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**MAY 2026 FACT SHEET**

# **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**

**By Karla Coleman-Castillo**



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. Attempts to dismantle Head Start are not expected to cease, and perhaps equally important, they are not new or sporadic. The following timeline details the deliberate and sustained attacks on the Head Start Program so far in the second Trump administration, which have led to instability, lack of access to funding, and even some programs to temporarily close their doors.<sup>1</sup> These attacks can be traced directly to plans put forth by the Heritage Foundation in Project 2025, the conservative playbook that proposed to fully eliminate the Head Start Program.<sup>2</sup>

Head Start began in 1965 as an anti-poverty program as part of President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. Head Start programs have served millions of children and families for 60 years, including almost 800,000 in the last year for which data is available.<sup>3</sup> Head Start services include critical supports 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 literacy classes, family engagement opportunities, as well as provide a career path for many parents who become Head Start staff.

## Timeline of Targeted Attacks on Head Start

<b>January 2025</b>	<p><b>FEDERAL FUNDING FREEZE</b></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.<sup>4</sup> Lawsuits challenging the memo were immediately filed, and on January 28th, a U.S. district court blocked the freeze through an administrative stay.<sup>5</sup> On January 29th, the Trump administration rescinded the memo.<sup>6</sup> 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: some programs were forced to close temporarily, and families were left with unstable and unpredictable access to child care and other critical services.</p>
<b>February 2025</b>	<p><b>ACF FIRINGS BEGIN</b></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).<sup>7</sup> The significant cuts left Head Start grantees without access to necessary resources and information.<sup>8</sup></p>
<b>March 2025</b>	<p><b>HEAD START GRANTEES INSTRUCTED TO HALT DEI INITIATIVES</b></p> <p>On March 14, ACF sent a letter to Head Start program recipients, amplifying President Trump’s executive order on removing diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.<sup>9</sup> The letter warned Head Start grantees across the country that their programs would not be funded if they “promoted or took part in” DEI initiatives.<sup>10</sup> Critically, these new requirements did not include a definition of a “DEI initiative.” The lack of guidance clarity paired with the loss of OHS staff left grantees without clear understanding of how to best meet the needs of children in their care without losing their funding.<sup>11</sup></p> <p>(As of January 6, 2026, these restrictions are enjoined pursuant to a preliminary injunction in <i>Washington State Association of Head Start and Early Childhood Assistance and Education Program et al. v. Robert F. Kennedy et al.</i>)<sup>12</sup></p>
<b>April 2025</b>	<p><b>ACF FIRINGS CONTINUE, HEAD START REGIONAL OFFICE CLOSURES</b></p> <p>In early April, 2025, more ACF firings led to the loss of almost 50 percent of staff of OCC and OHS staff. Additionally, five regional OCC and OHS offices were closed (Region 1, in Boston; Region 2, in New York; Region 5, in Chicago; Region 9, in San Francisco; and Region 10, in Seattle)—offices that had served 22 states, 5 territories, and 467 Tribal governments. Regional staff serve as primary points of contact for Head Start programs, as well state and local tribal agencies. Normally, regional staff would work to provide clarity on the administration’s arbitrary and ambiguous new rules and advise providers on how best to continue providing child care, health care, and nutritional services. Without OCC and OHS staff to turn to for support navigating the shifting funding and regulatory landscape, some programs were forced to close temporarily.<sup>13</sup></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. On April 11th, 2025, a leaked budget proposal detailed President Trump’s intent to eliminate the Head Start program entirely.<sup>14</sup> Eliminating Head Start is a core recommendation of Project 2025.<sup>15</sup></p> <p>A coalition of parents and Head Start providers filed a lawsuit challenging the attacks on Head Start. In January, 2026, a federal judge granted a preliminary injunction in the case and blocked the administration’s efforts to dismantle Head Start nationwide.<sup>16</sup></p>
<b>May 2025</b>	<p><b>TRUMP BUDGET PROPOSES ELIMINATING EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS</b></p> <p>President Trump’s final budget proposal did not include the elimination of the Head Start program, but instead included the elimination of two other important early childhood programs: the Preschool Development Grants (PDG B-5) program<sup>17</sup> and the Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools (CCAMPIS) program.<sup>18</sup></p>

<b>July 2025</b>	<p><b>HHS: IMMIGRANT EXCLUSION DIRECTIVE</b></p> <p>In July 2025, the Trump administration reinterpreted longstanding guidance to block certain immigrant families from accessing Head Start (among other critical programs).<sup>19</sup> Following intense public opposition<sup>20</sup> and in response to the lawsuit brought by a coalition of parents and Head Start providers, a federal judge blocked the Trump administration from implementing or enforcing this ban on September 11, 2025.<sup>21</sup> The judge noted that the “chilling effect” of the administration’s directive “results in the immediate harm of childhood education loss, disability support, dual language instruction, and stable learning environments, leading to long-term harms in development. It also results in parents losing childcare, risking missed work, unemployment, forced dropouts, and inability to pay life expenses and support families.”<sup>22</sup></p>
<b>August 2025</b>	<p><b>ADVOCATES DRIVE HIGH RESPONSE RATE TO HHS COMMENT PERIOD</b></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 comment period, hundreds of organizations representing parents, educators and concerned community members took a stand to express outrage at the attempt to keep kids from accessing a critical education program.<sup>23</sup></p>
<b>September 2025</b>	<p><b>ACLU PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION ON IMMIGRANT EXCLUSION DIRECTIVE</b></p> <p>On September 11th, a federal judge granted a nationwide preliminary injunction on the notice excluding immigrant children in Head Start.<sup>24</sup> This ruling paused the immigrant exclusion direction for the duration of the litigation across the country.</p>
<b>October - November 2025</b>	<p><b>GOVERNMENT SHUT DOWN</b></p> <p>The 43-day government shutdown in late 2025 led to further delays in federal funds.<sup>25</sup> These delays created major problems for Head Start and Early Head Start programs across the country, with many struggling to access their payments and some forced to close temporarily.<sup>26</sup></p>
<b>December 2025</b>	<p><b>LIST OF BANNED WORDS</b></p> <p>In December, news broke that Head Start programs around the country had been informed that they had to remove a list of almost 200 commonly used words (like “Black” and “women”) on their federal funding applications or risk the applications being denied.<sup>27</sup> This was concerning because the directive was not clear and was in direct contrast to Head Start’s mission.<sup>28</sup> This is currently blocked by the federal judge presiding in the lawsuit brought by a coalition of parents and Head Start providers against the administration (see below).<sup>29</sup></p>
<b>January 2026</b>	<p><b>COURT STOPS UNLAWFUL ATTACKS ON HEAD START</b></p> <p>On January 6th, 2026, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction in the case brought by a coalition of parents and Head Start providers against the attacks on Head Start. The order blocked the Trump administration’s ban on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility initiatives in Head Start as well as office closures and layoffs at the Office of Head Start.<sup>30</sup> This injunction stands alongside the injunction prohibiting implementation of the Head Start immigrant exclusion directive.<sup>31</sup></p>

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