2026 Head Start Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) Frequently Asked Questions

The *Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs* Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) proposes a substantial modernization of the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Its central premise is that Head Start is strongest when the Federal government sets clear safeguards and outcome expectations, then trusts local leaders and parents—the people closest to children—to decide how best to meet them. The proposal would preserve the Federal-to-local grant model and ACF oversight, rely more on statutory requirements and local decision-making, reduce duplicative process rules, strengthen specific nutrition and physical activity requirements, and expand local flexibility. As ACF leaders have emphasized, flexibility is permission, not a mandate: programs may keep practices that are working. Because this is a proposed rule, ACF is seeking public comment before changes are finalized.

General Frequently Asked Questions

QUESTION: What is Head Start?

- Head Start is a Federal-to-local early childhood and family support program authorized by the Head Start Act. Head Start Preschool serves eligible children ages 3 to 5, while Early Head Start serves pregnant women and families with infants and toddlers. Services integrate education, health, nutrition, and family support so children can enter kindergarten healthy, safe, and ready to learn.
- Since 1965, Head Start has been built around a whole-family model. As Office of Head Start Director Lizbeth Casco White has emphasized, Head Start does more than enroll a child—it embraces a family, supporting parents and caregivers as partners and leaders in their children's development.
- HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF), through the Office of Head Start (OHS), awards grants to more than 1,600 local public, nonprofit, for-profit, school, community action, and Tribal agencies. This Federal-to-local structure is designed to pair national accountability with local knowledge and decision-making.
- Congress determines Head Start funding through annual appropriations. ACF awards and renews grants, monitors recipients, and enforces the Head Start Act and applicable regulations. Parents also have a formal role in program governance through statutorily required Policy Councils.

QUESTION: Is HHS dismantling the Head Start program through deregulation?

- No, this is a proposal to change how the Federal government regulates Head Start. The NPRM relies on the Head Start Act, preserves the Federal-to-local grant model, ACF grant oversight, and Head Start's comprehensive mission.

- The governing idea is that Washington should set clear safeguards and expectations, while giving capable local professionals and parents more room to decide how to meet them. ACF's goal is focusing accountability on child and family outcomes rather than requiring every community to follow the same Federal process checklist.
- ACF estimates that, under the primary scenario in the NPRM's regulatory analysis, the proposal could produce about $2.2 billion in annual cost reductions and therefore allow program reinvestment. HHS estimates those resources could preserve or expand as many as 236,000 funded Head Start slots. Actual effects would depend on the final rule and local implementation choices.
  - The proposal also responds to a recent decline in funded enrollment. ACF analysis found a net loss of 97,625 funded slots between FY 2022 and FY 2024 even as Federal Head Start operations funding increased by roughly 11 percent.
  - The National Institute for Early Education Research similarly reported that fewer 3- and 4-year-olds were served across major public early childhood programs in 2024–2025, with the decline driven by reduced Federal Head Start enrollment at those ages.

QUESTION: Does the NPRM strip away Head Start's quality standards?

- No. The NPRM would substantially streamline the current Performance Standards. It does not repeal the Head Start Act's quality and accountability requirements, including requirements related to school readiness, research-based curricula, screening and assessment, services for children with disabilities, parent governance, health and nutrition, and Federal monitoring.
  - The proposal is built on trust in local expertise. Directors, teachers, family-service professionals, health specialists, and parents know their communities best, and Policy Councils give parents a formal voice in important program decisions.
  - That flexibility does not assume every current practice should change. A program with a model that is working may keep it. Another program may use the added flexibility to address a workforce shortage, transportation challenge, facility constraint, family schedule, or other local need.
- Accountability remains. ACF would continue to monitor performance, protect children and public funds, and intervene when programs fall short. The proposed shift is from prescribing every operational input toward setting safeguards and holding programs accountable for real results.
- The NPRM also proposes affirmative Federal policy choices, including new nutrition and physical activity requirements. Those provisions, like the rest of the NPRM, are open for public comment.

QUESTION: Will the NPRM force Head Start providers to make drastic changes in how they operate?

- No. Flexibility is permission, not a mandate. A program with a model that works may keep it and is encouraged to continue practices that serve children and families well.
- The proposal gives programs room to make thoughtful adjustments when local circumstances call for them,

subject to the Head Start Act, applicable licensing and other laws, parent governance, and ACF oversight. The goal is not a new one-size-fits-all model, it is more room for local leadership.

QUESTION: Will states have to make major policy or funding changes to accommodate the proposed Head Start regulations?

- The proposal would not transfer Head Start grants or Federal program accountability to states. ACF would continue to award grants, monitor recipients, and enforce the Head Start Act and applicable regulations.
- The NPRM would rely more on existing state, Tribal, and local licensing systems. Programs would be required to be licensed by the applicable state, Tribal, or local entity; programs that are exempt from licensing would have to meet basic Child Care and Development Fund health and safety requirements. ACF estimates that about 74 percent of Head Start service locations are already licensed under state child care requirements.
- The intent is to align Head Start with systems that already exist rather than create a new state-run Head Start bureaucracy. Under this proposal, Head Start programs do not have to default to the regulatory floors that states currently set, rather they can establish their own ceiling of excellence through local decisions.

QUESTION: Does the NPRM erode Head Start's quality standards or shift quality oversight to state control?

- No. The proposal clarifies complementary roles rather than replacing Federal oversight with state control. State, Tribal, or local licensing would establish certain regulatory floors, while ACF would retain responsibility for Head Start grants, statutory requirements, monitoring, and enforcement.
    - For example, the NPRM would replace Head Start-specific Federal numeric group-size and staff-to-child ratio requirements with applicable state and local licensing standards and CCDF requirements. Programs could remain more stringent than those minimums, including by keeping their current Head Start ratios and group sizes.
- Program quality would continue to be shaped locally by recipients and their governing bodies and Policy Councils, with parents holding a formal governance role. Programs would also remain accountable to ACF for meeting the Head Start Act and other applicable requirements.

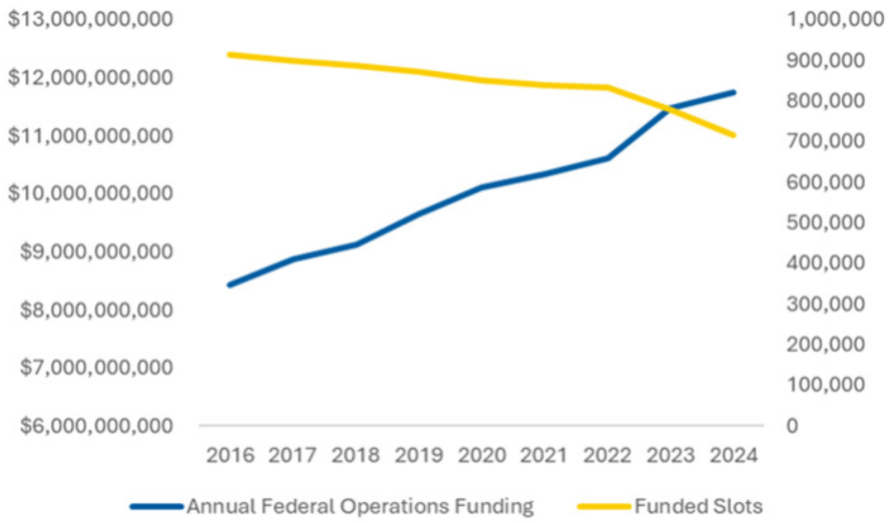
Specific Questions

QUESTION: What drove the recent decline in funded Head Start slots?

- ACF's analysis of change-in-scope decisions found a net loss of 97,625 funded Head Start slots between FY 2022 and FY 2024 while Federal Head Start operations funding increased by roughly 11 percent.

- For FY 2023 to FY 2024, about 94 percent of the slot loss came from enrollment reductions and about 6 percent from conversions of Head Start Preschool slots to Early Head Start. The decline therefore cannot be explained primarily by conversions.
- Current ACF leadership has made restoring access to Head Start a central objective. The NPRM is intended to give programs more options to manage costs, keep classrooms open, and serve more children, while preserving local judgment about genuine enrollment and community needs.

- **Annual Head Start Program Operations Funding and Funded Slots**



Note: *Funding is reported in nominal dollars and has not been adjusted for inflation. Annual Federal operations funding does not include supplemental appropriations during COVID-19.*

QUESTION: Is HHS "eliminating" teacher-to-child ratios, group size, and other important child safety measures?

- No. The NPRM would remove Head Start-specific Federal numeric group-size and staff-to-child ratio requirements and instead require programs to meet applicable state or local licensing standards and CCDF requirements.
- Programs could keep the current, more stringent Head Start ratios and group sizes if those practices work for their communities. Programs would also have to publish their maximum group size and ratio in a place and format visible to parents.

QUESTION: Is HHS raising health and nutrition standards?

- Yes. Even as the NPRM streamlines requirements in many areas, it would strengthen specific Federal expectations for nutrition and physical activity.

- Programs would serve nutrient-dense, whole foods consistent with a healthy diet and CACFP requirements; use meals and snacks in ways that support learning and development; collaborate with parents on healthy eating and physical activity; and provide at least 30 minutes of physical activity for every three and a half hours a child participates in the program, outdoors when weather permits.

QUESTION: Is HHS banning toothbrushing?

- No. The NPRM would remove the Federal requirement that programs assist children with daily toothbrushing; it would not prohibit toothbrushing. Programs may continue the practice and all other services that are beneficial for the children and families they serve.
- The Head Start Act continues to require programs to establish goals and measurable objectives for health and nutrition services. Programs remain responsible for children's health and can design oral-health supports around local needs, family circumstances, applicable law, and professional judgment.
- HHS also retains responsibilities for research, demonstration, and evaluation related to effective oral-health strategies. This reflects the proposal's broader approach: preserve the objective and applicable safeguards while giving local professionals more discretion over the method.

QUESTION: Is HHS eliminating requirements for program duration?

- No. The NPRM would remove the 2016 Federal annual-hour requirements for center-based Head Start Preschool, but statutory and longstanding service-duration floors would remain. Center-based preschool programs could not provide less than three hours of service per day; four-day programs would still operate at least 128 days per year, five-day programs at least 160 days per year, and all center-based preschool programs at least 32 weeks.
- Early Head Start would remain subject to the statutory requirement for continuous services, which ACF has long interpreted as full-day, year-round service for infants and toddlers.
- Recipients, working with their Policy Councils, could keep their current hours or adapt schedules to local family needs.

QUESTION: Does the NPRM remove background check requirements for Head Start staff?

- No. Background checks remain required by the Head Start Act and applicable state and CCDF law. Before hiring staff, programs must continue to conduct interviews, verify references, and obtain required state, Tribal, or Federal criminal record checks.
- The NPRM would remove detailed Federal process requirements that duplicate those statutory and state requirements. This streamlines the Federal process layer; it does not eliminate the duty to screen staff.
- Programs remain responsible for child safety and may maintain practices that are more protective than the applicable minimums. ACF would continue to monitor recipients for compliance with the Head Start Act and other applicable requirements.

QUESTION: Does the NPRM reduce access for children experiencing homelessness or families with very low or no income?

- No change is proposed to the Head Start Act's statutory eligibility categories. Children in foster care and children experiencing homelessness remain categorically eligible, and children experiencing homelessness may receive services while documentation is obtained within a reasonable period.
- The NPRM would no longer allow self-attestation alone to establish eligibility, so families would need other acceptable documentation. ACF has specifically requested public comment on the proposed self-attestation change.

QUESTION: Does the proposed rule remove supports for children with disabilities?

- No. The NPRM would replace detailed disability-services regulations with a requirement that programs comply with all applicable Federal and state disability laws. Core protections in the Head Start Act remain, including timely referral, early intervention services, and coordination with state or local agencies responsible for IDEA Part B and Part C services.
- ACF would continue to monitor whether programs meet their obligations, including through the designation renewal system. Programs would retain responsibility for serving children with disabilities while gaining more discretion in how they organize services around individual children and families.

QUESTION: What is an administrative expense?

- Administrative costs generally support overall management and coordination of the organization rather than direct services to children and families. The classification depends on the function and allocation of the cost, not simply a job title. Examples of costs commonly treated as administrative include:
  - Salaries and fringe benefits for administrative and executive personnel performing organization-wide management functions
  - Organization-wide planning, budgeting, and management costs
  - Accounting, auditing, human resources, and other central administrative functions
  - Rent, maintenance, and operation of administrative space
  - Other allowable organization-wide administrative costs, when properly allocated
- Costs generally treated as programmatic or direct service include:
  - Teacher salaries and fringe benefits
  - Salaries and benefits for other positions providing direct services to children and families
  - Educational and curriculum materials
  - Classroom supplies and equipment
  - Transportation expenses for enrolled children

- Food and meals for children
- Rent and utilities for Head Start centers to the extent attributable to direct program services

QUESTION: Will the NPRM require programs to cut Head Start staff salaries or lay off staff?

- No. The NPRM does not direct programs to cut salaries or lay off existing staff. It proposes more flexibility in staffing qualifications and hiring, along with a lower administrative-cost cap, while leaving local recipients responsible for staffing decisions and service quality.
- The proposed 5 percent administrative-cost cap is not a cap on teacher pay; teacher and other direct-service compensation is generally programmatic rather than administrative.

QUESTION: How can I comment on the proposed rule?

- ACF welcomes comments from all interested parties, including people with firsthand Head Start experience and related expertise.
- Comments are due **October 6, 2026**. You may submit a comment through www.regulations.gov by searching for docket ACF-2026-0595 (RIN 0970-AD30), or by emailing Deregulation@acf.hhs.gov. If submitting by email, include the docket number ACF-2026-0595 and/or RIN 0970-AD30 in the subject line.
- Submissions should identify the Administration for Children and Families and the docket number or RIN.