

Civil Rights and Disability Organizations' Joint Statement in Opposition to Administration Efforts to Dismantle Head Start

Today, the Trump administration proposed changes to Head Start that, if finalized, would dismantle the program from the inside out. The proposal strips away most of the quality standards that define what services children and families actually receive, including the requirements that ensure children are safe and supported, that hold programs accountable to the families they serve, and that guarantee the comprehensive services children need to arrive at kindergarten ready to learn. We urge the administration to withdraw it.

Over the past year, the administration has delayed funding that programs depend on to keep their doors open, cut the federal staff who support them, and proposed eliminating Head Start entirely. Each of these moves has created uncertainty for the providers who run these programs and the families who count on them. We oppose this latest attack on Head Start, which will harm the children and families the program was built to serve.

The Head Start program began in 1965 with a simple promise: the American Dream belongs to every child, regardless of the circumstances of their birth. Head Start sought to prepare children in our country's most impoverished communities with the opportunity to learn. Head Start prepares children for school not only by teaching them to read and write, but also by helping them get medical and dental exams, developmental screenings that catch delays early on when intervention can make the biggest difference, and nutritious meals to help them grow. At the heart of the program are standards that ensure every child gets the support they need and that parents are full partners in governing the program and as their child's first and most important teachers.

Since Head Start opened its doors over 60 years ago, the program has made good on that promise by applying cutting edge child development research and implementing it in programs nation-wide. Today, Head Start operates in 20,000 neighborhood locations across the country and is key to our nation's effort to provide educational opportunities for all children no matter their race, ethnicity, or language spoken at home. Millions of children have graduated from Head Start and now, decades of research demonstrates that children who attend Head Start are more likely to graduate high school, go to college, and become working adults who contribute to our economy. Head Start counts among its alumni teachers, lawyers, professional athletes, Members of Congress, a Supreme Court justice, and countless professionals and leaders who enrich our country.

Now, a new proposal seeks to change Head Start's long tradition of offering a gold standard education for families with the least resources and welcoming all children. The changes would gut the Head Start program, removing the high-quality standards that keep class sizes small, ensure teachers are trained and supported, value bilingualism and biliteracy as strengths, and offer services like timely medical and dental screenings to address a child's school readiness. These quality standards are the hallmark of the Head Start program that ensure every child receives an early education and services that promote healthy child development. Without them,

Head Start will exist in name only, offering unequal services based on where the child lives. If finalized, these changes would mean that a child could be turned away from Head Start because of a disability or because a child is struggling. The proposal would also make it more difficult for families experiencing homelessness to enroll, and would remove prohibitions on corporal punishment, seclusion, and expulsion. These changes would particularly harm Black children, Latino children, and children with disabilities, who make up 29%, 40%, and 15% of Head Start participants respectively. This proposed rule would fundamentally alter Head Start and break the promise that America has made good on for decades to offer the children born furthest from opportunity with the best our country has to offer in early childhood education.

We stand in solidarity and say unequivocally that every child deserves a Head Start open to all and grounded in the high-quality standards that effectively prepare children to succeed in school. We call on the administration to rescind this proposal, and we call on Congress to stand behind Head Start and reject these changes so that we maintain the promise of Head Start for future generations.

Signed,

Children's Defense Fund
EdTrust
Legal Defense Fund
NAACP
National Center for Learning Disabilities
National Urban League
The Arc
UnidosUS