

Reforming Head Start for the 21st century: A policy prescription

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abstract. Head Start was born in 1965 as a federal program that aimed to lift America's neediest children out of poverty and enhance their lifetime opportunities. Today, Head Start continues to play an important role in our nation's early learning and development system; it serves nearly 1 million children and remains the only preschool option for poor children in many communities. Yet Head Start faces real challenges if it is to remain relevant and competitive in the face of the surge in state-funded prekindergarten (pre-K) programs over the past 25 years. State pre-K programs now serve 1.3 million children and typically spend about half the amount per child that Head Start does, yet the best state pre-K programs achieve better results than does the average Head Start program. And recent federally funded evaluations of Head Start raise serious questions about its long-term effectiveness. In this article, we examine the major actions undertaken by bipartisan policymakers to improve Head Start and propose three distinct prescriptions of our own: (a) Allow Head Start providers and grantees the flexibility to triage the services most needed by children in their program rather than follow the "all services to all kids" mandate that now exists, (b) shift performance measures to focus more on outcomes than on compliance with regulations, and (c) change federal policies so that Head Start grantees can more easily coordinate and integrate with local and state early education services and funding streams.

Policymakers have been debating Head Start's effectiveness for nearly as long as the program has existed. In 1969, a study by the Westinghouse Learning Corporation, a research organization, found that Head

Start produced gains in cognitive and language skills at the end of first grade but that these gains "faded out" by the end of second and third grades. Despite flaws in the study's methodology, the study propagated the idea that Head Start does not work. And the government's own 2010 study of Head Start—the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), a rigorous, federally funded evaluation—found that although Head Start students made meaningful

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Head Start

Head Start is a federally funded, comprehensive child development program that provides early childhood education, health (physical, mental, and oral), and nutrition services to children in poverty and works with their parents and families to help them support their children's development and improve family economic self-sufficiency and well-being. The federal Office of Head Start, located within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services' Administration for Children and Families, makes grants directly to over 1,600 local Head Start agencies located in all 50 states, Puerto Rico, the District of Columbia, outlying territories, and Native American tribal organizations. Head Start serves preschoolers 3–5 years of age. A smaller program, Early Head Start, offers similar services to infants, toddlers, and pregnant women.

gains in early literacy and the program enhanced some behavior, health, and parenting skills in participating Head Start families, as compared with a control group of nonparticipants, the gains quickly evaporated; in this case, the advantage was gone by the time kids completed first grade.

In 2014, future House Speaker Paul Ryan's antipoverty budget plan stated, "Although certain Head Start centers have made a positive difference for select beneficiaries, the program overall has a disappointing record."¹ Checker E. Finn, Jr., a former U.S. assistant secretary of education who currently conducts policy analysis for prominent think tanks, has frequently criticized the program, stating, "Despite its popularity, despite the billions spent on it, and notwithstanding the decent job it does of targeting services on needy kids, today's Head Start, when viewed through the lens of pre-K education and kindergarten readiness, amounts to a wasted opportunity."² And *TIME Magazine*, citing the disappointing results to the HSIS, called for an end to the program.³ Others are more optimistic: "Weighing all of the evidence . . . , the most accurate conclusion is that Head Start produces modest benefits including some long-term gains for children," said W. Steven Barnett, an education professor at Rutgers University in an op-ed for the *Washington Post* in 2013.⁴

Disheartening as the initial results of the HSIS were to policymakers, there is evidence from further analysis of the HSIS data that kids enrolled in Head Start

had stronger vocabulary and cognitive outcomes than did kids who stayed at home with a parent or relative during these early years and that their parents reported fewer child behavior problems; these gains were sustained through elementary school. There was little difference between results for Head Start students and kids in other center-based child care or preschool programs.^{5,6} In other words, although Head Start may not perform better than other preschool programs, it is better than not attending preschool at all. And many of the children Head Start serves would not otherwise attend preschool.

Even given the significant expansion of state prekindergarten (pre-K) programs this century and the end of the last, there are far fewer state pre-K slots than there are low-income children,⁷ and eight states do not offer publicly funded preschool at all.⁸ As a result, only 60% of poor 4-year-olds attend preschool.⁹

But other evidence (see Table 1) suggests that Head Start could do better than it currently does. Studies of high-quality, publicly funded state pre-K programs that serve significant numbers of children in New Jersey, Boston, and Tulsa find evidence of learning gains at kindergarten entry that are larger than those found in the Head Start Impact Study, with some of these gains lasting well into the elementary years.¹⁰ Moreover, Head Start effects vary significantly across centers—even more than they vary across measures of kindergarten through 12th grade (K–12) school effectiveness.¹¹ In other words, some Head Start programs produce dramatically better results than others.

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Given this evidence, the relevant question for policymakers is not whether Head Start works but how to increase the number of Head Start centers that work as well as the most effective Head Start centers and state-funded pre-K programs.

Bipartisan Efforts to Improve Head Start

Federal policymakers have taken numerous steps to improve the quality and impact of Head Start through the required reauthorizations of the program. In 1998,

Table 1. Comparison of two public high-quality prekindergarten programs to Head Start

Measure	Boston Preschool Program	New Jersey Abbott Preschool program	Head Start Impact Study
Impacts found at end of preschool year ^a	Positive impacts on vocabulary, early reading, numeracy, and social-emotional skills	Positive impacts on vocabulary, math, and print awareness skills	Positive impacts on prereading, prewriting, and vocabulary skills and parent reports of children's literacy skills
Effect size ^b	.44–.62	.40	.10–.34
Gains lasted through	3rd grade	5th grade	No gains found after first grade for full sample
Cost per child	\$12,000	\$12,000–\$14,900	\$10,526 ^c

Note. The data from this table come from the following sources: "Early Learning: The New Fact Base and Cost Sustainability," by J. Minervino and R. Pianta, 2013, https://docs.gatesfoundation.org/documents/Lessons%20from%20Research%20and%20the%20Classroom_September%202014.pdf; *Head Start Impact Study: First Year Findings*, by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, June 2005, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/first_yr_finds.pdf; and *The Effects of New Jersey's Abbott Preschool Program on Young Children's School Readiness*, by C. Lamy, W. S. Barnett, and K. Jung, December 2005, <http://nieer.org/resources/research/multistate/nj.pdf>.

^aThe comparisons are between program participants and nonparticipants—that is, kids with no preschool experience or those who attended another program. ^bEffect sizes provide a quantitative way of comparing the relative strength of effects found in different studies. In the social sciences, an effect size of .2 is generally considered small, an effect size of .5 is considered medium, and an effect size over .8 is considered large. Thus, the effect sizes found for the Boston and Abbott programs are generally medium, whereas those found for key indicators in the Head Start Impact Study were small. ^cThere is no set per-child cost in Head Start, but on average, the federal government spent \$8,771 per Head Start child served in fiscal year 2015. Including the required 20% nonfederal match, Head Start programs can be assumed to spend an average of \$10,526 per child in federal and nonfederal funds, although actual spending levels vary widely.

the Coats Human Services Amendments required Head Start to develop education performance standards and increased educational requirements for Head Start teachers.¹² The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007 expanded on these reforms, requiring all Head Start teachers to have an associate's degree by 2011 and half to have a bachelor's degree by 2013.¹³ The 2007 act also mandated that monitoring of Head Start grantees include measures of teaching quality, using "valid and reliable" observations of adult-child interactions.¹⁴ The Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) Office of Head Start subsequently adopted the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), an observational tool developed by researchers to measure these interactions. The 2007 act also sought to increase coordination between Head Start, state preschool programs, and local public schools by, among other things, mandating that Head Start work with local school districts to serve children with disabilities and prepare children to transition to kindergarten. The act also funded the creation of State Advisory Councils on Early Childhood Education and Care, which bring together representatives from various state agencies that serve young children and their families, as well as

other early childhood providers and stakeholders, to advise on early childhood policies and improve coordination across programs.¹⁵

The Designation Renewal System

Also, under the 2007 act, Head Start grants changed from continuous grants, with no expiration date, to renewable, 5-year grants. Grants are automatically renewed if federal monitoring finds that Head Start grantees are operating a "high-quality and comprehensive Head Start program." But grantees that are found to have one of seven red-flag criteria (listed below) are required to compete to renew their grant—a process known as *designation renewal*. During the designation renewal process, other organizations can also apply for the grants, which could result in the incumbent losing the grant. The Office of Head Start uses the following seven criteria to identify grantees that must compete:

- deficiencies identified through Head Start's monitoring system, through which monitors conduct site visits and review documentation to ensure programs are complying with Head Start performance standards;

- license revocations by state or local child-care licensing agencies;
- suspensions by the Department of HHS;
- disbarment by any other state or federal agencies;
- significant financial risk;
- failure to establish or track and analyze data on goals for improving children's school readiness; and
- CLASS scores that fall below a certain threshold or within the lowest 10% of grantees on any of the three CLASS domains.¹⁶

As of July 2015, all current Head Start grantees have been evaluated under the designation renewal system. (For more information on the schedule of designation renewal and the criteria used for each cohort, see the online Supplemental Material.)

Roughly one-quarter of Head Start grantees were required to compete through designation renewal from 2012 to 2015. Of those, 22% lost their grants. Nearly 5% of Head Start grants changed hands over the past 3 years as a result of designation renewal.^{17–20} (By way of comparison, the closure rate for charter schools—which were explicitly created on the assumption that schools that fail to improve performance should be closed—was about 3% per year over the same time period.)²¹ This suggests that designation renewal has been effective in expelling underperforming grantees and allowing others to replace them, particularly when compared with rates of provider turnover in some other education and social service programs. Some large Head Start grants have also been split between a previous grantee and other agencies that had served children as its subcontractors. Breaking up large grants may help improve quality by giving former subcontractors more autonomy and control over resources and shifting resources closer to the level at which the child is actually served.

Limitations of the Designation Renewal System

Anecdotal reports suggest that designation renewal has motivated remaining grantees to address long-standing problems and focus on improving the quality of teaching. “Designation renewal had more influence on grantees changing what they do than the millions that the federal government invests in training and technical assistance,” says one former federal official involved in implementing the designation renewal system, adding, “The thought of losing money moves people to change.”

But the process also has limitations. The criteria for identifying grantees to compete may not be the right ones. They place a heavy weight on compliance with Head Start or other state and federal regulations²² and too little on actual outcomes for kids and families. In recent designation renewal cycles, 44% of the grantees that participated in designation renewal were required to do so on the basis of their CLASS scores, but two-thirds of those also had other compliance issues. And 30% of those required to participate in designation renewal were identified on the basis of immediate self-reports—most commonly incidents in which a child was left unattended (which Head Start staff are required to report to regional offices). No grantee was required to compete on the basis of child or family outcomes. That is because the criteria for designation renewal do not include measures of child and family outcomes, and it illustrates the extent to which current policies incentivize providers to focus on compliance rather than improving outcomes for children and families. The result has been to intensify a culture within Head Start that focuses on adherence to bureaucratic rules rather than on how programs can better serve children and families, thereby reducing opportunities for innovation.

CLASS is a measure of program quality, but because it only measures one dimension of quality—teacher–child interactions—and is administered in only a sample of classrooms, it does not give a comprehensive picture of program quality. Current designation renewal criteria require grantees to compete if they score in the lowest 10% of all grantees on any of three CLASS domains—but on two of the three domains, the cutoff for the lowest 10% still reflects a relatively high level of quality. As a result, some programs required to compete because of their CLASS scores are likely delivering high-quality early learning experiences for children, while the criteria miss other programs that are not delivering quality learning experiences.

Designation renewal was meant to enable new providers to compete to replace existing providers, yet few applied. Of more than 250 organizations that received grants in the first two rounds of renewal, all but 13 already operated Head Start programs. The current grantee is often the only applicant, causing incumbent grantees inconvenience but providing no true competition. And sometimes the Office of Head Start receives no applications that meet the bar to receive funding. The lack of qualified applicants undermines the designation

Explaining CLASS

The Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) was selected by the Office of Head Start to provide a valid and reliable observational measure of quality in Head Start monitoring reviews, as required by the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007.

CLASS, which evolved out of tools developed by researchers in the 1990s to evaluate child-care quality, focuses on the teacher–child interactions in early childhood settings, which research shows predict children’s learning much better than traditional pre-K quality measures such as class size, adult-to-child ratios, and teacher qualifications.^{A–C} Interactions in pre-K classrooms are rated in three domains:

- **Emotional Support** looks at teachers’ sensitivity and responsiveness to children’s perspectives and is related to children’s social-emotional development.
- **Instructional Support** looks at the quality of instruction in classrooms, how teachers use language, and how they create experiences that foster children’s learning. Scores on this domain of CLASS are correlated with children’s cognitive development.
- **Classroom Organization** looks at how teachers structure the classroom, use time, and manage children’s behavior.

All three domains of CLASS are scored on a 7-point scale. Scores above a 5 are considered good. Most early childhood programs perform relatively well on measures of emotional support and classroom organization and management but dismally on measures of instructional support.^D This is true in Head Start as well.^E In 2015, the average CLASS score for all Head Start grantees observed was 6.03 for emotional support, 2.88 for instructional support, and 5.8 for classroom organization.^F

All CLASS reviewers complete extensive training and must pass a reliability test before being permitted to score programs for Head Start monitoring reviews.

^APianta, R. C. (2007, Winter). Preschool is school, sometimes: Making early childhood education matter. *Education Next*, 7(1), 44–49. Retrieved from <http://educationnext.org/preschool-is-school-sometime>

^BPianta, R. C., Barnett, W. S., Burchinal, M., & Thornburg, K. R. (2009). The effects of preschool education: What we know, how public policy is or is not aligned with the evidence base, and what we need to know. *Psychological Science in the Public Interest*, 10(2), 49–88.

^CSabol, T. J., Hong, S. L. S., Pianta, R. C., & Burchinal, M. R. (2013, August 23). Can rating pre-K programs predict children’s learning? *Science*, 341, 845–846. doi:10.1126/science.1233517s

^DEarly, D., Barbarin, O., Bryant, D., Burchinal, M., Chang, F., Clifford, R., . . . Barnett, S. (2005). *Pre-Kindergarten in eleven states: NCEdL’s multi-state study of pre-kindergarten & Study of State-Wide Early Education Programs (SWEEP). Preliminary descriptive report* [Working paper]. Available from Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute website: <http://www.fpg.unc.edu/node/4654>

^EOffice of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. (n.d.). *Use of Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®) in Head Start*. Retrieved from <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/hs/sr/class/use-of-class.pdf>

^FOffice of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center. (n.d.). *A national overview of grantee CLASS® scores in 2015*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/data/class-reports/docs/national-class-2015-data.pdf>

renewal system as an accountability measure and threatens access to early learning in communities where Head Start is the only preschool option.

Why aren’t more organizations applying for Head Start funds? Funding levels provided by Head Start may be too low to cover the cost of delivering quality programs or attract new applicants. The complexity of Head Start’s requirements and the relatively short application timeline also likely dissuade many prospective applicants.

Designation renewal is based on sound ideas: accountability and an opportunity to replace weak providers with new blood. But the implementation of the process has had weaknesses, as outlined above. Improving the designation renewal system will require

including additional measures of program quality and outcomes besides compliance and CLASS; making grantees compete when they fall below an absolute threshold for bad CLASS scores rather than when they are part of the lowest 10% of performers; and intentionally cultivating the supply of new applicants for Head Start grants where the incumbent provider is historically weak.

Revising the Head Start Performance Standards Under the Obama Administration

Head Start Performance Standards, the federal rules that govern the operation of Head Start programs,²³ address

everything from education, to parent engagement to finances. In September 2016, the Office of Head Start finalized a new version of the performance standards. This is the first major revision of the performance standards since 1998 and the first complete overhaul since their creation 40 years ago. Because the old standards have been amended piecemeal over the years, they were often confusing and redundant. The new standards are streamlined in number and clarity to make them easier to navigate, and they codify expectations for grantees. They also reflect recent research on how young children learn and on the characteristics of quality early childhood programs that have produced lasting learning gains in other studies. Key changes include the following:

- **Increasing dosage, or time spent in class:** The new standards more than double the minimum required hours for Head Start programs from 448 to 1020.²⁴ Currently, Head Start grantees are permitted to offer several preschool options—including full- or part-day programs, 4 or 5 days a week, and home-based preschool options—but only 43% of Head Start preschool programs offer classes that last 6 hours day, 5 days a week. Most of the rest offer only half-day programs, serve children 4 days a week, or both. The new standards phase in increased hour requirements: Head Start grantees must provide at least 1020 hours to 50% of children they serve by 2019 and 100% by 2021. They also allow programs to request the flexibility to offer a part-day program if doing so meets the community's needs. The administration proposed this change because research shows that kids who spend more time in early learning programs make greater learning gains; the relationship between time spent and learning is roughly proportional, meaning that children who spend twice as much time in preschool learn twice as much.^{25,26} In the event Congress fails to appropriate the funds needed to implement the increased hour requirements, the Secretary of HHS may delay these added hour requirements.
- **Education and development:** The revised standards elevate the importance of the educational component of Head Start programs by providing more details about what quality early education

programs look like and emphasizing research-based practices in four core areas:

- Teaching and the learning environment²⁷
- Curriculum
- Child screening and assessment
- Parent involvement
- **Parent engagement and support:** The new standards emphasize helping parents to support their children's learning by requiring programs to use a research-based parenting curriculum that focuses on building parents' confidence and skills to support their children's development and advocate for their children within the education system.²⁸ Although programs may continue to support families in other ways, such as by connecting them with social service and continuing education programs or helping them find housing and jobs, these changes clarify that the primary priority for Head Start family engagement is enabling parents to support children's learning and development.
- **Professional development:** The new standards shift the focus of professional development away from the one-shot workshops that are currently the norm to ongoing coaching. Research shows that this approach, in which a dedicated coach or center director regularly observes teachers in their classrooms (whether in person or by video), provides ongoing feedback, and helps teachers reflect on practice and set goals for improvement, results in better early childhood teaching and outcomes.^{29,30}
- **Use of data:** The new standards require Head Start programs to collect, analyze, and use data to inform ongoing, continuous improvement. Effective early childhood programs regularly collect data—such as child learning outcomes; descriptive information on child and family demographics, well-being, and experiences; measures of teacher quality and professional development; and program operational data (such as financial indicators and staff turnover)—analyze that data to understand overall performance, trends, and opportunities for improvement; and make changes in practice in response to that analysis.³¹ Practices for collecting and using data should be embedded into the practices of all program staff, from classroom teachers, to family support workers, to

center directors, to central leadership and board members. Reflecting this, the draft standards embed data and continuous improvement in program governance, education, child development, health, safety, and enrollment.

In revising the standards, the Administration for Children and Families eliminated a number of duplicative or overly prescriptive requirements and reduced the amount of paperwork for grantees. But current Head Start statute limits how much the standards can be streamlined, because it prohibits the secretary of the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services from reducing the range or scope of educational, health, dental, and other services that Head Start programs must provide.³² And the new standards also impose new requirements on grantees on top of the above-noted revisions to current standards.

Implementing these new requirements will cost money, a lot of it. On average, the federal government spends about \$8,800 per Head Start child served³³—which is twice as much as the typical state pre-K program spends³⁴ but less than the costs of high-performing public preschool programs in Boston and New Jersey.³⁵ Federal regulatory impact analysis estimates a net cost of \$1.05 billion to implement the new standards at current enrollment levels, with the longer day and year making up the lion's share of the price. The fiscal year 2016 omnibus appropriations increased Head Start funding by \$570 million, including \$294 million to extend the Head Start day.³⁶ But this increase will not cover the full cost to implement the standards.

Our Key Proposals

The adoption of CLASS, the designation renewal system, and the proposed revisions to the Head Start Performance Standards all represent improvements that support Head Start quality and outcomes. Yet further changes are needed to maximize the program's impact. On the basis of our past research and policy analysis on Head Start, our consulting work with high-performing Head Start grantees and other early childhood programs, and our review of research on effective early childhood practices and successful state pre-K programs, we propose the following changes.

Use a Triage System

Grantees should be allowed to determine the mix of family, health, and other services that are most important for preparing the children in their communities for school.

Current program standards require Head Start grantees to provide a wide variety of services, including early childhood education, family support services, nutrition services, oral health services, mental health services and referrals, and health screenings and referrals. This emphasis on comprehensive services, which has been a core feature of Head Start since its inception, reflects the integrated nature of child development and the complex, interrelated challenges facing poor families.

But over the past 50 years, a variety of federal and state programs—including Medicaid; the Affordable Care Act; community health centers; and the Women, Infants, and Children (WIC) food program—have been created to address many of these needs. Poor families may yet struggle to access services through these programs. But it is well worth asking whether Head Start programs should still be required to provide all currently mandated services for all children. Documenting currently required screenings, referrals, and other comprehensive services consumes considerable staff time and resources. Moreover, there is little evidence that early childhood programs offering these comprehensive services produce better results—either educationally or on health and other more holistic outcomes—than do those that focus on early learning. For example, an article published in 2010 analyzed the results of previous studies and found evidence of a negative relationship between programs' provision of comprehensive services and child outcomes.³⁷ Similarly, the HSIS found little evidence of improvements in most health outcomes for Head Start children, with the exception of dental health.³⁸

That does not mean that Head Start should eliminate comprehensive services altogether. Many of the children Head Start services do need health, nutrition, or family supports to achieve their learning potential. But comprehensive service delivery in Head Start should be viewed as one tool in helping Head Start programs meet their ultimate goal: enabling children to enter kindergarten with the preparation and family support needed to succeed.

But comprehensive service delivery in Head Start should be viewed as one tool in helping Head Start programs meet their ultimate goal: enabling children to enter kindergarten with the preparation and family support needed to succeed.

That means giving grantees greater flexibility to customize the family, health, and other services to reflect the needs of individual children and of the communities they serve rather than delivering all services to all children, as current rules require.

Develop Better Tools to Measure Program Performance and Child and Family Outcomes

Shift performance measures to focus more on outcomes rather than on compliance with regulations.

As we have shown, federal monitoring of Head Start focuses heavily on compliance with regulations. We believe the focus should shift to how well Head Start programs are preparing children to succeed in school and preparing their families to support this success. However, this shift cannot happen without better tools to assess children's learning and other developmental outcomes that support school readiness, as well as measures of program quality and impact on families.

Child development experts are understandably hesitant to place high stakes on measures of children's learning outcomes: Few existing measures of children's learning are valid, reliable, and sufficiently trusted by the field to be used in this way. Those measures that do exist often measure only a few components of development—and often not the most important outcomes.

To address this issue, Head Start officials should work with other federal agencies, researchers, grantees, and philanthropic groups to identify, develop, test, and refine new measures or improve existing ones, with the ultimate goal of adopting a set of measures that provides a comprehensive picture of Head Start performance at both the grantee and the program-wide levels. In the meantime, they can make better use of existing measures, such as setting cutoff points for unacceptable CLASS scores or establishing red flag indicators of child attendance and absenteeism. In the near term,

federal officials can also increase focus on performance by encouraging groups of grantees to adopt common measures of child learning and program quality, share data on these measures to compare their performance and identify strengths and weaknesses, and set individualized and collective goals for improvement. This approach creates incentives and support for programs to improve performance in areas that matter most, without mandating a single federal measurement tool. Groups of grantees could also pilot the range of new assessment tools that researchers are now developing—such as the early language screener developed by researchers at the Temple University Infant & Child Laboratory, the Lens on Science computer-adaptive science assessment, and the Minnesota Executive Function Scale—both to measure their performance and to determine whether these tools are appropriate for future program-wide adoption.

Facilitate Coordination with State Programs

Federal policies must provide flexibility and incentives for Head Start grantees to work with state and local programs.

Over the past 25 years, states and local school districts have dramatically expanded their involvement in early childhood education, creating state- and locally funded pre-K programs. They have also developed systems to measure the quality of early childhood programs, such as Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRIS), and created data systems to track information on children's participation in early childhood programs and link it with K–12 school data. (For more information on QRIS and data systems that link early childhood programs with K–12 data, see the online Supplemental Material.)

Head Start plays a central role in some of these efforts but has been excluded from others. Ensuring Head Start's future requires improving integration and coordination between Head Start and state and local early childhood initiatives. In our opinion, the federal government should not simply transfer funding and management of Head Start to the states, as some policymakers have proposed.¹ Rather, federal policymakers should focus on incentivizing Head Start, states, and local schools to work together and eliminate policies that prevent them from doing so. Working together

allows these entities to be more efficient, streamlined, and integrated, reducing overall costs and the burden that families face when dealing with these systems separately.

For example, federal and state policies could:

- require Head Start to participate in state data systems (and require these systems to include Head Start);
- align federal and state standards for quality and child learning outcomes;
- allow state oversight (through QRIS or state pre-K programs) to take the place of some monitoring requirements for some Head Start grantees; or
- increase flexibility for grantees to braid together multiple state and federal funding streams to serve more children, lengthen the school day, or offer services in mixed-income settings.

In states with universal preschool access, Head Start funds might one day serve to supplement and enhance programming for at-risk children—as Title I funds do in K–12 schools—or shift to focus on infants and toddlers.

But any policies increasing the integration of Head Start and state pre-K must maintain or raise—not lower—quality standards for providers using Head Start funds and ensure that resources remain focused on the most at-risk children. This is complicated work that will likely require changes in state and local policies and programs, as well as in federal Head Start policies and grantee practices.

Conclusion

Over its 50-year history, Head Start has improved the lives of millions of children and their families by providing quality early learning programs and empowering parents to support their children's learning, and it continues to improve school readiness for our nation's most at-risk children. But Head Start needs additional changes. Policymakers must be willing to raise expectations for Head Start quality and outcomes, set clear priorities, find fair and accurate ways to measure programs' quality and effect on children's learning, and explore ways to better integrate Head Start with state and local preschool programs. These changes will be difficult, but they are necessary to maximize Head Start's impact for children and families.

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supplemental material

- <https://behavioralpolicy.org/journal/>
- Supplemental Text

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