

Head Start

Head Start and Early Head Start provide comprehensive early learning services to poor preschoolers, infants, and toddlers. The federal government provides grants to entities — typically non-profit organizations or school districts — to operate Head Start programs in local communities. Head Start started as a program for preschoolers, serving 3- and 4-year-olds, but expanded in 1995 to include Early Head Start programs for infants and toddlers due to a growing understanding of the critical developmental importance of the early years. In 2015, federal funding supported Head Start services for 945,000 children, including 115,000 infants and toddlers in Early Head Start.³⁶

Head Start funding in 2017 is roughly even with its 2001 level, adjusted for inflation, though the number of poor children under age 5 has risen by half a million since 2001.³⁷ In addition, in 2014 the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) launched the Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships to support some Early Head Start programs directly and support partnerships between child care and Head Start programs to improve the quality of care for infants and toddlers in child care settings. If the funding for this initiative — \$640 million in 2017 — is included, overall funding for Head Start and the Partnerships is just modestly (8 percent) above funding in 2001.

Funding remains well below what is needed to give all eligible children access to high-quality early education and to ensure that Head Start programs meet high expectations for quality. In fact, Head Start (including Early Head Start) enrollment has fallen by nearly 20,000 children from its 2011 peak of 964,000, as funding hasn't kept up with the cost of providing quality early education.³⁸ The National Women's Law Center estimates that Head Start serves just 46 percent of eligible 3- and 4-year-olds and Early Head Start serves just under 5 percent of eligible infants and toddlers.³⁹ Without adequate funding, Head Start will either serve fewer and fewer children or will be forced to reduce quality of services.

Serving more poor children is only one reason Head Start needs more resources. Increased investment is also needed to ensure that Head Start provides the high-quality early learning that low-income children need to start kindergarten healthy and ready to succeed.

Bipartisan reauthorization legislation enacted in 2007 called for higher educational standards for Head Start teachers and required HHS to institute a system in which Head Start grantees that didn't meet certain quality benchmarks would have to compete for continued funding. These measures are designed to improve the program's quality and effectiveness. But, hiring teachers with bachelor's degrees and ensuring that programs effectively help children reach educational and developmental

³⁶ Administration for Children and Families (ACF), "Head Start Program Facts, Fiscal Year 2015," Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), February 8, 2017, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/factsheets/docs/head-start-fact-sheet-fy-2015.pdf> and 2015 Head Start Program Information Report.

³⁷ CBPP analysis of Census Bureau data from the 2001-2016 March Current Population Survey.

³⁸ ACF, "Head Start Program Facts, Fiscal Year 2015."

³⁹ National Women's Law Center calculations based on data on Head Start enrollment in fiscal year 2016 from "Fiscal Year 2017 Administration for Children and Families Justification of Estimates for Appropriations Committees," p. 111, https://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/olab/final_cj_2017_print.pdf and data on the number of children ages 3 and 4 in poverty in 2015 from the Census Bureau's Current Population Survey Detailed Tables for Poverty, <http://www.census.gov/data/tables/time-series/demo/income-poverty/cps-pov/pov-34.html>.

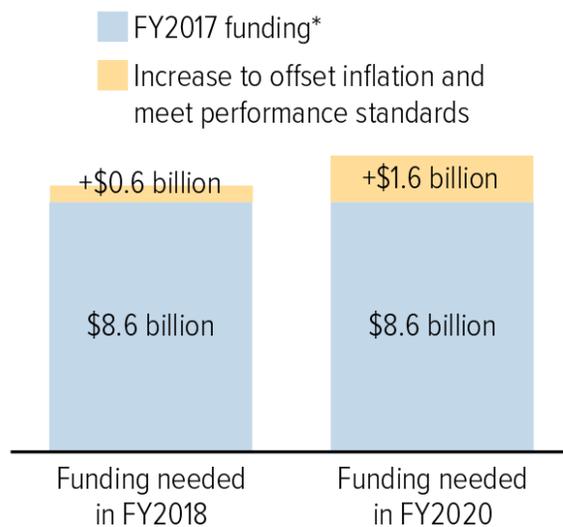
milestones costs money. In fact, even as the share of Head Start teachers with bachelor’s degrees has increased from 47 percent in 2008 (before enactment of the legislation) to 73 percent in 2015, average salaries of lead classroom teachers continue to lag those of publicly funded pre-kindergarten and kindergarten teachers.⁴⁰

As part of efforts to improve quality, HHS also recently revamped the Head Start performance standards. Among other changes, it set a timetable for raising the number of hours children are in Head Start classrooms. Under the new regulations, all programs (with limited exceptions) are supposed to provide all children with a full school day, full school year program by 2021 — and provide at least *half* of all children with a full school day and year program by 2019. For preschoolers, a full school day and year program would mean that children would receive at least 1,020 annual hours of service (the equivalent of six hours per day for 170 days a year).⁴¹ Under the prior requirements, Head Start preschool programs could meet for as little as 3.5 hours per day for 128 days per year. While many programs exceeded this minimum standard, fewer than half of Head Start preschoolers attended a full-day, full-year program in 2015.⁴²

The new regulation’s emphasis on transitioning to full-day, full-year programs has broad support and is based on research suggesting that children in programs with more hours and more days each year have better outcomes.⁴³ But ensuring that Head Start programs can provide all children with this robust program will take significant additional investment.

FIGURE 10

More Funding Needed to Maintain Head Start Enrollment, Meet New Performance Standards



*Excludes Early Head Start - Child Care Partnerships fund.

Source: CBPP based on U.S. Department of Health and Human Services estimates from Federal Register 81 (172) and enacted appropriations

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⁴⁰ National Survey of Early Care and Education, “Number and Characteristics of Early Care and Education (ECE) Teachers and Caregivers,” November 5, 2013, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/resource/number-and-characteristics-of-early-care-and-education-ece-teachers-and->

⁴¹ 45 CFR 1302.21. See “Head Start Performance Standards,” *Federal Register* 81 (172), September 6, 2016, <https://www.gpo.gov/fdsys/pkg/FR-2016-09-06/pdf/2016-19748.pdf>.

⁴² ACF, “Head Start Program Facts, Fiscal Year 2015.”

⁴³ Christopher Walters, “Inputs in the Production of Early Childhood Human Capital: Evidence from Head Start,” National Bureau of Economic Research, Working Paper 20639, October 2014, <http://www.nber.org/papers/w20639.pdf>; Abbie Lieberman, “What’s the Secret Sauce for an Effective Head Start Program?” *New America*, November 20, 2014, <http://dev-edcentral.pantheonsite.io/secretssauceheadstart/>.

Policymakers provided \$294 million in 2016 to begin increasing the number of children attending Head Start for a full school day and year. Unfortunately, they did not provide any additional resources in 2017 to further expand full school day and year program offerings. For all programs to meet the 2019 target as well as other performance standards, while also keeping up with inflation to maintain enrollment, an additional \$600 million is needed in 2018. To meet the 2021 target and other performance standards, 2020 funding must be \$1.6 billion above the current level (see Figure 10).⁴⁴

While these increases are not enormous in magnitude, securing a \$600 million increase in Head Start may be extremely difficult in 2018 if full sequestration cuts take effect and overall NDD funding falls between 2017 and 2018. In 2017, when partial sequestration relief was in place, Congress provided funding to cover some of the cost of inflation, but provided no additional resources to start down the road of meeting the new performance standards.

⁴⁴ CBPP based on HHS estimates from 45 CFR 1302.21 and Bureau of Labor Statistics inflation data. While the target of 50 percent of all children in each Head Start program participating in a full school day and year program goes into effect in August 2019, the funding would be needed in fiscal year 2018 to meet that standard in August 2019.