

Attacks on Head Start are Part of a Sustained Strategy to Undermine Progress for Families with Low Incomes:

A Timeline of the Trump Administrations Efforts to Eliminate the Program

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Earlier this year, families woke to the news that the Trump administration planned to completely eliminate the Head Start program as part of its forthcoming budget proposal to congress.¹ Across the country, Head Start Programs, families, and entire communities worked diligently to uplift the value of the program and advocate to protect it. Weeks later, the Trump administration's budget proposal to congress did not include the elimination of Head Start – an important win for families and advocates. Yet, since that time the Trump administration has continued its attacks on the program thorough various means. Attempts to dismantle Head Start are not expected to cease, and perhaps equally important, they are not new or sporadic. **Attacks on the Head Start Program, which includes Early Head Start and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, are part of a decades-long sustained strategy to undermine progress for families with low incomes and reduce critical supports for entire communities.**

The following timeline details the deliberate and sustained attacks on the Head Start Program so far sin the first four months of the second Trump administration, which have led to instability, lack of access to funding, and even some programs temporarily closing their doors.² These attacks can be traced directly to plans put forth by the Heritage Foundation in the conservative Playbook Project 2025, which **proposed to fully eliminate the Head Start Program.**³

Head Start began in 1965 as an anti-poverty program as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty efforts. Head Start programs have served millions of children and families for 60 years, including almost 800,000 in the last year alone⁴ through critical services like early childhood education, services during pregnancy, indoor and outdoor physical activity, social and emotional support, nutrition education along with meals and snacks, mental health services, health and dental screenings, financial literary classes, family engagement opportunities, help finding child care, or employment, transportation services, and providing a career path for many parents who become Head Start staff.

Timeline of Targeted Attacks on Head Start in 2025

January	<p>FEDERAL FUNDING FREEZE</p> <p>On Monday, January 2nd, a memo from the White House Office for Management and Budget (OMB) paused congressionally approved funding for a wide range of programs, including Head Start.⁵ Lawsuits challenging the memo were immediately filed, and on January 28th, a U.S. district court blocked the freeze through an administrative stay. On January 29th, the Trump administration rescinded the memo. Yet, in the days the freeze was officially in effect and the weeks and months that followed, Head Start programs across the country faced challenges accessing their payment, with some programs closing temporarily, leaving families with unstable and unpredictable access to child care and other critical services.⁶</p>
February	<p>ACF FIRINGS BEGIN</p> <p>In mid-February, approximately 70 people working at the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Administration for Children and Families (ACF) were fired. These personnel losses equaled almost 20 percent of the Office of Head Start (OHS) staff and 25 percent of the Office of Child Care staff (OCC), leaving Head Start grantees without access to resources and information, made worse by the continued instability of funding access and other threats to Head Start.</p>
March	<p>HEAD START GRANTEES INSTRUCTED TO REMOVE DEI INITIATIVES</p> <p>On March 21, ACF sent a letter to Head Start program recipients, amplifying President Trump's executive order on removing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.⁷ Head Start grantees across the country received warnings that their programs would not be funded if they "promote or take part in" DEI initiatives, and included a new requirement to certify that DEI practices are not being implemented in order to receive funding.⁸ These new requirements did not include a definition of a "DEI initiative," and lack of guidance paired with the loss of OHS staff have left grantees without clear understanding of how to best meet the needs of children in their care without losing their funding.⁹</p>
April	<p>ACF FIRINGS CONTINUE, HEAD START REGIONAL OFFICE CLOSURES</p> <p>In early April, additional ACF firings led to the loss of almost 50 percent of staff of the Office of Child Care, with almost the same amount of staff lost at the Office of Head Start. Additionally, all staff in five regional OCC and OHS offices were terminated (Region 1, located in Boston; Region 2, located in New York; Region 5, located in Chicago; Region 9, located in San Francisco; and Region 10, located in Seattle). The closed regional offices served 22 states, 6 territories, and 467 Tribal governments, leaving them without access to resources or support to navigate lack of access to funding.¹⁰ Without OCC or OHS staff to turn to, some programs were forced to close temporarily.¹¹ Importantly, regional staff serve as primary points of contact for Head Start and state and local tribal agencies. Normally, regional staff would seek clarity on the administration's arbitrary and ambiguous new rules and advise providers on how best to continue their work ensuring children receive child care, health care, and nutritional services. Their absence is creating chaos for providers, who do not know whether providing dual-language learning services, for example, will be punishable under the new rules.¹²</p> <p>The American Civil Liberties Union (ACLU) filed a lawsuit¹³ with a coalition of parent advocacy groups and State Head Start Associations challenged the Trump administration's unlawful efforts to dismantle the Head Start program, stating that by slashing staff, delaying funding, and imposing bans that block programs from fulfilling their mission to support young children from low-income families, the administration is defying Congress's mandate to continue Head Start services nationwide.¹⁴ This lawsuit will be critical in determining what the Trump Administration can require programs to do to receive funding, particularly in light of HHS Secretary Kennedy's congressional testimony on May 14th stating that Head Start funding will be preserved but that "in exchange, Head Start needs to be consistent with Administration priorities."¹⁵</p> <p>TRUMP BUDGET PROPOSES ELIMINATING HEAD START</p> <p>Each year, the President submits a budget proposal to Congress detailing what they would like to see in the next year's congressional funding process. Ahead of this, on April 11th, a leaked budget proposal detailed President Trump's intent to eliminate the Head Start program entirely.¹⁶ Eliminating Head Start is an idea that can be found on page 482 of Project 2025.</p>

May	<p>TRUMP BUDGET DOES NOT LIST ELIMINATING HEAD START; PROPOSES ELIMINATING OTHE EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS</p> <p>When President Trump submitted his “skinny” budget proposal to Congress for FY26, it did not include the elimination of the Head Start program, instead, it was silent on the program.¹⁷ However, it did include the elimination of two other important early childhood programs: Preschool Development Grants (PDG B-5) and the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) program.^{18 19}</p>
July	<p>HHS Notice: Immigrant Exclusion Directive</p> <p>The Trump administration issued a series of notices imposing restrictions to accessing essential benefits and services for immigrant families. Included among the impacted federal agencies was the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which named restrictions to a wide range of services including the Head Start program. The notices attempt to reinterpret federal law, namely the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 (PRWORA) which explicitly details immigrant access to federal benefits and services. Based on PRWORA, most “federal public benefits” are available only to those who meet the definition of “qualified immigrants” as defined in the statute.²⁰ HHS did not provide additional guidance to implement the restrictions but did open a 30-day comment period on the notice.</p> <p>ACLU amended complaint</p> <p>Given the sweeping proposed changed from the HHS notice excluding immigrant families, the unclear legal standing of such action, and the lack of guidance for Head Start programs already facing challenges imposed by the trump administration, the ACLU amended the Head Start lawsuit to include the impact of the immigrant exclusion directive.²¹</p>
August	<p>Advocates drive high response rate to HHS comment period</p> <p>After the Trump administration tried to strip immigrant families from Head Start and other programs, more than half a million people took action. During the 30-day HHS comment period which ended at midnight on August 13th, 587,551 comments were received with thousands of parents, educators, Head Start staff and alumni, and concerned community members taking a stand to express outrage at the attempt to keep kids from accesing a critical education program.²²</p>
September	<p>ACLU preliminary Injunction on immigrant exclusion directive</p> <p>On September 11th, a federal judge granted a nationwide preliminary injunction on the notice excluding immigrant children in Head Start.²³ This ruling will allow for the immigrant exclusion directive to be paused for the duration of the litigation in states across the country.</p>

Despite Head Start’s proven record of success, conservative think tanks and leaders have been attempting to discredit and eliminate the program for decades.²⁴ **The first few months of the Trump Administration’s efforts show a clear and deliberate plan to consistently attack Head Start through any available means.** Attacks on Head Start threaten the availability of child care and early learning programs, particularly for rural communities²⁵; reduce employment and support for entire communities that are employed or partner with Head Start grantees; and seek to dismantle efforts to lift families out of poverty. These efforts are also a direct attack on democracy, as the Trump administration pursues illegal efforts circumventing Congressional authority and imposing requirements outside of and directly conflicting with Head Start statute.²⁶

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- 3 Coleman-Castillo, Karla. “Project 2025 Would Worsen Our Country’s Child Care Crisis.” National Women’s Law Center, October 17, 2024. <https://nwlcc.org/project-2025-would-worsen-our-countrys-child-care-crisis/>.
- 4 “Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2023.” Office of Head Start - U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, February 25, 2025. <https://www.headstart.gov/program-data/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2023>.
- 5 Memorandum M-25-13, entitled “Temporary Pause of Agency Grant, Loan, and Other Financial Assistance Programs.” The Memo directed every federal agency to “temporarily pause all activities related to obligation or disbursement of all Federal financial assistance, and other relevant agency activities that may be implicated by [President Trump’s] executive orders, including, but not limited to, financial assistance for foreign aid, nongovernmental organizations, DEI, woke gender ideology, and the green new deal” effective at 5 p.m. EST on Jan. 28 M-25-13-Temporary-Pause-to-Review-Agency-Grant-Loan-and-Other-Financial-Assistance-Programs.pdf
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- 7 “Head Start Grantees Instructed to Present Training, Expenditures Free from DEI.” Administration for Children & Families, March 21, 2025. <https://acf.gov/media/press/2025/head-start-grantees-instructed-present-training-expenditures-free-dei>.
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- 10 “Child Care for Every Family Network Warns Secretary Kennedy That Department Firings Will Lead to Major Child Care Disruptions.” Child Care For Every Family Network, April 23, 2025. <https://childcareforeveryfamily.org/press-release/child-care-for-every-family-network-warns-secretary-kennedy-that-department-firings-will-lead-to-major-child-care-disruptions/>.
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- 15 “Statement by Robert F. Kennedy, Jr. Secretary, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on The President’s Fiscal Year 2026 Budget.” U.S. House of Representatives Committee on Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies, May 14, 2025. <https://docs.house.gov/meetings/AP/AP07/20250514/118230/HHRG-119-AP07-Wstate-KennedyR-20250514.pdf>.
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- 18 PDG B-5 provides grants to states to improve their early childhood systems by building up on existing local, state, and federal investments. Grants can be used to improve access to quality early childhood education, improve program administration, or provide supports for early educators. [Preschool Development Grant Birth through Five \(PDG B-5\) | The Administration for Children and Families](#)
- 19 CCAMPIS is a federal grant program that can be used to support or establish campus-based child care and early learning opportunities that primarily serve the needs of student parents with low-incomes. [ED629780.pdf](#)
- 20 [What New Federal Notices Mean for Immigrants’ Program Eligibility - NILC](#)
- 21 [Motion to amend complaint, Head Start Associations, Parent groups v HHS | American Civil Liberties Union](#)
- 22 [Hundreds of groups push back on Trump denying lawful immigrants access to Head Start, other programs](#)
- 23 [Preliminary Injunction Order in Washington State Association of Head Start and Early Childhood Assistance and Education Program et al. v. Robert F. Kennedy et al.](#)
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