

The Trump Administration's 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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The Trump Administration's most recent attacks on the Head Start Program are part of a sustained strategy by extremists to undermine progress for families with low incomes and reduce critical supports for entire communities. Despite Head Start's critical role in helping children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed and helping connect parents to jobs, education, housing, health care, and other social services that strengthen families and lift them out of poverty,¹ **The Trump Administration is engaged in a clear and deliberate effort to attack and weaken Head Start through any available means.** 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 delayed funding, program instability, and even caused some programs to temporarily close their doors.² These attacks can be traced directly to plans put forth by the out-of-touch Heritage Foundation in Project 2025, the extremist playbook that proposed to fully eliminate the Head Start Program.³ 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 federal law.⁴

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.⁵ 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.

Legend

- Action by advocates & community members to oppose administration action & related wins
- Other administration action that directly or indirectly impacts Head Start

HEAD START NPRM: ELIMINATING CRITICAL SERVICES & STANDARDS

**August
2026**

On August 6th, 2026, the Trump Administration released a second Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) on Head Start (see below for information on the first NPRM from May 2026). This proposed rule entitled *Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs*⁶ aims to roll back vital Head Start quality standards and services. If enacted, this proposal would significantly weaken Head Start by (among many other things): eliminating research-based standards that support educational quality, removing teacher-child ratio and class size requirements that support individualized learning and safe learning environments; reducing the number of hours that programs are required to operate; eliminating requirements for vision, hearing, and developmental screenings; eliminating and weakening qualifications and professional training and support for educational staff; reducing protections and services for children with disabilities; removing key safety requirements like a bus monitor when transporting children; limiting opportunities for parents to shape their local Head Start programs; making it more difficult for communities, especially rural communities, to sustain high-quality Head Start services. This proposal appears to contradict federal law in multiple ways.

The NPRM has a 60-day comment period which closes October 6, 2026 at 11:59pm.

OHS SURVEY SHOWS FEDERAL DELAYS CONTINUE TO HARM HEAD START PROGRAMS

A survey of Head Start programs shows how Head Start grantees experienced major changes in how the Office of Head Start (OHS) operated and in the level of support they received after 2025 staffing changes (see *April 2025 update below*). Grantees report feeling unsupported and isolated, that bureaucratic delays and uncertainty are causing disruption and increasing costs, and that programs have lost staff and families as decisions linger on and funding is in limbo.⁷

**June
2026**

ADVOCATES RESPOND TO HEAD START NPRM ON WAGES & BENEFITS

National early education leaders, parents, providers, and community members rallied to defend the key elements under attack by the Head Start NRPM undoing critical progress for pay equity and worker protections for Head Start educators and staff. Public comments, community letters, and sign-ons engaged hundreds of advocates across the country.

The National Women's Law Center and the Center for Law and Social Policy (CLASP) submit a joint comment in opposition to the proposed rule for the ways in which it would undermine the program's continued ability to provide the high-quality support to children, parents, and the economy that Head Start is known for.

**May
2026**

HEAD START NPRM: REPEALING PROGRESS ON STAFF WAGES & BENEFITS

On May 11, 2026, the Trump Administration published a NPRM entitled *Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Access*⁸, which repealed wage & benefits requirements finalized in October 2024 by the Biden Administration. The NPRM proposed eliminating wage requirements including: pay scales for all Head Start staff; ensuring Head Start educator wages were comparable to public preschool educators; ensuring Head Start salaries cover basic living costs; and advancing wage comparability between Head Start preschool and Early Head Start staff. The NPRM also proposed eliminating benefits requirements including health insurance, paid leave, behavioral health support, child care subsidies, and student loan forgiveness. Public comment closed on June 11 and the Trump administration is expected to issue a final rule in 2026.

January 2026	COURT STOPS HHS UNLAWFUL BAN ON DEI AND DOGE ACTIONS On January 6th, a federal judge issued a preliminary injunction in the case brought by a coalition of parents and Head Start providers. The order blocked the Trump administration's March 2025 ban on Head Start programs spending funds on diversity, equity, inclusion, and accessibility activities such as training staff on disabilities or recruiting bilingual teachers for classrooms with dual language learners. The order also blocked DOGE actions that had closed 5 regional Head Start office and fired staff at the Office of Head Start. ⁹
December 2025	LIST OF BANNED WORDS EXPOSED 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," "disability," and "women") on their federal funding applications or risk the applications being denied. ¹⁰ This was concerning because the directive appeared in direct conflict to Head Start's mission to serve children, with disabilities, dual language learners, and address clear community needs. ¹¹ Banning the use of these words conflicts with Head Start's statutory mandate to provide linguistically and culturally appropriate services, as well as provide services to children with disabilities. ¹² This language restriction 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). ¹³
October - November 2025	GOVERNMENT SHUT DOWN IMPACTS HEAD START FUNDING The 43-day government shutdown in late 2025 led to further delays in federal funds. ¹⁴ 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. ¹⁵
September 2025	ACLU PRELIMINARY INJUNCTION ON IMMIGRANT EXCLUSION DIRECTIVE On September 11th, a federal judge granted a nationwide preliminary injunction on the notice excluding immigrant children in Head Start. This ruling paused the immigrant exclusion direction for the duration of the litigation across the country.
August 2025	ADVOCATES DRIVE HIGH RESPONSE RATE TO HHS COMMENT PERIOD 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. ¹⁶
July 2025	HHS MOVES TO EXCLUDE IMMIGRANT FAMILIES FROM HEAD START In July, the Trump administration reinterpreted longstanding federal guidance to block certain immigrant families from accessing Head Start (among other critical programs). ¹⁷
April 2025	HHS FIRES MORE HEAD START STAFF, CLOSSES 5 REGIONAL OFFICES AS PART OF DOGE EFFORTS In April, HHS fired many more federal Head Start Staff and additionally closed five regional Office of Head Start offices (in Boston, Chicago, New York; San Francisco, and Seattle)—offices that had served 22 states, 6 territories, and 467 Tribal governments. The fired staff in regional offices served as primary points of contact for Head Start programs, and their closure continues to hamper the operation of local programs. ¹⁸ (A January 2026 preliminary injunction has paused these firings and office closures and staff remain on paid administrative leave as of September 2026). TRUMP BUDGET PROPOSES ELIMINATING HEAD START 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, a leaked budget proposal detailed President Trump's intent to eliminate the Head Start program entirely. ¹⁹ Eliminating Head Start is a core recommendation of Project 2025. ²⁰ The leak led to severe public outcry and President Trump's final budget proposal did not include the elimination of the Head Start program. ²¹

**March
2025**

HHS INSTRUCTS HEAD START GRANTEES TO HALT PROGRAM ACTIVITIES THAT ARE FOR DIVERSITY, EQUITY, INCLUSION, AND ACCESIBILITY (DEIA)

On March 14, HHS warned Head Start grantees across the country that their programs would not be funded if they “promoted or took part in” DEIA initiatives.²² This amplified President Trump’s recent executive order to remove diversity, equity, and inclusion (DEI) initiatives.²³ 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 and appeared in direct conflict with their legal duty under federal law to provide inclusive services for children with disabilities and tailor services to meet the diverse needs of their local communities.²⁴ (As of January 6, 2026, these restrictions are enjoined pursuant to a preliminary injunction in Washington State Association of Head Start and Early Childhood Assistance and Education Program et al. v. Robert F. Kennedy et al.).²⁵

HHS BEGINS FIRING FEDERAL HEAD START STAFF AS PART OF DOGE EFFORTS

**February
2025**

In February, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) fired federal Office of Head Start staff as part of a larger DOGE effort to reduce the federal workforce. (Firings were unrelated to staff merit or performance).²⁶ The significant cuts left Head Start grantees without access to necessary resources and information.²⁷

*See August 2026 for updates regarding OHS survey showing how federal delays are Harming Head Start Programs since staffing changes of 2025.

FEDERAL FUNDING FREEZE

**January
2025**

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.²⁸ Lawsuits challenging the memo were immediately filed, and on January 28th, a U.S. district court blocked the freeze through an administrative stay.²⁹ On January 29th, the Trump administration rescinded the memo.³⁰ 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.

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