Head Start NPRM Summary

Head Start Rule Change

On August 6, 2026, the U.S. Administration for Children and Families (ACF) unveiled the most significant proposal to rewrite the federal standards that govern Head Start since its inception in 1965.

This proposal is the first step in the federal rulemaking process. It is not final and may be revised before taking effect. Until that time, programs remain open, services continue under current standards and families can continue to enroll as usual.

The proposal does not change Head Start's overall federal funding. Instead, in its initial form it would significantly weaken federal standards over how services are delivered. Streamlining requirements to better serve children is welcome, but those efforts should not come at the cost of Head Start's proven ability to ensure that all children, regardless of their families' income status, have the support they need for school readiness and successful life outcomes.

What It Does and Why This Matters

- ***Lowers standards for children with the fewest resources***: Head Start was created to ensure that all children have access to consistently high-quality early learning experiences from one-on-one teacher interactions and additional supports such as dental care and vision screenings. Replacing national standards with varying state and local ones could create a system in which the quality of a child's experience depends on where they live.
- ***Creates greater challenges for rural and smaller programs***: Programs in rural, remote or small communities are often the only resource available. Any changes that reduce federal support could be especially harmful to these areas, which may have fewer community partners, less access to specialized professionals and less capacity to absorb fixed administrative costs.
- ***Lowers the administrative cost limit***: The proposal reduces the amount programs may spend on administration from 15% to 5% of total program costs, while many program management and oversight responsibilities remain. Roughly 96% of grants supporting program costs would be impacted, nationwide.
- ***Forces programs to make tough staffing decisions:*** Built into the proposal is an assumption that programs would reduce staffing like family service workers, health personnel, child development specialists, home visitors and teachers, as well as service hours.
- ***Creates less clarity for programs***: The proposal removes many of the standards that explain how programs must meet their responsibilities. Less detailed guidance could create confusion, inconsistent implementation and uneven federal enforcement.
- ***Expulsions and suspensions allowed***: Limitations on expulsions and suspensions are removed from the federal standard. This raises concerns that children with disabilities, developmental delays, behavioral needs or histories of trauma could be disproportionately removed from programs.
- ***Less parent voice and family engagemen***t: Strategies to maintain children's attendance and parent engagement activities at local sites would become optional, leading to less consistency in family engagement and school readiness for children.
- ***Fewer best-practice standards for support services***: Removes evidence-based guidance for several important

services, including support for children with disabilities, health care coordination, home visiting for pregnant women and services that promote young children's development. While basic requirements would remain, many of the standards outlining how to deliver these services would be eliminated.

- ***Removes dual-language instruction***: Programs would be barred from supporting home-language development while children also learn English, with limited exceptions. Removing dual-language instruction may lead to delayed school readiness, particularly efforts to identify children with developmental delays or disabilities.
- ***Creates barriers to enrolling***: Requires more documentation for homelessness, income and age verification, presenting a barrier for the proposal's estimate of roughly 8% of currently enrolled children. This would especially impact families in crisis and those in rural areas without shelters to verify for them.

What Can You Do

Keep in mind: These proposed rules are not final. ***Head Start programs continue operating under current standards and families may continue to enroll.***

There is a 60-day public comment period. ***The public has until October 6 to weigh in.*** We encourage Head Start supporters, families, providers and community partners to review the proposal and submit a public comment in ***opposition*** to the proposed changes. You can learn more on the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) from First Five Nebraska: Administrative Policy - First Five Nebraska. To submit your comment at the Federal Register, please click here: Federal Register: Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs.

Where To Learn More

- See the Core Elements of Head Start guide from the First Five Years Fund (FFYF), one of our national partners.
- FFYF polling shows Head Start is still very popular with voters across all backgrounds.
- Read what the National Head Start Association says about how new rules should be judged in their article, "Fewer Rules Cannot Mean Fewer Results."

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