

May 20, 2022

The Honorable Chuck Schumer
Majority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Nancy Pelosi
Speaker of the House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Mitch McConnell
Minority Leader
United States Senate
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Kevin McCarthy
Minority Leader
U.S. House of Representatives
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Majority Leader Schumer, Speaker Pelosi, Minority Leader McConnell, and Minority Leader McCarthy:

On behalf of the Head Start community nationwide, we are writing to share information about dramatic workforce issues facing Head Start—which includes Early Head Start, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start, and Migrant and Seasonal Head Start—and to urgently request congressional action to address this crisis.

Unfortunately, COVID-19 has laid bare a crisis that Head Start program managers had previously been able to sweep under the rug. Simply put, because of long-neglected workforce underinvestment, conflicting and confusing COVID-19 protocols, and the rising impact of inflation, we are struggling to meet the needs of the nation's most vulnerable children and their families. We urge you to take immediate action to help address the spiraling labor crisis crippling Head Start.

The Head Start and Early Head Start workforce—a corps of dedicated professionals committed to the mission of serving the most vulnerable children and their families—has been pushed to a breaking point. We urge you to act now to improve baseline compensation for the Head Start workforce **by at least \$2.5 billion per year** to address these urgent, systemic shortcomings.

Chronic low compensation, challenging job conditions, and better opportunities with employers who pay more are combining and creating a vortex of spiraling need that demands immediate action. A May 2022 survey by the National Head Start Association revealed what we already know to be the case from experience in our own states and tribes:

Low compensation...

57% of respondents indicated that compensation is the number one reason for staff leaving

Means higher job turnover...

85% of respondents indicated staff turnover is higher than in a typical year

Causing staff shortages...

an estimated average of 30% of staff positions are currently unfilled

Resulting in closed classrooms.

90% of respondents' programs have closed classrooms permanently or temporarily due to lack of staff

LOW COMPENSATION

Across the country, the median elementary school teacher earns \$61,350 per year. For Head Start teachers, the mean hourly wage is \$19.10, which equates to \$34,073 per year. Teacher's aides, bus drivers, and other support staff are paid even less. The salary gap between Head Start and other, non-education employers has taken on new significance in the current tight labor market.

Staff—and potential staff—are making financial decisions in the best interest of their own families and seeking higher-paying jobs unrelated to early childhood education. This turnover includes not only lead teachers—whose expertise and credentials make them particularly well-suited to move to the public school system—but also other Head Start staff who are leaving for entry-level jobs that pay more and offer better benefits.

MEANS HIGHER JOB TURNOVER

In the NHSA workforce survey, 85% of respondents reported that staff turnover is higher than usual. The impact of turnover is more than an academic exercise—it has been shown to disrupt child-teacher relationships, which are particularly important for those from the most vulnerable backgrounds. According to the Federal Reserve Bank of Minneapolis, a recent study of Head Start participants found “kids who experienced higher teacher turnover during the school year had smaller gains in vocabulary and literacy and higher levels of parent-reported behavior problems than peers who had more continuity with their caregivers.”

CAUSING STAFF SHORTAGES

Our programs say it best: “We consider it a crisis that we are unable to serve hundreds of children on our waitlist because we have 20 classrooms closed due to lack of staff.”

Another program notes: “We are planning to permanently close 3+ more classrooms before the new school year. Staff are leaving in droves and some of the remaining are so burned out [from] working low-staffed, they likely will leave also.”

RESULTING IN CLOSED CLASSROOMS

Difficulties filling open positions equals fewer children served. It also puts greater pressure on remaining staff, which leads to increased turnover. In the NHSA workforce survey, over 90% of respondents indicated their program has closed classrooms either permanently or temporarily due to a lack of staff.

For example, a lack of available substitutes or floater aides is leading to random classroom shutdowns when a teacher or aide is sick. This has disrupted parents who rely on Head Start services while they are at work, causing some to seek alternative care arrangements that are more reliable. In the words of one program, “all of our managers have worked daily in classrooms since Thanksgiving break so

that we can keep classrooms open. We have one classroom that has not opened all year due to lack of staff. The others were closed temporarily [when] we were not able to meet child/staff ratios.”

Closures translate to thousands of children left at home with an older sibling, a relative, or a neighbor while a mom or dad goes to work or school. For hourly employees, missing one day can be a huge setback—often only a day’s pay away from missing rent or the ability to purchase groceries. For children, closed Head Start classrooms translate into critical learning loss in educational basics and missed critical social skills—skills that COVID-19 has already weakened for so many young children.

An additional impact of the pandemic has been children with higher needs entering Head Start, adding to stressful working conditions and curtailed services beyond shuttered classrooms. Teachers are seeing the developmental and socialization delays caused by pandemic-related isolation and trauma. Not only has this had a cumulative effect on staff, but it is coming at a time when children more than ever need the support and structure that comes from Head Start.

Our staff are the backbone of Head Start; without their tireless dedication, we would not be able to live up to our mission to provide children and families from at-risk backgrounds with the opportunities for success as we have done over the previous generations. We urge you to find a path forward for improved compensation for the Head Start workforce. Thank you for your consideration of our urgent request.

Sincerely,

National Head Start Association
National Migrant & Seasonal Head Start
Association
National Indian Head Start Directors Association

Region I Head Start Association
Region II Head Start Association
Region III Head Start Association
Region IV Head Start Association
Region V Head Start Association
Region VI Head Start Association
Region VII Head Start Association
Region VIII Head Start Association
Region 9 Head Start Association
Region X Head Start Association

Alabama Head Start Association
Alaska Head Start Association
Arizona Head Start Association
Arkansas Head Start Association
Head Start California
Colorado Head Start Association

Connecticut Head Start Association
Delaware Head Start Association
DC Head Start Association
Florida Head Start Association
Georgia Head Start Association
Hawaii Head Start Association of Hawaii
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North Dakota Head Start Association
Ohio Head Start Association
Oklahoma Head Start Directors
Oregon Head Start Association
Rhode Island Head Start Association
South Carolina State Head Start Association
Pennsylvania Head Start Association

South Dakota Head Start Association
Tennessee State Head Start Association
Texas Head Start Association
Utah Head Start Association
Vermont Head Start Association
Virginia Head Start Association
Washington State Association of Head Start and
ECEAP
West Virginia Head Start Association
Wisconsin Head Start Association
Wyoming Head Start Association Inc