Spring 2022: The 2021–2022 Study, OPRE Report #2024-198 (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2024), available via <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/FACES2122StudySpring22Tables.pdf>.

²⁸ Office of Head Start, Office of Head Start - Services Snapshot.

²⁹ Study of Early Education through Partnerships, Profiles of Early Educators in Virginia in Spring 2023: Head Start Teachers (University of Virginia, 2023), https://www.see-partnerships.com/uploads/1/3/2/8/132824390/head_start_workforce_profile_2023_final.pdf.

³⁰ Martha J. Bailey et al., "Prep School for Poor Kids: The Long-Run Impacts of Head Start on Human Capital and Economic Self-Sufficiency," American Economic Review 111, no. 12 (December 2021): 3997

As Head Start girls grow, they see long-term benefits that rebound across generations. Girls who participated in Head Start are more self-sufficient: Head Start reduces adult poverty rates among women by 32 percent.³¹ Along with increases in educational attainment and income, girls with greater access to education and resources have lower rates of teen pregnancy and lower rates of involvement with the criminal legal system.³² Additionally, for Head Start girls who go on to become mothers, the benefits of participating in the program roll over to the next generation—a 2022 study found that a mother's increased educational attainment and resources led to improved health and development for their children.³³

B. The Proposed Rule removes requirements for critical services that support maternal health and lead to strong positive impacts for mothers and their children: Early Head Start provides maternal health supports including connecting a pregnant woman to prenatal health care and comprehensive services—such as nutritional and food assistance, dental care, mental health services, and emergency shelter or transitional housing in cases of domestic violence.

Notably, if an expectant mother enrolls in the program without an accessible source of health care, the program finds her one, ensuring that she can access critical pre- and post-natal care for herself and her baby. The United States has the highest maternal mortality rate among developed countries throughout the world, with 23.8 deaths per 100,000 live births.³⁴ The Black maternal rate is more than twice that rate at 55.3 deaths per 100,000. The infant mortality rate declined nearly 20 percent in the last two decades but the rate among babies born to Black moms is still 1.9 times the national rate.³⁵ Providing maternal health care doesn't just provide essential benefits for the mother and child, it also contributes to financial stability for expectant families. Mothers serve as the sole or co-breadwinner in two-thirds of American households, a number that has more than doubled over the last 50 years.³⁶ Even without comprehensive data on the long-term effects of maternal morbidity, eliminating preventable deaths and severe illnesses associated with childbirth would bolster household income and improve households' financial health.

Through the HSPPS, Early Head Start programs also ensure expecting mothers receive a home visit in the first two weeks after the birth of a child and postpartum education and services on postpartum recovery, postpartum mental health, infant care, feeding, and

³¹ Bailey et al., "Prep School for Poor Kids," 3997.

³² Andrew Barr and Chloe R. Gibbs, "Breaking the Cycle? Intergenerational Effects of an Antipoverty Program in Early Childhood," *Journal of Political Economy* 130, no. 12 (December 2022): 3279

³³ Barr and Gibbs, "Breaking the Cycle?," 3279.

³⁴ "Metrocentered: Tackling the Black Maternal Health Crisis," *American Magazine*, American University, accessed October 5, 2026,

<https://www.american.edu/magazine/article/better-outcomes-for-black-birthing-people.cfm>

³⁵ March of Dimes, 2025 March of Dimes Report Card: The State of Maternal and Infant Health for American Families, PeriStats (March of Dimes, 2025),

<https://www.marchofdimes.org/peristats/reports/united-states/report-card>.

³⁶ Sarah Jane Glynn, Breadwinning Mothers Continue To Be the U.S. Norm (Center for American Progress, May 15, 2019),

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/breadwinning-mothers-continue-u-s-norm/>.

father engagement.³⁷ This engagement leads to positive effects for the child, given that once a pregnant woman is enrolled, the child is automatically enrolled in Early Head Start for up to three years, so a slot must be available once the child is born.³⁸ Other studies show that Early Head Start leads to: a greater percentage of parents being in school or job training programs, parents reporting lower parenting distress, more supportive home environments for language and literacy, and improved academic and social-emotional outcomes for the child.³⁹ Eliminating these required supports entirely undermines Head Start's core purpose, and will disproportionately harm the women and girls who benefit from Head Start's services.

- C. The Proposed Rule will have direct adverse effects on women's economic stability and participation in their children's development:** Head Start supports mothers' well-being and helps low-income working mothers break the cycle of poverty in a range of ways: providing child care that enables mothers to work, as well as a range of other supports such as education, connections to job training, and social supports that help them get on a pathway to the workforce. Indeed, access to high-quality child care alone has been shown to support mothers' access to employment and education opportunities.⁴⁰ Compared to other programs, Head Start is both uniquely accessible to low-wage working mothers⁴¹ and uniquely supportive.⁴² Through Head Start, many low-income mothers—especially single mothers and mothers of color—can achieve long-term financial stability and economic independence because Head Start allows them to maintain full-time employment.⁴³ Research shows that single mothers' employment rates drop from 84 percent to 67 percent when they don't have access to a

³⁷ Office of Head Start, Services to Pregnant Women and Expectant Families in Early Head Start (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, April 25, 2025), <https://headstart.gov/publication/services-pregnant-women-expectant-families-early-head-start>.

³⁸ Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Services and Outcomes for Early Head Start Families Enrolled During Pregnancy, research brief (Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), accessed October 5, 2026, <https://acf.gov/sites/default/files/documents/opre/pregnancy2.pdf>

³⁹ Prenatal-to-3 Policy Impact Center, "Early Head Start," Prenatal-to-3 State Policy Roadmap 2025, Vanderbilt University Peabody College of Education & Human Development, 2025, <https://pn3policy.org/pn-3-state-policy-roadmap-2025/us/early-head-start/>; Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, Building Their Futures: How Early Head Start Programs Are Enhancing the Lives of Infants and Toddlers in Low-Income Families, research report (Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, June 15, 2001) <https://acf.gov/opre/report/building-their-futures-how-early-head-start-programs-are-enhancing-lives-infants-and-0>; Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, "Early Head Start Research and Evaluation Project (EHSRE), 1996–2010," Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, dataset profile last updated February 3, 2025, <https://acf.gov/opre/project/early-head-start-research-and-evaluation-project-ehsre-1996-2010>.

⁴⁰ National Head Start Association, The Head Start Advantage: Investments That Work (National Head Start Association, 2021), 3–4, <https://nhsa.org/resource/head-start-advantage-investments-that-work/>.

⁴¹ Due to limited funding or restrictive requirements for other programs targeting low-income families.

⁴² By providing free services to pregnant women and young children who meet eligibility requirements. Save the Children, "Head Start Program," Save the Children, accessed October 5, 2026, <https://www.savethechildren.org/us/what-we-do/education/head-start-program>.

⁴³ Jasmine Tucker, Black Women Have Been Undervalued and Underpaid for Far Too Long, fact sheet (National Women's Law Center, June 2024), 1–2, <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2024/07/BWEPD-2024.6.28v4.pdf>

child care program.⁴⁴ Single mothers are both the primary earner and primary caregiver in the household, and benefit greatly when they have access to affordable and reliable child care, like the early education programming of Head Start. Notably, nationally representative studies (such as FACES) show that roughly 62 percent to 66 percent of participating children come from single-parent families.⁴⁵

Because Head Start offers high-quality, reliable, and cost-free programming, participation enables mothers to achieve greater employment and financial stability. The Proposed Rule names reducing operating hours as a potential strategy for reducing program operating costs, and also immediately acknowledges that such a change “could have costs for families who may need to find alternative care or miss out on work to care for children.”⁴⁶ This cost is most often shouldered by women. Because women's employment is often inextricably linked to child care access, studies have found that the increasing access and programming hours would lead to increased benefits for working mothers. Providing high-quality, affordable child care would increase full-time employment for women with young children by almost 17 percent, and for women without a college degree, by about 31 percent.⁴⁷

Head Start also helps low-income mothers, single mothers, and mothers of color pursue higher education.⁴⁸ Access to affordable early childhood education increases single mothers' college graduation rates by 21 percent, which, in turn, has a direct impact on her lifetime earnings.⁴⁹ Moreover, a college degree not only increases parents' economic stability and mobility, it also improves their health and well-being and supports educational outcomes for their children.⁵⁰ In addition, the Head Start framework encourages parents to participate in their children's education, such as by volunteering in classrooms, participating in Head Start governance and leadership opportunities, and

⁴⁴ Leila Schochet, *The Child Care Crisis Is Keeping Women Out of the Workforce* (Center for American Progress, March 28, 2019),

<https://www.americanprogress.org/article/child-care-crisis-keeping-women-workforce/>; Rasheed Malik, Katie Hamm, and Leila Schochet, *America's Child Care Deserts in 2018* (Center for American Progress, December 6, 2018), <https://www.americanprogress.org/article/americas-child-care-deserts-2018/>.

⁴⁵ Arya Ansari and Elizabeth T. Gershoff, “Parent Involvement in Head Start and Children's Development: Indirect Effects Through Parenting,” *Journal of Marriage and Family* 78, no. 1 (February 2016): 56–70, <https://onlinelibrary.wiley.com/doi/full/10.1111/jomf.12266>

⁴⁶ Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs, 91 Fed. Reg. 51248, 51248–51322 (proposed Aug. 7, 2026) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pts. 1301–1305), <https://www.federalregister.gov/d/2026-16134/p-437>.

⁴⁷ Robert Paul Hartley et al., *A Lifetime's Worth of Benefits: The Effects of Affordable, High-Quality Child Care on Family Income, the Gender Earnings Gap, and Women's Retirement Security* (National Women's Law Center and Center on Poverty & Social Policy at Columbia University, March 2021), 4, <https://nwlc.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/04/A-Lifetimes-Worth-of-Benefits-Compliant.pdf>.

⁴⁸ Tucker, *Black Women Have Been Undervalued*, 1–2.

⁴⁹ Zach Scherer and Michael D. King, “Income Gap Between Householders With College Degrees and Those With High School Degrees but No College Widened Over Last Two Decades,” *America Counts: Stories*, U.S. Census Bureau, September 9, 2025, <https://www.census.gov/library/stories/2025/09/education-and-income.html>.

⁵⁰ Institute for Women's Policy Research, *Head Start-College Partnership to Promote Student Parent Family Success: A Roadmap to Guide Collaboration*, IWPR #C500 (Institute for Women's Policy Research, June 2021), 3, <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED614641.pdf>.

being prioritized for open and appropriate staff positions.⁵¹ The Proposed Rule threatens all of these research-based benefits.

III. Proposed changes and new requirements, such as English-only instruction, will have an adverse effect on immigrant and mixed status families.

The Proposed Rule would disproportionately harm immigrant families—including U.S. citizen children—and Head Start staff who are already under strain. Head Start is especially impactful for immigrant families, who face greater barriers accessing necessary wraparound support, and it relies significantly on immigrant workers to sustain the scope and quality of its services. By eliminating critical guidance for Head Start staff and prohibiting dual language learning, this rule will upend the Head Start workforce and reduce the quality of and access to care for thousands of immigrant families—despite their legal eligibility for services.⁵² The Proposed Rule contradicts the Head Start Act's mandate to promote English language acquisition and serve eligible families regardless of immigration status, and will result in weakened access to and quality of services for thousands of families.

A. The proposal's requirement for English-only instruction conflicts with Head Start's mandate to help children from immigrant families acquire English language skills and could undermine their overall academic achievement: Robust research documents that dual language instruction leads to higher English vocabulary skills compared to dual language learners who are instructed solely in English.⁵³ Requiring English-only instruction would not only diminish Head Start recipients' language acquisition, but directly defies the Head Start Act's mandate to promote school readiness in an environment that supports language and literacy development for the 18,767 classrooms primarily serving dual language families.⁵⁴ Further, requiring English-only instruction diminishes eligible immigrant parents' authority in Head Start, reducing parents' agency in their receipt of services and their input in their children's education. Parent engagement is a critical tenet of the Head Start program, but forcing the 34,464 teachers working in a dual-language classroom to discuss children's development with their families in English alone will make it harder for them to participate in and shape the services they receive, as the Head Start Act mandates.⁵⁵ The rule would result in weakened quality of services for children, whose well-being and learning hinge on parents' engagement with the school-family partnership.⁵⁶

B. The proposed change prohibiting self-attestation while weakening privacy protections will disproportionately deter immigrant families from applying for

⁵¹ See 45 C.F.R. §1302.50(b)(4). See also 1. Lucie E. White, "Raced Histories, Mother Friendships, and the Power of Care: Conversations with Women in Project Head Start," *Chicago-Kent Law Review* 76, no. 3 (Spring 2001): 1572, iit.edu.(discussing Head Start's unique legal blueprint that emphasizes family well-being and parent development).

⁵² Hannah Matthews, Immigrant Eligibility for Federal Child Care and Early Education Programs, updated June 2026 by Mikayla Slaydon, fact sheet (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2026), <https://www.clasp.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/06/CCEE-Factsheet-Update-6.26-FINAL.pdf>.

⁵³ Natalie L. Bohlmann et al., "Academic Outcomes of English Learners in Monolingual and Dual Language Programs," *Journal of Applied Developmental Psychology* 101 (November/December 2025): Article 101889, <https://www.sciencedirect.com/science/article/abs/S0193397325001169>.

⁵⁴ Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9831, Sec. 636(1).

⁵⁵ Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9836, Sec. 641(I)(J)(i).

⁵⁶ Susan M. Sheridan et al., "A Meta-Analysis of Family-School Interventions and Children's Social-Emotional Functioning: Moderators and Components of Efficacy," *Review of Educational Research* 89, no. 2 (April 2019): 296

care, despite their eligibility for services: The Proposed Rule will make it harder for families to access available slots by eliminating self-attestation, particularly for immigrant and mixed-status families who are disproportionately more likely to have income that is informal, seasonal, or cash-based.⁵⁷ In the cases of asylees and refugees, who would especially benefit from access to Head Start, many families could have a harder time applying because of limited access to birth certificates and other documents necessary for eligibility determination. Research shows that these types of policies are already weakening immigrant families' access to the early childhood services for which they're legally eligible, and destabilizing the child care and early education sector as a whole.⁵⁸

On top of increased difficulty applying for services, the Proposed Rule would limit families' data privacy, which would further defy Head Start's mandate to "address the challenges of children from immigrant, refugee, and asylee families."⁵⁹ Requiring that the federal government have access to families' eligibility determination documentation could create a chilling effect and reduce the trust that's been built across decades with grantees serving eligible families regardless of their immigration status. Combined with the elimination of community-assessment requirements, these proposed changes will weaken Head Start grantees' ability to fully understand and meet the needs of the mixed-status and immigrant communities who would benefit from services.⁶⁰

- C. **The Proposed Rule will reduce outreach strategies and family engagement which will especially deter eligible immigrant participation in the program:** Immigrant families are increasingly fearful about accessing services for which they're legally eligible, as the Trump Administration's anti-immigrant policies continue to stoke violence across the country.⁶¹ As a result, removing the HSPPS that guide grantees' outreach process, such as actively informing eligible families about services; using modern technology to facilitate applications; and undertaking specific efforts to recruit particular populations, will disproportionately harm immigrant access to Head Start services.

Further, in assessing the collective harm of this Proposed Rule, it's critical not to look at any one proposed change in isolation. The English-only mandate sends a clear message to immigrant and mixed-status families that there is no room for culturally responsive learning or support for their unique needs. The removal of guidance for community-based outreach weakens the infrastructure that allows families who are fearful of the current government to understand and access services. The explicit requirement for data sharing communicates that even if families are eligible for Head Start regardless of immigration status, they should fear their need for services becoming a tool in the Administration's anti-immigrant policy agenda. Any one of these changes

⁵⁷ Christopher R. Tamborini et al., "Measuring the Economic and Sociodemographic Characteristics of Unauthorized Immigrants in the United States with Survey Data," Social Security Bulletin 85, no. 2 (2025): 9–25, <https://www.ssa.gov/policy/docs/ssb/v85n2/v85n2p9.html>.

⁵⁸ Suma Setty, Kaelin Rapport, and Emily Rodriguez, Caregiving in Crisis: How Immigration Policies Are Undermining Early Care and Education Programs, report/brief (Center for Law and Social Policy, April 16, 2026), <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/caregiving-in-crisis-how-immigration-policies-are-undermining-early-care-and-education-programs/>.

⁵⁹ Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9835, Sec. 640(5)(B)(i).

⁶⁰ Setty, Rapport, and Rodriguez, Caregiving in Crisis.

⁶¹ Suma Setty et al., Even the Playground Isn't Safe: How Immigration Policies Are Harming Our Youngest Children, report/brief (Center for Law and Social Policy, April 16, 2026), <https://www.clasp.org/publications/report/brief/even-playground-unsafe-immigration-policies-hurt-child/>.

causes harm to immigrant families, but taken together this rule would deeply destabilize immigrant communities and the early childhood programming that can make a tremendous difference in their lives, as is Head Start's promise. The result will be communities with the greatest need further divided, further challenged to find child care and wrap-around services, and therefore further prohibited from engaging fully in the workforce and their community as a whole.

IV. Weakening Head Start program performance standards will worsen workplace conditions for Head Start's majority-female educator workforce which will further destabilize Head Start and the early education and child care infrastructure.

Through its removal of core provisions that protect learning environments and workplace conditions for educators and staff, the Proposed Rule could result in program closures, Head Start educators and service providers leaving their jobs, and families being left without the core support on which they depend. Already, Head Start programs have faced persistent challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff,⁶² leading to severe staff shortages with turnover at its highest point in two decades.⁶³ This severely impedes the ability of programs to fully enroll classrooms and provide consistent high-quality services to children and families. Low wages and poor benefits are a key driver of rapidly increasing staff turnover among Head Start teachers and staff.⁶⁴

- A. The removal of the majority of the HSPPS will worsen workplace conditions for Head Start educators and staff:** The Proposed Rule would increase class sizes; decrease hours of operation; reduce the qualifications, competencies, support, and coaching of teachers and staff; eliminate requirements for effective teaching and learning environments, home visiting, and parental involvement; and more. The proposal would eliminate requirements for breaks for Head Start staff, alongside required mental health supports. Despite being named as cost-saving measures, eliminating breaks and other supports will not impact program finances and will instead contribute to increased fatigue and overwhelm for Head Start educators and staff. The Proposed Rule would also remove requirements that programs provide research-based coaching for education staff, which will reduce clarity and consistency around program support and professional development. In particular, staff-to-child ratios and staff qualifications are important in influencing early educators' decisions to remain in the classroom. In recent surveys,

⁶² Charlotte V. Farewell et al., "Investigation of Key Domains Associated with Worker Well-Being and Burnout and Turnover in the Early Care and Education Workforce," *International Archives of Occupational and Environmental Health* 96, no. 5 (July 2023): 1–11; National Head Start Association, *Confronting Head Start's Workforce Crisis*, research brief (National Head Start Association, May 2022), <https://nhsa.org/resource/confronting-head-starts-workforce-crisis/>; Megan B. Wells, "Predicting Preschool Teacher Retention and Turnover in Newly Hired Head Start Teachers Across the First Half of the School Year," *Early Childhood Research Quarterly* 30, no. 1 (1st Quarter 2015): 152.

⁶³ Head Start 2022 PIR. via Supporting the Head Start Workforce and Consistent Quality Programming, 89 Fed. Reg. 67720, 67721n7 (Aug. 21, 2024) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pt. 1302), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2024/08/21/2024-18279/supporting-the-head-start-workforce-and-consistent-quality-programming#footnote-7-p67721>.

⁶⁴ D. Bassok et al., *The Effects of Financial Incentives on Teacher Turnover in Early Childhood Settings: Experimental Evidence from Virginia*, working paper (EdPolicyWorks at the University of Virginia, 2021), <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/worthy-work-still-unlivable-wages/>; Marcy Whitebook et al., *Then & Now: Changes in Child Care Staffing, 1994–2000* (Center for the Child Care Workforce and Institute of Industrial Relations, University of California, Berkeley, 2001), <https://cscce.berkeley.edu/publications/report/then-and-now-changes-in-child-care-staffing-1994-2000/>.

educators note that the changes in the Proposed Rule would make it harder for them to meet children's individual needs, make classroom management more difficult, increase risks to children's health and safety, and increase the risk of staff leaving the field.⁶⁵

These changes compound the damage from the May 2026 Proposed Rule undoing wages and benefits progress for Head Start educators,⁶⁶ despite clear evidence that compensation disparities are a primary driver of turnover and workforce instability for Head Start programs.⁶⁷ Analysis of Program Information Report (PIR) data from the 2023–2024 program year show that almost one in four (22 percent) of staff departures are attributed to higher compensation, with many staff moving to state pre-K or other early childhood programs.⁶⁸

Collectively and individually, these changes risk adding to existing burnout, worsening workplace conditions, increasing workplace burden, and pushing educators out of the Head Start field. As a result, programs will be less likely to stay fully enrolled and keep all their classrooms open, fewer children will receive services, and those who do will be served less well by teachers who are required to manage under increasingly difficult conditions without increased compensation.

- B. The proposal to restrict dual language instruction will further strain the Head Start workforce, despite the Proposed Rule's stated efforts to reduce programmatic burden:** In addition to the negative impacts on children and families, the proposals to re-train or re-hire staff in order to enforce proposed language restrictions would further destabilize the Head Start workforce, imposing undue restrictions on local needs. Per the NPRM's Regulatory Impact Analysis, the proposed English-only restrictions would require an estimated 34,464 teachers to be retrained or replaced. In the 18,767 classrooms primarily serving dual language families, the proposal would require replacing curricula, teaching materials, and books and educational toys that have non-English words. The proposal would require retraining or removing approximately one-third of all non-tribal Head Start classrooms across the country, as the Head Start workforce simultaneously battles high turnover rates and classroom under-enrollment.⁶⁹

⁶⁵ National Association for the Education of Young Children 2026, "ECE Workforce Survey: Coherence, Not Cuts: Educator Perspectives on How to Improve ECE Regulation," <https://www.naeyc.org/sites/default/files/wysiwyg/user-174467/coherence-not-cuts.pdf>.

⁶⁶ Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Program Access, 91 Fed. Reg. 24892 (proposed May 12, 2026) (to be codified at 45 C.F.R. pt. 1302), <https://www.federalregister.gov/documents/2026/05/12/2026-09383/restoring-flexibility-to-support-head-start-program-access>.

⁶⁷ Kyong-Ah Kwon et al., "A Longitudinal Study of Head Start Teacher Turnover Trends and Factors," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 156 (April 2025): Article 104916, <https://fpg.unc.edu/publications/longitudinal-study-head-start-teacher-turnover-trends-and-factors>.

⁶⁸ Sherri Castle et al., Five Things to Know About Recruitment and Retention in Head Start in 2026, Research Highlight (National Early Care and Education Workforce Center, April 2026), <https://www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org/wp-content/uploads/2026/04/Five-Things-to-Know-About-Recruitment-and-Retention-in-Head-Start-in-2026.pdf>.

⁶⁹ Kyong-Ah Kwon et al., "A Longitudinal Study of Head Start Teacher Turnover Trends and Factors," *Teaching and Teacher Education* 156 (April 2025): Article 104916, <https://doi.org/10.1016/j.tate.2024.104916>.

V. Undermining Head Start will have cascading harms to other beneficiaries, systems, and broader communities.

By destabilizing Head Start, a high-quality pillar of the early education and child care infrastructure, the Proposed Rule would result in widespread harm to broader communities, including parents, employers, and other participants in our educational system, and would likely create significant additional costs to state and local budgets. The degradation of Head Start would have a severe impact on state and local educational systems. Head Start's primary purpose is promoting the school readiness of children facing many disadvantages and who, without this intervention program, are likely to start school behind their more advantaged peers.

- A. Reducing Head Start quality and services means more children will be entering kindergarten behind their more advantaged peers, without the benefit of early intervention services, exhibiting more challenging behaviors for elementary schools to manage, and with unstable family situations that can interfere with learning and achievement:** Because the Proposed Rule would reduce quality and make Head Start less effective, local school districts—many of which are already stretched for resources—will face additional burdens and costs to address the resulting developmental and educational gaps created by the Proposed Rule. Similarly, since the Proposed Rule's English-only instruction mandate and other restrictions would forbid the research-based approaches shown to be most effective in supporting the development, English acquisition, and academic achievement in young dual language learners, local school districts are going to have to take on additional educational costs.
- B. States and local communities will see their costs rise and experience other negative impacts because of this rule:** The Department's own analysis suggests the Proposed Rule will trigger the unemployment of 40,000 Head Start staff, increasing unemployment rates in communities across the country. The Department also estimates \$167 million in cuts to health services, meaning costs will shift to families or to federal, state, or local governments, or families will go without needed health services, which will lead to greater costs down the road. The Department also expects the Proposed Rule to lead Head Start programs to reduce their hours of operations, which will increase costs to families and states as families' child care needs increase. Weakening Head Start could also add further strain on the other child care facilities that are serving families with the greatest need, namely the Child Care and Development Fund, which is already serving only a small fraction of eligible families as the result of insufficient funding.⁷⁰

In addition, the Proposed Rule's changes to the administrative cap, along with changes that will make working conditions more difficult for teachers and staff, will leave many programs struggling to stay fully staffed or even retain their grants. Parents will lose their child care arrangements, be more likely to drop out from school and training programs, and could have a harder time supporting their families. This harm will fall most harshly on women, who bear a disproportionate amount of child care responsibilities. Parents' and caregivers' loss of access to Head Start services will also cause instability for

⁷⁰ Jessica Rendon and Kendall Swenson, Estimates of Child Care Subsidy Eligibility & Receipt for Fiscal Year 2022, Data Point (Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, July 2026), 1, https://aspe.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/documents/423242373901e0901d36fc56c3d55a21/CCDF%20Eligibility%20and%20Receipt_FY22.pdf.

employers, many of which cannot meet their staffing needs unless workers have reliable access to child care.

- C. **Head Start has long been an important model that states and private providers rely on to identify and implement evidence-based practices that help prepare children for school:** Head Start has been a leader in early education and parent engagement and has therefore helped promote the school readiness of children attending other early childhood programs. Eliminating Head Start's high-quality HSPPS would be a loss not just for the children and families that directly benefit from the program, but also for the broader early care and education ecosystem, which needs to be striving towards higher quality and standards that more effectively support children's development, learning, and well-being.

Ultimately, communities in every corner of the nation are dependent on Head Start providing high-quality services to the nation's lowest income and most vulnerable. Denigrating these services will have cascading effects that harm the communities Head Start was intended to strengthen.

Conclusion

The Head Start statute states that the purpose of the program is to "promote the school readiness of low-income children by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development" through a learning environment that supports child development and through "health, educational, nutritional, social, and other services" to children and families.⁷¹ This statutory goal cannot be met without the high-quality, comprehensive, and research-based Head Start Program Performance Standards that clearly delineate all the core standards and services each program must meet and provide. We urge the Department to immediately withdraw its current proposal and instead dedicate its efforts to advancing policies consistent with the statute that strengthen—rather than undermine—the ability of Head Start to effectively prepare children from families with low incomes to succeed in school.

We appreciate your consideration of these comments. For additional information or follow-up on this joint comment please contact: Stephanie Schmit, Director of Child Care and Early Education at CLASP sschmit@clasp.org or Whitney Pesek, Senior Director of Federal Child Care Policy at NWLC wpesek@nwlc.org.

Citations

This comment includes numerous citations including direct links for the benefit of the Department's review. We request that the full text of each of the items cited, along with the full text of this comment, be considered part of the administrative record in this matter for purposes of the Administrative Procedure Act. Thank you for the opportunity to comment on this regulation.

⁷¹ Head Start Act, 42 U.S.C. § 9831 (2007).