

NEPC Review: From Washington, DC, to the States: Rethinking Head Start (Heritage Foundation, June 2026)



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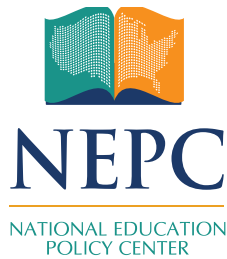
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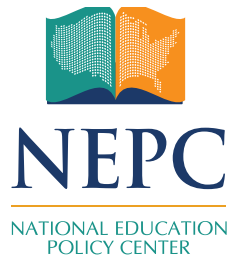
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Summary

A new Heritage Foundation report proposes to end Head Start, a federal-to-local program intended to enhance the school readiness and success of children in poverty. The report concludes that Head Start does not improve school readiness or produce lasting benefits, spends more per child than alternatives, fails to protect children adequately, and is burdened by regulations that serve no purpose. It recommends eliminating Head Start, block granting its funds to states, and replacing federal program standards with less stringent state childcare regulations. Although Head Start is long overdue for reauthorization and a case can be made for regulatory reform, the report's findings and recommendations are unsupported by evidence. The full body of research indicates Head Start has immediate benefits for children and likely improves adult outcomes, while the report's recommended relaxed class size and ratio requirements would likely reduce benefits. Adopting the report's recommendations could do more harm than good to children and taxpayers, since stronger not weaker standards are warranted to improve outcomes. The report should, however, be credited for raising questions about how Head Start should adapt to changes in demographic and policy conditions. Yet the report's use of evidence is so limited, selective, and misleading that neither its conclusions about Head Start's performance and benefits nor its policy recommendations usefully inform policy decisions.



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I. Introduction

Head Start is the federal government's largest direct investment in early childhood education and development for children ages 0 to 5 living in poverty. The program was designed to promote the "school readiness of low-income children by enhancing their cognitive, social, and emotional development."¹ Achieving Head Start's school readiness goal has proven more difficult than was imagined in 1965, and the program has evolved over the years in response to research and evaluation.² Among the most notable changes was the creation of Early Head Start to support child development from prenatal to age 3. Head Start was last reauthorized in 2007 by Congress and the George W. Bush administration through the Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act, which, as the name implies, focused on boosting the program's effectiveness in preparing children to succeed in school.³ Subsequent rule changes aiming to strengthen the program's outcomes were implemented by the Obama and Biden administrations.⁴

In FY 2025, Head Start's federal budget was nearly \$12.3 billion for 685,296 enrolled children, nearly 40% under age 3.⁵ Compared to prior years, these numbers reflect a sizable decrease in the overall number of children served, and a sizeable increase in the percentage under age 3 served in Early Head Start. Demographic, contextual, and programmatic changes that may have contributed to this shift include: declining birth rates, lower child poverty rates, relocation of poverty to the suburbs, the COVID-19 pandemic, expansion of state-funded preschool education (including universal programs in some states), and policy changes over the past decade to increase

hours, teacher qualifications, and compensation.⁶

The magnitude of demographic and contextual changes, together with changes in other policies affecting families with young children from Medicaid and CHIP to minimum wage laws, certainly warrants new attention to how Head Start might best adapt. Most prominent among recent analyses and proposals for change is the Heritage Foundation's publication, *From Washington, DC, to the States: Rethinking Head Start*.⁷ In the report, co-authors Madison Doan and Jonathan Butcher address issues of cost, oversight, access, and effectiveness, and recommend policy changes by Congress and the Administration for Children and Families (ACF). Newly proposed Head Start rule changes align with the Heritage report's analysis and recommendations, suggesting that it is already strongly influencing policy.⁸

II. Findings and Conclusions of the Report

The report lays out a set of strong claims regarding the effectiveness, cost, and safety of Head Start, followed by equally strong recommendations for changes to program policy and regulation. The report levies four main critiques:

1. Head Start is largely ineffective. The program does not “prepare children for K–12 schools” or “improve their social skills,” and it “does not produce long-term positive academic or behavioral outcomes for children.”⁹
2. Head Start centers are too expensive and “waste money.”¹⁰
3. Head Start does not ensure safety and fails to “protect children.”¹¹
4. Head Start is “burdened with bureaucratic red tape that does nothing to help children and families.”¹²

Based on the critiques and to “boost accountability, efficiency, and results,” the report concludes that policymakers should sunset Head Start, adopt policies that give parents more choices, and reduce program regulation.¹³ Specifically, it offers three broad recommendations that appear to be in reverse order of anticipated implementation:

1. Eliminate Head Start entirely.¹⁴
2. Block grant Head Start funds to the states and allow states to use these funds to set up education savings accounts (ESAs) for young children.¹⁵
3. Deregulate and streamline Head Start with state child care regulations, including licensing, safety rules, and ratios.¹⁶

The first two are straightforward. The third recommendation is more involved. It

includes reducing “degree and credit-hour requirements for teachers,” and relaxing staff-to-child ratios and group-size limits.¹⁷ The report calls for “state legislatures and governors” to apply these new regulations to “lessen burdens on Head Start centers.”¹⁸

III. The Report’s Rationale for Its Findings and Conclusions

The report bases its central claim that Head Start is ineffective almost entirely on the only large-scale national randomized trial of the program. This study of one year of Head Start enrollment in fall of 2002 found modest initial impacts and few impacts lasting into the primary grades. Evidence of larger, lasting, and much later impacts from other studies of Head Start and other preschool programs is discounted because experimental designs were flawed, results have not been replicated, or weaker, quasi-experimental designs were used.¹⁹

To support the claim that Head Start is too expensive and wasteful, the report compares median Head Start and Early Head Start expenditures per child to expenditures per child for “other child care options,” specifically citing lower national average costs per child in child care centers. It also shows that Early Head Start and Head Start expenditures per child are higher than public K-12 expenditures per child in some states. Additional analyses show that total Head Start funding in recent years remained above 2016 levels adjusted for inflation despite a sizable decline in the number of children enrolled. The report compares Head Start and public school per-pupil K-12 spending to two lower figures: roughly \$6,000 per student for voucher and education savings accounts (ESAs), and charter school funding, which it reports as about \$3,000 lower than public school per-pupil spending. From this it concludes “that choice saves money for taxpayers and families.”²⁰ Finally, a Government Accountability Office (GAO) audit of Head Start programs under interim management identifies evidence of waste; such programs had high levels of under-enrollment but were not asked to return funds for unfilled seats.²¹

To support its claim that Head Start is unsafe, the report points to HHS Office of Inspector General (OIG) reports from 2011 and 2022 that found Head Start grant recipients out of compliance with state child care safety regulations (including criminal background checks for staff) and with cases of abuse, leaving a child alone, and sending a child “home with the wrong adult.”²² It also cites the GAO’s investigation of programs under interim management, which also found safety-related problems.

Given the safety violations and lack of effectiveness, the report argues that regulations raise costs without benefits in a program that is too expensive. It bases this claim on one report on state child care ratio and group size requirements and a reference to Obama administration rule changes to increase hours and Biden adminis-

tration rule changes to increase teacher compensation and benefits.²³

The recommendation to eliminate Head Start follows directly from the conclusion that it produces no meaningful benefits and is unsafe, yet expensive. The recommendation to block grant Head Start to the states and allow the funds to be used for ESAs follows from the same conclusion, together with the findings that parents could receive more hours at the same cost in typical child care and that choice improves efficiency. The last recommendation, to deregulate and streamline Head Start by defaulting to states' child care regulations,²⁴ recognizes that the Administration does not have the authority to enact the first two recommendations on its own. However, HHS can reduce regulations to lower expenditures, permitting more children to be served at the same cost. The safety and fiscal issues also motivate a call for reform to "improve accountability."²⁵

IV. The Report's Use of Research Literature

The report relies on a small number of research studies, federal government reports and data, and think tank articles and reports, including the Heritage Foundation's own daily online news and commentary publication.

To assess Head Start's effectiveness, the report primarily relies on the Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), a nationally representative randomized controlled trial of children who sought to enroll at age 3 or 4 in oversubscribed Head Start centers, published in 2010.^{26, 27} The report cites only two other research studies directly, both more recent quasi-experimental studies of Head Start.²⁸ It mentions two other well-known, older, small-scale randomized trials of intensive programs for children under age 5, but does not cite them, instead relying on two think-tank articles that briefly critique those studies.²⁹ The sheer volume of relevant research not considered is stunning: experimental and lottery-based studies of contemporary preschool and parenting programs finding lasting impacts that could inform improvements in Head Start; numerous more fine-grained reanalyses of the HSIS data; and a host of rigorous quasi-experimental studies of Head Start.³⁰ The report cites no studies regarding the effectiveness of Early Head Start, omitting the national randomized trial with longitudinal follow-up of Early Head Start, the randomized trial and long-term follow-up of the Infant Health and Development Program, and others.³¹

Findings regarding Head Start's high cost and waste rely on government data on expenditures per child in Head Start, public school costs, and child care, together with a think tank analysis of the fiscal consequences of public school choice and a think tank analysis of charter school revenues compared to traditional public school revenues.³² A critique of the analysis of public school choice relied upon is not cited.³³

The evidence for safety problems and fraud relies on two OIG audits and one GAO

audit supplemented by the authors' previous Heritage Foundation articles on problems in Head Start relying on government and media reports.³⁴ The study does not present information on the prevalence of safety problems or fraud across all Head Start programs in other public and private programs for young children. Nor does it report studies on the effects of Head Start on child maltreatment or on program characteristics associated with safety problems that might allow inferences about how the prevalence of problems compares between Head Start and other programs for young children.³⁵

The report cites no research to support its claim that “burdensome” regulations—including those addressing staff qualifications, staff-child ratios, and group sizes—do not benefit children and families. The report also omits research on associations between these specific program standards, program quality, and child outcomes.³⁶

V. Review of the Report's Methods

The HSIS is a valuable source of information on Head Start's effectiveness, but it is inadequate as a sole or primary source.³⁷ The HSIS uses an exceptionally strong design, is national in scope, provides follow-up to third grade, and examines a very broad range of outcomes. Yet, its limitations for understanding the effectiveness of Head Start today are manifold:

- The HSIS was conducted more than two decades ago when children and contexts were different and before 2007 reauthorization and subsequent program reforms designed to improve outcomes.³⁸
- The programs studied were oversubscribed, perhaps resulting in unmeasured differences in the behavior of applicants, available alternatives, and other conditions that might affect outcomes.
- The HSIS evaluates the impacts of just one year of a two-year program (or longer if one includes Early Head Start).
- The HSIS did not measure outcomes beyond Grade 3, including much later outcomes such as educational attainment that are strongly related to economic returns.³⁹

A more adequate basis for judging Head Start's effectiveness would include: (1) re-analyses of the HSIS that provide insights into variations in outcomes, including subgroups that had larger gains;⁴⁰ (2) other studies of Head Start and similar pre-school programs more relevant to the current program design; and (3) estimating benefits from attending two years and on later outcomes.⁴¹ As the report considers no evidence regarding Early Head Start, it provides no basis for assessing its effectiveness.

Simple comparisons of expenditure per child across Head Start over time and to public schools and child care are insufficient for judging whether Head Start is too expensive or inefficient. Nor do they establish that state or privately administered programs are more efficient. No allowance is made for differences in the ages and other characteristics of the children served over time or across programs and in the programs' purposes. Comparisons of Head Start and custodial child care expenditures are uninformative as they provide different services with different observed quality and outcomes. The report's selected state-specific comparisons of Head Start to K-12 are unrepresentative and misleading, even ignoring the different ages served. In FY 2025, Head Start's average expenditure per child was \$15,841 while K-12 expenditure was \$20,063.⁴²

The question of whether private programs are more efficient than public programs is more complex than the report allows. The report fails to consider market failures, as well as government failures, specifically imperfect information and externalities (public benefits differ from private), and other potential problems. It also does not consider direct comparisons of quality or outcomes between public and private programs that suggest Head Start is more beneficial.⁴³

The report provides no context for the data underlying its safety claims.⁴⁴ About one in four Head Start grant recipients had incidents involving children between October 2015 and May 2020. Each year during this period, more than 1,600 grant recipients with more than 60,000 classrooms served 800,000 to one million children. This amounts to approximately four to five million child-years.⁴⁵ Just over 1,000 incidents is a rate of about one per 4,000 to 5,000 child-years.² □ Another way to summarize this information is: annually, less than 1/2 of 1% of classrooms were cited for child safety issues, and 99.99% of children experienced no incident.⁴⁶ To judge how concerning this is, it would be helpful to have information on incident rates in private center and home care. The report provides none, but a review of research on injuries in child care suggests much more widespread deficiencies in safety practices in child care centers and homes than reported for Head Start.⁴⁷

VI. Review of the Validity of the Findings and Conclusions

The report's claims regarding the benefits of Head Start are not substantiated by the research it cites and are contradicted by research it fails to cite. The HSIS, on which the report relies, found modest initial gains in school readiness and that Head Start improved the lives of young children and their parents during the program.⁴⁸ Other studies, particularly those not limited to the impacts of a single year, suggest larger, more persistent benefits from Head Start.⁴⁹ Subsequent changes to Head Start seem likely to have increased effectiveness.⁵⁰ Most importantly, longitudinal studies suggest that Head Start positively affects adult outcomes, including educational attain-

ment, earnings, and health, even in the absence of persistent achievement gains.⁵¹ Such outcomes could yield a positive economic return to taxpayers at current costs.⁵² The report presents no evidence regarding Early Head Start's effectiveness, precluding any conclusions about that program.

Charges that Head Start is unsafe are misleading; the data indicate safety problems are rare. Claims of waste are unsubstantiated, as they are based on investigations of programs under interim management, a tiny, unrepresentative subgroup. The recommendation to replace Head Start standards with less stringent child care standards, including lower staff qualifications and larger group sizes and child-staff ratios, would exacerbate safety problems.⁵³ Moreover, the claim that these standards do not benefit children and families is not only unsubstantiated for safety, but for program quality and child outcomes more generally.⁵⁴

Broader recommendations to end the program entirely or block grant Head Start funding to states and allow ESAs to replace the program are invalidated by evidence that Head Start benefits children, parents, and taxpayers. Moreover, whether or not the false premise of Head Start ineffectiveness is accepted, the report provides no evidence that states would use funds more effectively with or without ESAs. Direct comparisons of program quality and outcomes indicate that both are higher in Head Start than in private programs.⁵⁵

VII. Usefulness of the Report for Guidance of Policy and Practice

Head Start is long overdue for Congressional reauthorization. Despite recent reductions, Head Start regulations remain voluminous, suggesting room to reduce paperwork and overly detailed regulation. Massive demographic, economic, and policy changes over the past quarter century have altered the population Head Start serves and the context in which it operates, including the other education, social, and health services available to Head Start-eligible families. All these factors provide a strong rationale for calls to "rethink" Head Start. Despite its title, the report reviewed here does not rethink Head Start. Instead, it offers false and misleading claims, superficial comparisons to other programs, and ideologically predetermined policy recommendations. Neither the remarkable societal changes of the last quarter century nor unnecessary bureaucratic procedures that might increase cost or impede effective service provision are identified and addressed. Anyone wishing to rethink Head Start will have to look elsewhere for evidence, analysis, and fresh policy proposals. Policy changes advocated by this report should be paused for a "rethink" based on a full review of the evidence.

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