

Correspondence



ACF-IM-HS-22-06
Strategies to Stabilize the
Head Start Workforce

ACF Administration for Children and Families	U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH AND HUMAN SERVICES	
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INFORMATION MEMORANDUM

TO: All Head Start and Early Head Start Grant Recipients

SUBJECT: Strategies to Stabilize the Head Start Workforce

INFORMATION:

The federal Head Start program is a nationally recognized leader in the field of early childhood education for providing innovative, high-quality services to the children and families who will most benefit from early education and comprehensive services. In this memo, “Head Start” refers to Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs, services, and staff, unless otherwise specified. The credentials and qualifications of Head Start staff have significantly increased over the past decade, while their compensation has been persistently low. Stagnant wages and lack of comprehensive benefits and wellness supports make it difficult to recruit and retain staff, which contributes to classroom closures and high caseloads for current staff. A well-compensated and supported workforce is essential to providing high-quality services to promote children’s optimal development and family well-being. The Office of Head Start (OHS) draws upon the legacy of Head Start leadership in the early childhood field to encourage programs to appropriately compensate and support their staff.

Head Start staff are deeply committed to the mission of the program and are highly qualified professionals. OHS encourages programs to look holistically at their organizational structure and identify sustainable ways to support and compensate staff accordingly. As needed, OHS encourages grant recipients to consider restructuring their programs as a sustainable mechanism for providing increased compensation and other necessary supports to staff. This requires a balance of effectively providing high-quality, comprehensive services to the highest need children and families while improving staff compensation and supports. This may include consolidating grants, restructuring management or organizations, or requesting a reduction in the overall number of funded slots while continuing to prioritize services to the children and families who are most in need.

During this process, we encourage programs to consider equity issues in pay and benefits for staff. Research shows that, like other fields, there are ethnic and racial pay disparities in early childhood education. We understand these are difficult decisions that will take time and careful consideration of local wages, cost of living, data on current enrollment and staffing, and other relevant information.

If a program requests an enrollment reduction to increase staff compensation, the request should focus on those positions for which staffing challenges are most pressing and are impeding the program from fully serving children and families. We encourage programs to take the time needed to make such decisions through thoughtful, data-informed strategic planning, while not reducing the quality of services for children and families. All enrollment reduction requests must be submitted via the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES). Regional Offices will carefully review each request to determine whether it can be approved.

This Information Memorandum (IM) highlights strategies to support the Head Start workforce that grant recipients can begin working toward immediately.

Increase Compensation and Financial Supports for Head Start Staff

Permanently Increase Compensation

OHS strongly encourages Head Start grant recipients to permanently increase compensation, which is the most effective strategy in retaining and recruiting qualified staff. When considering an increase in staff compensation, OHS encourages programs to use findings from their [wage comparability study](#) to help support their decisions. Programs can consider elementary school settings for purposes of wage comparability, including neighboring school districts. OHS also urges programs to consider benefits that might be critical to recruit and retain a qualified, diverse workforce — such as health care, retirement, and paid leave benefits — and compete with other employers providing comparable services in their local job market. Additionally, the [Financial Essential Series](#) may help programs in restructuring existing budgets to align with program goals and support high-quality program services.

Offer Bonuses, Short-term Pay Increases, or Other Financial Incentives

As detailed in [ACF-IM-HS-22-04 Competitive Bonuses for the Head Start Workforce](#), programs can use American Rescue Plan (ARP), other COVID-19 relief, or base grant funds to provide retention bonuses, hiring bonuses, or other financial incentives to staff to support their workforce in the short-term. OHS encourages programs to prioritize bonuses or incentives for staff who have an established tenure with the program, and to consider distributing any hiring bonuses out over time rather than in one lump sum. OHS also strongly urges programs to use their own data on the workforce to determine for which positions bonuses might be most impactful. OHS reminds programs that any bonuses or incentives for staff must be incorporated into their personnel policies and procedures approved by the governing body and Policy Council or policy committee. Since monetary bonuses likely count as income, grant recipients should understand income requirements for public benefits to determine how such bonuses may impact staff members' access to these benefits.

At their discretion, programs can decide to require a service commitment as a condition of receiving a bonus or financial incentive. However, any service requirement is solely the responsibility of the grant recipient to establish, implement, and enforce as they see fit.

Compensate Staff During Closures and Transitions

OHS reminds programs that when centers are closed or in-person home visits are temporarily suspended due to a disaster, they can continue to provide compensation for up to two weeks to those staff who are unable to engage in employment activities as described in [ACF-IM-HS-19-01](#). Programs also may continue to pay health insurance premiums for up to 90 days for staff subject to furlough, such as during a summer break ([ACF-IM-HS-21-02](#)).

Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF)

Programs can provide information to their staff about federal programs that could help make student loans easier to pay back and lead toward loan forgiveness, such as the [PSLF program](#). The Department of Education is offering a [time-limited waiver for PSLF](#) so borrowers can count additional payments toward forgiveness. Watch this [webinar](#) for additional information. The waiver expires October 31, 2022. After that, normal PSLF rules will be in effect. Staff who wish to take advantage of the time-limited changes are encouraged to apply for PSLF as soon as possible to ensure they complete the required paperwork prior to the deadline.

Additional Supports and Flexibilities for the Head Start Workforce

Promoting a Positive and Empowering Work Environment

A healthy and supportive work environment is critical for recruiting and retaining staff, as well as providing high-quality services to children and families. Programs are encouraged to consider strategies to promote the mental health and well-being of their workforce. This may include providing staff with regularly scheduled breaks, brief unscheduled wellness breaks, reflective supervision, and access to employee assistance programs. These and other strategies are described in [ACF-IM-HS-21-05 Supporting the Wellness of All Staff in the Head Start Workforce](#).

Additionally, programs can consider how personnel management could be improved to foster a satisfying and engaging work environment, including through:

- Effective communication and feedback with staff (e.g., two-way instead of top-down)
- Improved orientation or onboarding practices
- Clear personnel policies and procedures
- Ample professional development, coaching, and mentoring opportunities that value the work staff perform and help them improve and move forward in their careers

Recognizing Head Start staff as professionals, inviting innovative practices and ideas, and including staff input in the program's plans and operation contributes to job satisfaction and employee retention.

Supports for Educational Attainment and Career Advancement

Head Start programs have a unique opportunity to invest in their communities by supporting the career development of their staff. Programs may advertise and encourage existing staff to use educational benefits, such as tuition and fee support, and opportunities for career growth that are associated with increased educational attainment.

Apprenticeship programs are a strategy to support educational growth and provide consistent pools of staff. Apprenticeship models recruit people who have interest and talent in working in early childhood settings and support them in obtaining required credentials and employment with Head Start programs. This includes, for example, starting as paid substitutes, floaters, or bus monitors, and then moving into other positions as they obtain required degrees or credentials. Increases in compensation typically accompany increases in qualifications and responsibilities. Watch this [webinar](#) for resources on how to build and execute a successful registered apprenticeship program. Grants to support apprenticeship programs are often available from the U.S. Department of Labor.

Programs can also create partnerships with high schools, community colleges, and other higher education institutions that are available to multiple staff and designed to promote successful completion of degree or credential requirements (e.g., courses offered at times that accommodate full-time workers or taught in non-English languages). Further, creating cohorts of staff enrolled in the same education or credentialing program can facilitate shared support systems.

Costs associated with supporting educational attainment and development of career pathways for staff, such as tuition and fees for obtaining a degree or credential or costs associated with developing an apprenticeship program, can be paid for using Head Start base grant, ARP, or other COVID-19 relief funds. If a program uses funds from the Coronavirus Relief and Response Supplemental Appropriations or Coronavirus Aid, Relief, and Economic Security Acts, they must document and justify that the expense is directly supporting their response to the COVID-19 pandemic.

Qualification Waiver for Head Start Preschool Teachers

A program that has attempted unsuccessfully to recruit a qualified teacher for a Head Start preschool classroom may submit to their Regional Office a request for a waiver of up to three years for the position's qualification requirements ([Sec. 648A\(a\)\(4\)\(B\)](#)). To be considered for the waiver, the program must demonstrate that the Head Start preschool teacher is 1) enrolled in a program that grants a qualifying degree and such degree will be completed in a reasonable time not to exceed three years; and 2) has at least a current center-based preschool Child Development Associate® (CDA) credential or a state-awarded certificate that meets or exceeds the CDA credential.

As outlined in the Head Start Act, a qualifying degree includes an associate or bachelor's degree in early childhood education, or in a related field with coursework equivalent to an early childhood education major along with experience teaching preschool-age children. A waiver request must also adequately describe how the program's attempts to recruit qualified individuals were unsuccessful. The Regional Office will review each waiver request and determine whether to grant the waiver. Programs could consider using the waiver process to promote a strong assistant teacher to a lead teacher role, ensuring that teacher will receive the necessary degree in a reasonable timeframe as described above.

OHS will continue to work with programs as they support a strong, qualified workforce that is highly valued, healthy, and committed to the Head Start mission. Please direct any questions about the content of this IM to your OHS Regional Office.

Thank you for all you do on behalf of children and families.

Sincerely,

/ Katie Hamm /

Katie Hamm
Acting Director
Office of Head Start