



How Local Flexibility in Head Start Drives Community- Based Decisions





Head Start empowers children inside and outside the classroom by building essential foundations for early childhood learning, giving them the academic and developmental skills they'll need for school. But Head Start does more than prepare children to succeed in school.

The last 60 years have proven that the best decisions happen locally. That's why we pride ourselves on being a national network with local control: every Head Start program tailors their services to meet the unique needs of the children, families, and communities it serves, specifically connection and adaptation to local communities.

With more than 50,000 classrooms, across the U.S., home-based options, and serving children birth to age five as well as pregnant women, there is no singular look to Head Start. National standards ensure a baseline of quality. In addition, Head Start programs demonstrate a rich breadth and depth of services across locations — reflecting the spirit, priorities and cultures of local communities. This compendium illustrates how Head Start programs collaborate with families across the country, harness the resources and expertise of local community partners, and infuse creativity to meet the unique needs of children.

Head Start builds essential foundations for early learning, equipping children with the academic and developmental skills that support success in school. Early Head Start serves families from pregnancy to age 3 and Head Start Preschool serves children ages 3 to 5 and their families; both programs are collectively referred to as “Head Start.” Depending on community and family circumstances, services may be delivered in a center, at a family child care home, in a school, or through a home visiting model. Head Start is a national network with local control and comprehensive services that focus on four key elements: education, health, parent engagement and support, and local design.

Head Start knows the best decisions happen at the local level. Head Start takes a federal-to-local approach, tailoring how federal dollars are spent according to the unique needs of the communities where it operates as well as with direct input from and oversight by the parents and caregivers of children in the program. Every Head Start program reflects the strengths, resources and challenges within its local communities and has the flexibility to adapt services based on needs assessments and parent voices.

The following examples — a small selection from all 50 states, Washington, D.C., Puerto Rico, and various tribal nations — illustrate the many ways Head Start is adaptable and flexible, allowing communities to shape it to best support what matters most to local families and children. The compendium is organized into topic areas generally focused on early childhood education, health and well-being, parents and families, community partnerships, and the Head Start workforce.

TABLE OF CONTENTS

[Creative Approaches to Learning](#)

[Healthy Early Childhood Development and Learning Supports](#)

Supporting Early Interventions for Children
Mobile Health Units and Community Clinics

[Nutrition and Healthy Children](#)

Fresh Meals
Addressing Food Insecurity
Little Bodies on the Move

[Addressing the Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness](#)

[Local Decisions: Where and When Matter](#)

Strong Local Economy
Location Matters
Working Parent Calendars/Schedules

[American Indian/Alaskan Native Programs](#)

[Two Generations: Empowering Parents](#)

Support for Teen Parents
Adult Education and Job Training
Financial Independence

[Supporting Parent/Child Relationships](#)

Supporting Fatherhood
Creating Brighter Futures

[Parent Leadership](#)

[Community Partnerships To Expand Parent Choice](#)

Schedules for Working Families
Meeting Transportation Needs

[Finding Creative Ways To Build A Strong Workforce](#)

Apprenticeship Programs
Quality Instruction
Recruiting New Teachers

[Conclusion](#)



Creative Approaches to Learning

Early childhood is a critical time period to develop the skills and behaviors children need to become lifelong learners. Head Start programs create engaging environments to encourage children's natural curiosity and exploration and foster a love of learning. Through quality teacher-child interactions, strong developmental standards, and locally chosen curricula, Head Start ensures all children are ready for kindergarten.

Alaska

*Rural Alaska Community
Action Program*

The typical Early Head Start model is not a fit for eight remote Alaska Native communities that engage in subsistence activities, including moving to stay at their fish camps during the summer months. So, the Rural Alaska Community Action Program provides home-based Early Head Start services to meet these communities' needs. This includes providing developmentally appropriate packages to each child, which include parent newsletters and activities specific to the child's age and development that they can take with them to their subsistence camp and continue their learning. The packages include culturally responsive activities that complement the local environment that the children are experiencing at their fish camp.

Dayton, Ohio

*Miami Valley Child
Development Centers*



Photo courtesy of Aullwood Audubon Center

The Aullwood Audubon Center and Farm partners with the Miami Valley Child Development Centers to operate a Head Start classroom on a working farm. The program meets all Head Start standards and follows the High Scope curriculum, chosen by the program leadership and parent policy council, but also, the children spend extensive time outdoors on the farm every day. They go on nature walks with their teachers, tend the gardens, and spend time with Aullwood naturalists who help the children explore their interests outdoors. The children help Aullwood's farmers with farm chores such as feeding animals and gathering eggs.

Portland, Oregon

Albina Head Start

Since its inception in 2012, the highly popular Mandarin program at Albina Head Start has expanded from three classrooms to 17. Daily Mandarin instruction incorporates methods like singing, dancing, movement, art activities, and games. This approach allows children to learn another language while having fun. Albina Head Start has also worked to create a pathway for students to continue learning Mandarin in local schools up through high school. Links to resources connect parents to Mandarin lessons at home.

Vega Baja, Puerto Rico

Head Start at the Christian Military Academy



Photo courtesy of Christian Military Academy

Head Start at the Christian Military Academy (CMA) provides an innovative approach to bilingual education and activities emphasizing technology. Its Nature Room provides children with an intentional, nature-based learning environment that promotes a STEAM model through research, science, and math skills, while fostering health and well-being. With the addition of Early Head Start in 2021, CMA now provides a continuum of learning, with an emphasis on academics and ethical, Christian and moral values, from birth through 12th grade.

Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania

Pittsburgh Public Schools

The Children's Museum of Pittsburgh has partnered with the Pittsburgh Public Schools since 2005 to include two pre-kindergarten/Head Start Preschool classrooms for children ages three to five in the museum. Children use the museum as a learning environment, visiting exhibits and participating in museum programs as part of hands-on exploration that's beyond the traditional classroom.

New Orleans, Louisiana

Clover Head Start

Clover Head Start has partnered with Lycée Français to pilot a French immersion program for their Early Head Start children. The curriculum will promote bilingual instruction on language development, sensory awareness, motor skills, and foundational math concepts.

Boise, Idaho

*Lincoln Early Learning
Center*



Photo courtesy of Lincoln Early Learning Center

The Lincoln Early Learning Center is a locally designed Head Start program, serving 20 children during the morning and another 20 children in the afternoon. Each session serves at least 10 children with developmental delays or disabilities in fully integrated classrooms. The special education and general education teachers partner to conduct Individualized Education Plan (IEP) meetings, complete home visits together, and create family events for children and parents. With no state-funded pre-K, Head Start is often the only resource available for Idaho families.

Hot Springs, Arkansas

*Community Services Office
Head Start/Early Head Start
/ Child Care Partnership*

Unlocking children's potential in STEAM is a goal of the Community Services Office Head Start/Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership programs. For example, children are introduced to vocabulary and hands-on experiments in the classroom. They then participate in field trips to put what they learned into action. Inertia and friction are tested at the local bowling alley. Rocks and quartz are local Arkansas products, and children are taken to dig for crystals.

Healthy Early Childhood Development and Learning Supports



With an understanding that every child develops at their own pace with their own set of unique abilities and skills, Head Start addresses critical health needs so that children are fully ready to learn and grow. And, Head Start brings services where they are needed most – directly to parents in the home, mobile health units, and local community health and dental clinics. For example, Head Start’s inclusion of oral health as a priority helps create good teeth habits in young children, and fosters access to additional dental care. Children in poverty are almost three times more likely to have untreated tooth decay.¹

Some children may take a little longer to meet developmental milestones, while others require additional learning support to fully thrive and meet their full potential. At least 10% of Head Start slots are required to be dedicated to children with disabilities, and many programs serve well over that baseline. Head Start screens all children for potential developmental delays and exceptionalities to ensure they access interventions at the earliest possible age to have the greatest impact. In 2024, more than 570,000 children completed developmental screenings and nearly 400,000 completed behavioral screenings.²

Supporting Early Interventions for Children

Parents are the drivers of their children’s early intervention needs, and Head Start meets those preferences more readily than most other community options.

Brockton, Massachusetts *Self Help Head Start*

Through the Commonwealth Preschool Partnership Initiative, Self Help Head Start now includes special education teachers and speech pathologists working with children onsite, instead of transporting the children to other locations for early intervention services. This has eliminated hours each week in transit for the Head Start children. Classroom curricula have been reviewed and adapted and teachers work with early interventionists to ensure the learning environment is appropriate for all children, no matter their abilities.

Los Angeles, California

*Los Angeles Office of Education
and the Blind Children's Center*



Photo courtesy of Blind Children's Center

Recognizing the gap in services for children with low vision and blindness, the Los Angeles Office of Education and the Blind Children's Center utilized Early Head Start's Locally Designed Option to create infant classrooms for children of all abilities, specializing in those with visual impairments. They modified the Early Head Start home visiting model to provide a place for families to come together to understand the unique ways children with low vision and blindness develop, expand the specialized skills parents need to support children's growth, and find community to learn together.

Marion, Indiana

*Marion Community Schools
Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Marion Community Schools Head Start

In 2020, the Community Schools Head Start took a creative approach to addressing their children's anxiety and mental health challenges caused by the pandemic: a therapy dog. Westin, the therapy dog, helps children regulate their emotions, cope with separation anxiety from their parents, practice patience, and much more. He has also become a reliable friend to the teaching staff, providing comfort during stressful times. Westin has been so successful in his duties that he was recently joined by another helper dog, Tucker.

Vauxhall, New Jersey

*Union Township Community
Action Early Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Union Township Community Action Early Head Start

The Union Township Community Action Organization Early Head Start Child Care Partnership Program created a sensory room to serve as an interactive space to help children who are zero to three years old and who may become overwhelmed and need a calming space. The room supports children on the autism spectrum, as well as all children and staff. The room features tactile, visual, and auditory based activities.

Mobile Health Units and Community Clinics

Calcasieu Parish, Louisiana

J.D. Clifton Head Start

J.D. Clifton Head Start sits right next door to the SWLA Center for Health Services. Through a neighborly collaboration, Head Start children receive free medical and dental care and healthy meals. The Health Center also has a mobile unit that serves the community, including Head Start parents.

Sarpy County, Nebraska

*Sarpy County/ESU #3 Head
Start*

The Sarpy County/ESU #3 Head Start partners with the Department of Health and the Nebraska Methodist College to conduct mobile blood lead testing and other screenings for families prior to the school year.

Anoka and Washington Counties, Minnesota

*Anoka/Washington County
Head Start*

The Anoka/Washington County Head Start partners with two local dental clinics to provide on-site dental services for their children and families. This has made it possible for families to avoid long waiting lists and get necessary dental care and any follow-up treatment much sooner than would be the case in the community at large.

Florida

*Le Jardin Community Center
Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Le Jardin Community Center Head Start

Le Jardin Community Center Head Start in south Florida focuses on health and wellness with a bus that provides onsite ultrasounds for pregnant women, hearing and vision screenings, and well-baby checks. The mental health bus houses a licensed psychologist and nursing students. Their Parent Career Academy supports parents seeking a GED, technical school, a national Child Development Associate (CDA), college degree, or who may simply need assistance finding a job.

Beaufort and Jasper Counties, South Carolina

Beaufort-Jasper EOC

The Beaufort-Jasper EOC launched the Head Start School-Based Oral Health Initiative — funded by The Duke Endowment — to bring intensive dental care directly to Head Start Preschoolers. This initiative is part of a broader statewide push to integrate oral health into early education settings, helping prevent cavities before they develop.

“Economically vulnerable and low-income children in South Carolina are twice as likely to have untreated cavities and only 13% of children receive dental sealants” according to The Duke Endowment.³



Nutrition and Healthy Children

Access to and availability of healthy foods is vital to improve children's health and well-being. Sadly, almost 14 million children live in households that experience food insecurity.⁴ Head Start makes certain children are provided with nutritious meals and snacks, often including months when the program is closed for summer and holidays. Outdoor time is vital for young children, supporting gross motor development, an appreciation for natural environments, and an understanding of where many healthy and whole foods originate. Many Head Start programs have created gardens for children to grow healthy foods, serve from-scratch or farm-to-table meals, and help parents access healthy foods to serve at home.

Fresh Meals

Denver, Colorado

Clayton Early Learning



Photo courtesy of Clayton Early Learning

The Clayton Early Learning program focuses on healthy living. Through on-site food pantries with local fresh vegetables and dairy, gardens in the outdoor space, hydroponic plant towers, and a from-scratch kitchen, children and parents are provided with nutritious food options for their families. Clayton Early Learning also partnered with local nonprofits to update walking trails and a mini amphitheater. Using solar power to save money, the outdoor space provides educational opportunities, such as "Inside the Orchestra," a concert on the grounds where students can participate in play with the Colorado Symphony.

Loudoun County, Virginia

*Loudoun County Public Schools
Head Start*

In Virginia, Loudoun County Public Schools Head Start partners with the Inova Healthy Plate Club which sends health educators who provide "Eating the Rainbow" lessons on healthy eating to all Head Start classrooms. Also, they run healthy cooking classes for parents and children and provide related groceries to replicate the recipe at home.

Utah

*Rural Utah Child Development
Head Start (RUCD)*

Rural Utah Child Development Head Start (RUCD) serves families in rural Utah, where health, nutrition, and access to healthy foods are significant concerns. Based on these needs, RUCD modified its program to increase the food services and to maintain cooks in-house. Classrooms turned into "fresh and healthy" sites where everything is homemade and not processed, premade, or frozen.

South Dakota

*Youth & Family Services (YFS)
Head Start*

The Youth & Family Services (YFS) Head Start serves fresh produce to nearly 500 children in western South Dakota each day, and works to enhance children's food literacy and encourage adventurous eating. Last year, YFS Head Start incorporated homegrown, fresh produce into their nutrition program, growing and serving over 860 pounds of vegetables, nearly 250 pounds of fruit (including melons), and numerous herbs. YFS also empowers families with practical cooking, shopping, and nutrition education tools.

Addressing Food Insecurity

Southern Kennebec County, Maine

*Southern Kennebec Child
Development*



Photo courtesy of Southern Kennebec Child Development

When the only grocery store in the community closed for an extended period after a winter flood, the Parent Policy Council at Southern Kennebec Child Development got to work to help their neighbors. They worked with program staff and a local food bank to access 10,000 pounds of food and worked with community partners to set-up a pop-up food distribution site.

Salt Lake City, Utah

Utah Community Action

To combat food insecurity, Utah Community Action's Central Kitchen prepares fresh, nutritious meals from scratch, delivering them to Head Start children during the school year and providing free dinners to children throughout the summer.

Little Bodies on the Move

Delaware

New Directions Early Head Start

As one of the original Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships, New Directions Early Head Start partnered with the state park system to provide healthy, outdoor opportunities for staff and families. Many home visits and group socializations are conducted in Delaware state parks.

West Laramie, Wyoming

Head Start of Laramie



Photo courtesy of Head Start of Laramie

Head Start of Laramie hosts a “Scooterama” where young children learn about pedestrian, scooter, and bike safety while building gross motor skills. Members of the police department build community connections and awareness. Parents and children discuss the necessity of helmets, the meanings of traffic signs, and general safety.

Addressing the Needs of Children Experiencing Homelessness



More than one million children ages birth to six experience homelessness in the U.S.,⁵ exposing them to potential physical, mental, and developmental risks. Head Start prioritizes unhoused families and partners with community organizations to ensure families' fabric of needs are met. In 2024, Head Start programs across the country served almost 55,000 children and families experiencing homelessness.⁶ Family service workers and other Head Start staff build strong, trusting relationships with families and connect them with vital resources to secure permanent housing.

Atlanta, Georgia

Our House

At Our House, Head Start and Early Head Start children and their families who are experiencing homelessness are provided comprehensive services in one location. With a Head Start center on one floor and shelter on another, children learn while their parents are supported through rapid re-housing assistance, a health care clinic, job skills training, and resume building and job search support.

Los Angeles, California

Venice Family Clinic

In 2024, the community health center Venice Family Clinic completed over 10,475 Early Head Start home visits. Venice Family Clinic has an expanding network of community health clinic locations, Early Head Start centers, and multiple mobile clinics, plus an extensive street medicine program to reach people experiencing homelessness.

Rutland County, Vermont

Rutland County Head Start

Rutland County Head Start serves a community with a high level of homelessness and has made adaptations to meet the transient nature of the population they serve, including partnering with a local children's museum to get free admission for Head Start children. This allows them access to an additional enriching environment as most are living in hotel rooms which provide little in the way of age-appropriate enrichment.

Fredericksburg, Virginia

*Fredericksburg Regional
Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Fredericksburg Regional Head Start

Fredericksburg Regional Head Start partners with a local primary and urgent care practice to provide physicals and other needed health services for unhoused families who may not have active medical insurance. The Head Start family service staff then help them enroll in an active insurance plan. Additionally, they assist with transportation, clothing vouchers, and other supplies needed to transition to stable circumstances.

Poplar, Montana

Fort Peck Head Start

Fort Peck Head Start is designed as a living room-style space in their center to accommodate “home” visits for families with insecure housing. The welcoming environment is also perfect for Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP) and Individualized Education Program (IEP) meetings for families and educators to discuss outcomes and plans for children with developmental delays and learning needs.



Local Decisions: Where and When Matter



Head Start programs are as unique as the families they serve, because they are designed and implemented by community leaders and based on priorities identified through a close look at local needs and parent preferences. Head Start mobilizes resources and partners to ensure services are child-focused and placed exactly where they are needed most, strengthening parent choice. Bringing resources and jobs to local communities, Head Start has been a catalyst for growth in communities and local economies.

Strong Local Economy

Alabama

*Community Action Partnership
of North Alabama (CAPNA)*

In congressional testimony in April 2025, Community Action Partnership of North Alabama (CAPNA) noted its investments in the community. CAPNA has 426 Head Start employees and invested over \$32 million across 15 counties in the last year, including more than \$24 million in wages and benefits. Their procurement activity directly supports more than 130 local businesses, including food suppliers, caterers, maintenance and fuel vendors, mental health professionals, educational and school supply companies, facilities contractors, and local tradespeople.

Location Matters

Children who qualify for Head Start live in every corner of the nation. Whether located at the bottom of the Grand Canyon for remote families or on military installations for active service families, Head Start is there.

Supai, Arizona

Havasupai Head Start

The Village of Supai, located at the base of the Grand Canyon and accessible only by foot, mule, or helicopter, can take up to three hours to reach by foot. Resources can be limited due to the isolated location. Here, the Havasupai Head Start program meets the needs of the children in the tribe by providing high-quality early childhood learning and comprehensive services.

Fort Carson, Colorado

Fort Carson Head Start Center

The Fort Carson Head Start Center, located on the Fort Carson Army base, serves more than 100 children, more than 80% of whom have a parent serving in the military. In addition to early childhood education classes for three to five-year-olds, the program also provides a therapeutic preschool program for young children experiencing severe behavioral challenges. The program is especially equipped in addressing separation issues that come with parental deployment. In the words of one board member, “This program assures military children are not at a disadvantage because their parents chose to serve. These kids are hooah.”

Stanislaus County, California

Stanislaus County Office of Education

The Stanislaus County Office of Education contracts with over 130 family child care homes to provide Head Start, including Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, services across eight counties in California. Utilizing community assessment data, the Family Child Care Home Option (FCCH) provides quality early education for families in high-demand areas. It allows services to be nimble and meet immediate needs, especially in places such as agricultural areas where farmworker families follow the harvest. Overall, the agency serves almost 4,000 children, while the FCCH option reaches more than 900 additional children who would not otherwise have access to Head Start.

Middlesex, Connecticut

ACES Early Head Start

ACES Early Head Start provides comprehensive support to 60 families with infants and toddlers, as well as expectant families, through the Early Head Start Home Based Option. By providing services through a home-based model, ACES ensures personalized support in a family's natural environment. Key community partners include the local health system and churches.

Beaufort and Jasper Counties, South Carolina

Beaufort-Jasper EOC Head Start

Beaufort-Jasper EOC Head Start operates two mobile classrooms. They visit neighborhoods to provide classroom instruction in comfortable community settings and facilitate home-style engagement for families who may feel uneasy about in-home visits. In addition, the mobile units bring visibility and access directly into neighborhoods, helping raise program awareness, and boosting enrollment.

Working Parent Calendars / Schedules

There is no one-size-fits-all family or Head Start calendar. These programs have adapted their services to meet the needs of parents in their communities.

New York

Agri-Business Child Development (ABCD)

In 19 New York counties, Agri-Business Child Development (ABCD) serves approximately 1,000 children, many of whom have parents who are farmworkers. Therefore, ABCD centers adjust care and education hours, based on family surveys, to enable parents to work. In addition to receiving quality education and comprehensive services, 34% of children served by ABCD have a diagnosed disability and 87% are dual language learners.

Mandan, North Dakota

West River Head Start

West River Head Start previously ran four days a week with Fridays off. The local school district, which provides services to children with Individualized Education Programs (IEPs), also runs four days a week, but with Wednesdays off. This misalignment often resulted in some Head Start children with IEPs missing intervention services, and the three-day weekend threw children off the daily routine of attending Head Start, causing high absenteeism. West River Head Start aligned days off to match the school district, improving access to intervention services and reducing absenteeism.

Florida

Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA)

Among the 7,000 children served across Florida by the Redlands Christian Migrant Association (RCMA), approximately 1,700 are Head Start children of agriculture workers. RCMA meets the special needs of these children and families by providing longer days of service and adapted calendars that correspond with the growing season.

Bronx, New York

Cardinal McCloskey Community Services



Photo courtesy of Cardinal McCloskey Community Services

The Cardinal McCloskey Community Services connects with parents over a sustained period of their children's lives by providing a seamless continuum of care and education from Early Head Start through fifth grade. Cardinal McCloskey focuses on reaching students in foster care, those receiving preventive services, and students with disabilities. They address the needs of these students by providing a rigorous academic program in a trauma-sensitive environment.



American Indian and Alaska Native Programs



American Indian / Alaska Native (AIAN) Head Start takes a holistic approach to health, education, family, and community needs in ways that are akin to traditional native learning styles and cultural practices. AIAN Head Start's family- and community-centered model is one of the most effective of the few programs providing resources to address the particular needs of young native children. The Head Start Program Performance Standards provide for the full integration of tribal language and culture in Head Start classrooms, in the curricula, and in program systems and services.

New Mexico

Walatowa Early Childhood Learning Center

The Pueblo of Jemez opened the Walatowa Early Childhood Learning Center to ensure the survival of their traditional language. Over 100 Jemez children have participated in the Walatowa Head Start Language Immersion program since 2013. All teachers are fluent in Towa, the Jemez language. The traditional Jemez calendar, arts, music, and dance are learned through movement, play, and exploration. Home lesson plans support parents to incorporate experiential learning with their children. Families learn nature, science, and math—all in Towa.

Alaska and Michigan

Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, Inc.

In Alaska and Michigan, Inter-Tribal Council of Michigan, Inc., implements the 13 Moons Curriculum as a supplement to the Gikinawaabi curriculum, which includes school readiness, traditional stories, and culture and language activities supporting family and child development.

New Town, North Dakota

Three Affiliated Tribes Head Start



Photo courtesy of Three Affiliated Tribes Head Start

Three Affiliated Tribes Head Start partnered with private companies and the Cal Ripken Sr. Foundation to open a STEM Center to enhance children's understanding of science, technology, engineering, and math. Equipped with 3D printers and screenless robots designed for preschoolers that are driven by color, the center encourages exploration and critical thinking, skills required for tomorrow's leaders.

Browning, Montana

Blackfeet Early Childhood Center's Head Start

In 2024, the Blackfeet Early Childhood Center's Head Start piloted a special project to partner with the Special Olympics to create the Young Athletes Program for children ages two to five. The program pairs the Blackfeet language and sign language with organized activities to develop children's gross motor skills.

Ronan, Montana

Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes

Each year, the Confederated Salish & Kootenai Tribes hold a free child health screening and recruitment event to gauge the demand for Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start classrooms for the following year. The number of classrooms opened is then adjusted and/or moved to meet the needs.



Two Generations: Empowering Parents

Head Start provides a two-generation approach to lift families out of poverty, recognizing that empowering parents helps strengthen families. While children receive comprehensive educational and health services, their families enroll in work and adult education programs, connect to community resources, and engage in parenting activities that emphasize their role as their children's first teacher. Head Start programs conducted almost four million home visits in 2024. Over 600,000 families received services that promote family outcomes, and almost 550,000 parents were employed, in school, or in job training programs.⁷

Support for Teen Parents

Billings, Montana

Young Families Early Head Start

The Teen Parent Program, offered through Young Families Early Head Start, allows young parents to earn high school credit for attending on-site child and parent development classes. The curriculum includes information about prenatal and human growth and development, healthy relationships, and life skills. Last year, 78% of parents earned their high school equivalency diploma.

Washoe County, Nevada

University of Nevada-Reno Early Head Start

University of Nevada-Reno Early Head Start and Washoe County School District have partnered to provide Early Head Start for teen parents at two local high schools. This program consists of center-based child care during the school year, plus three months of home visiting services when school is out of session.

Vermont

Capstone Head Start



Photo courtesy of Capstone Head Start

Located in a largely rural area of Vermont, Capstone Head Start provides opportunities for teen parents seeking to earn their high school diploma. Capstone supports parent choice by providing a wealth of Head Start and Early Head Start options despite its rural location: center-based care, collaborations with local school districts, home visiting, and Child Care Partnerships. The small program strives to ensure options are available to meet the needs of the families.

Adult Education and Job Training

Howard County, Maryland

The Children's Learning Center

The Children's Learning Center brings Head Start programming to the Howard Community College campus to support parents enrolled in higher education and/or career training. In addition, the Head Start program extends the typical early education day through the Maryland Childcare Scholarship Program for qualifying families who need it.

Providence, Rhode Island

The Genesis Center



Photo courtesy of The Genesis Center

At the Genesis Center, parents and children learn together. Through the Children's Friend Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership, parents attend adult education classes while children participate in Head Start. Parents are supported on their path to financial security through adult education classes, career support, bus vouchers, tax assistance, and a special savings-match program through the Bank of Newport.

Financial Independence

East St. Louis, Illinois

The Jackie Joyner-Kersey Head Start Center

The Jackie Joyner-Kersey Head Start Center hosts a 10-week financial literacy course for parents and grandparents through a partnership with the Jackie Joyner-Kersey (JJK) Foundation and a local bank. The course focuses on bank accounts, home ownership, and the importance of saving money, even in small amounts. At the end of the course, parents receive a donation from the JJK Foundation to start a savings account and a personal banker from the Associated Bank.

Joplin, Missouri

Economic Security Corporation
Head Start



Photo courtesy of the Economic Security Corporation

The Economic Security Corporation's Head Start program works with a local bank to build parents' financial literacy and credit scores. Each quarter, the bank hosts a cookout in four different counties to teach parents with low incomes about savings and checking accounts, how to build credit, and other vital financial skills. As a result, parents have increased their credit scores by up to 50% in nine months, and another parent increased their home-buying eligibility from \$40,000 to \$120,000, securing an opportunity to buy a family home. The program has been so successful that they expanded to include employees in the courses.



Supporting Parent-Child Relationships

Head Start family advocates appreciate parents as children's first and most important teachers. Parent education programs strengthen the bond between parent and child. When parents understand children's development, they are able to anticipate and productively respond to challenging behaviors, reducing the risks of maltreatment.

In 2023, Head Start programs completed almost four million home visits, supporting positive connections between parents and their children and helping parents create a home environment ready for learning and playing. Parent educators empowered more than 200,000 fathers as vital participants in their children's educational experiences.⁸

Supporting Fatherhood

Phoenix, Arizona

City of Phoenix Head Start Birth to Five



Photo courtesy of City of Phoenix Head Start Birth to Five

The City of Phoenix Head Start Birth to Five program encourages fatherhood engagement by offering the Men All Need to be Caring, Actively Engaged, Vested and Encouraged (M.A.N.C.A.V.E.) project. In partnership with other local nonprofits, M.A.N.C.A.V.E. is committed to increasing male involvement and equipping fathers and male role models with the tools and support they need to have positive relationships with their children and families.

North Carolina

Enola Group's Early Head Start

The Enola Group's Early Head Start implemented a six-week parenting program, utilizing the Circle of Security curriculum, to support parents ordered by the courts to participate in effective parenting classes. In addition, the Early Head Start program incorporates regular Men's Zones to encourage male involvement and has expanded their home-based model, all to meet the unique needs of Head Start parents.

Wheeling, West Virginia

Northern Panhandle Head Start



Photo courtesy of Northern Panhandle Head Start

Northern Panhandle Head Start is committed to strengthening families by actively promoting father involvement through a dedicated father advocate. This includes individualized home visits, engaging father-child events, and support groups that encourage positive parenting.

Oklahoma City, Oklahoma

*Sunbeam Family Services Early
Head Start*

Sunbeam Family Services Early Head Start has earned a strong reputation among families and family court judges. Sunbeam enrolls children under age three who are in foster or kinship care to Early Head Start, where family advocates support both foster and birth families through early childhood education, developmental screenings and referrals, and other critical services.

Creating Brighter Futures

Marion, Indiana

*Little Giants Preschool Head
Start*

Little Giants Preschool Head Start developed a program specifically to engage incarcerated parents in their child's education. With families' permission, Head Start staff collect letters, cards, school work, and more from children to share by mail with these parents. The parents can write letters back, which staff read to children and share with the parent at home.

Ohio

*LEADS Head Start/Early Head
Start*

At the Ohio Reformatory for Women (ORW), qualifying incarcerated mothers are able to participate in the Achieving Baby Care Success (ABC) nursery program, allowing them to keep their babies with them while in prison. Through this program, they participate in Early Head Start home visiting at the ORW nursery building through a partnership with LEADS Head Start/Early Head Start. Each mother and child receives weekly "home" visits that help them bond with their baby and practice positive parenting. Upon their release, they can connect with their home community for basic needs and typical Early Head Start services.

South Dakota

*Oahe Child Development
Center Early Head Start*

The state women's prison has a Mother Infant Program where a pregnant woman is allowed to keep her child with her if she is set to be paroled within 30 months and meets certain criteria. The prison has a Parent and Child Together (PACT) House where the women stay with their child. Oahe Child Development Center Early Head Start serves the women and children at the PACT house through an agreement with the prison.

Parent Leadership

The Head Start Act created Policy Councils as a formal leadership and policy-making role for parents. Today, every Head Start Preschool and Early Head Start program must have a Policy Council as part of its leadership structure. Through the Policy Council, parents have a voice in decisions about how the program spends money, what children do in their classrooms, and how the program works with community partners.

Building parents into leaders supports them on their journey to independence and empowerment, helping them become the most important advocates for their children.

Pottawattamie County, Iowa

Firefly Early Head Start



Photo courtesy of Firefly Early Head Start

The Policy Council for Firefly Early Head Start, in rural Pottawattamie County, is a vital decision-making authority. Composed of parents/guardians and community members, the Council works closely with program management to provide strategic direction regarding funding, policies, and regulations. Policy Council members receive training on program budget and expenses, Parents as Teachers curriculum requirements, home visit components, and more.

King and Pierce Counties, Washington

*Puget Sound Educational
Service District*

In Puget Sound Educational Service District, Head Start parents become peer educators in a specific content area, such as health, literacy, math, or budgeting/money. They gain experience teaching adult learners and the skills to advocate for themselves and their families. Parents then host “teach backs” where they teach their content knowledge to other parents. The Peer Program has been so successful that past parents have obtained their credentials to become paid instructors.

Washington, D.C.

Educare D.C.

Educare D.C.'s Parent Ambassador program is an eight-month leadership initiative that trains and empowers parents to take an active role in driving positive change within their communities. By stepping into leadership positions, parents help fulfill the mission of Head Start programs like Educare D.C., which aim to support not only children and families but also the broader community. Parent Ambassadors have led a voter registration drive, moderated a City Council Candidate Forum, and played a key role in preserving the District's Early Childhood Educator Pay Equity Fund, ensuring fair wages for early childhood teachers.

Kansas

Northeast Kansas

Community Action (NEK-CAP)

Head Start



Photo courtesy of NEK-CAP Head Start

At the Northeast Kansas Community Action (NEK-CAP) Head Start, parent participation through the Parent Committee and the Policy Council has dramatically increased parents' engagement and strengthened their voices in the program. Parents in leadership roles have secured learning items for children, group activities, and socializations, and even a youth soccer team, providing an outlet for fitness and fun. Parents engage in state and federal level meetings, providing first-hand testimonials about the impact of Head Start on the lives of their children.



Community Partnerships To Expand Parent Choice

Strong community partnerships help stretch limited federal dollars and enable Head Start to adapt to better meet the needs of children and preferences of families. For example, Head Start expands parent choice with local partnerships that extend care for parents who are working or in school, or have transportation needs.

Schedules for Working Families

Pima County, Arizona

Child-Parent Centers, Inc.

At Child-Parent Centers, Inc., the Pima County government funds an extension of the Head Start program day from four hours to seven for 200 families, making it easier for parents to work or attend school.

San Diego, California

The Metropolitan Area Advisory Committee Child Development Program maximizes Head Start and state funding to provide both center-based and home-based options for families. Family child care homes – a smaller and sometimes more local setting – may utilize and adjust or renovate existing space in a home to provide programming that meets Head Start quality standards. The intent is to ensure a full 10-hour day to meet family work schedules and provide additional choices for families.

Honolulu, Hawaii

*Parents and Children Together
Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Parents and Children Together Head Start

Parents and Children Together Head Start in Honolulu's Kahauiki Village is located in an affordable housing community for formerly homeless families. Built through a private/public partnership in response to Hawaii's growing unhoused population, Kahauiki Village includes 153 homes for families with children. Through the Head Start and additional early childhood education funds, the program runs 10 hours a day throughout the year, enabling parents to work or complete education.

Madison, Wisconsin

The Playing Field (TPF)

The Playing Field (TPF) was created through an Early Head Start Child Care Partnership in 2015. Early Head Start and Head Start funding bridges the gap between child care subsidy funds and the true cost of high-quality care. This enables TPF to serve children impacted by homelessness, foster care, and other adversities alongside children from more advantaged families. Buses travel throughout the city picking up children as young as six weeks old, bringing them to TPF sites where they are provided with nutritious meals, clean clothes, and even bathed if needed.

Del Rio, Texas

*Irene C. Cardwell Elementary
Head Start*

Irene C. Cardwell Elementary Head Start supports roughly 460 children, well over the 346 funded slots, due to creative use of blended funding and shared resources. Teacher salaries are shared between Head Start and the school district, which also pays for overhead and other resources. This allows the Head Start program to provide quality education and experiences to more students, as well as increase staff development.

Meeting Transportation Needs

Memphis, Tennessee

Memphis Area Transit Authority has relocated bus stops to be near three Head Start centers as part of the national Civic Mapping Initiative, which aims to overlay public transit route data with the location of Head Start centers in urban areas. This low-cost solution to move bus stops or adjust routes makes Head Start more accessible to families without cars.

Utah

Ute Indian Tribe Head Start

The Ute Indian Tribe Head Start has been serving children in the Uinta Basin of Utah since 1966. The program employs seven bus drivers to support children who might otherwise lack transportation. Each day, about 183 children board a bus for transit to Head Start with the buses averaging nearly 975 miles per day.

Finding Creative Ways To Build a Strong Workforce

Early childhood education is one of the lowest paid professions, forcing Head Start programs to get creative with ways to attract, develop, and retain staff. Despite the challenging conditions, Head Start staff show up for children and families every day, even when there are job opportunities elsewhere with less stress and greater pay. Why? Not only their commitment to children, but also, Head Start's commitment to them and their own potential as professionals and experts in the early childhood education field.

These Head Start programs have found unique ways to increase the quality of instruction and fill teaching positions in their centers.

Apprenticeship Programs

Kentucky

LKLP Community Action Head Start



Photo courtesy of LKLP Community Action Head Start

Recognizing the need for additional pathways to attract quality teachers, LKLP Community Action Head Start partnered with the Governor's Office of Early Childhood's Registered Apprenticeship Program. To date, 12 registered apprentices have gained skills and professional certifications while getting on-the-job training and experience.

Mississippi

Mississippi Action for Progress, Inc.

Mississippi Action for Progress, Inc. (MAP) partners with Copiah-Lincoln Community College to connect early childhood education students with hands-on internship opportunities in the Natchez area. This partnership will allow Co-Lin students to complete online coursework and gain vital in-person experience at MAP Head Start, equipping them with the skills and training needed to thrive in their future careers.

Missouri

*Economic Security Corporation
Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Economic Security Corporation Head Start

To address the shortage of child care educators, the Economic Security Corporation (ESC) Head Start in southwest Missouri worked with the Missouri Department of Labor to develop an on-site apprenticeship program. Local high school students are also placed in Head Start centers to complete apprenticeships. To date, ESC has hired five of the high school students as teachers and promoted 10 teacher aides to teacher positions.

Lewiston, Maine

*Promise Early Education Center
Head Start*

Promise Early Education Center Head Start partners with the University of Maine at Farmington on an apprenticeship grant aimed at supporting early childhood educators working toward a bachelor's degree in early childhood education or special education. This apprenticeship allows educators to earn college credit through hands-on classroom experience and on-the-job mentoring, and also allows for three distinct specializations, including special education.

Quality Instruction

Hennepin County, Minnesota

*Parents in Community Action,
Inc.*



Photo courtesy of Parents in Community Action, Inc.

Parents in Community Action, Inc. (PICA)'s lab school classrooms are staffed with highly skilled and experienced Early Head Start and Head Start teachers who train and provide support to new hires. As part of their onboarding process, new education staff get hands-on experience under the supervision of their lab school teachers who also model for them best practices and compliance with state and federal requirements. New hires spend at least two weeks in the lab school before integrating into their permanent placement in other classrooms. Lab school teachers visit new hires regularly in their new classrooms to continue coaching and providing technical support.

Detroit, Michigan

*Matrix Early Head Start/Child
Care Partnership*



Photo courtesy of Matrix Early Head Start/Child Care Partnerships

Matrix Early Head Start/Child Care Partnership researched and developed their own series of professional development teacher training modules with a goal of investing in teachers so they can invest in children. The comprehensive program connects the dots to successfully facilitate and implement “outside the box” teacher training.

Recruiting New Teachers

Manchester, New Hampshire

Manchester West High School

Through a local collaborative, Manchester West High School includes two Head Start classrooms on the high school campus. The partnership provides needed early learning services for Manchester families while supporting West High students interested in learning about careers in early childhood education or social work.

Lynnwood, Washington

*Edmonds College Head Start &
Early Head Start*

At the Edmonds College Head Start & Early Head Start program, Head Start parents are trained to enter the early childhood workforce through WorkStart. In addition to weekly professional training and development classes, students are paired with mentor teachers for on-the-job coaching and volunteer for 100 hours in classrooms. To date, WorkStart has graduated six classes and 38 participants, of whom 14 have been hired to work in Head Start classrooms.

Fall River, Massachusetts

*Citizens for Citizens (CFC) Head
Start & Early Head Start*



Photo courtesy of Citizens for Citizens Head Start & Early Head Start

At Citizens for Citizens (CFC) Head Start & Early Head Start, almost 60% of staff are parents who have found careers within the program, including teachers, parent advocates, and even grandparent volunteers. CFC ensures parents have the education, work skills, and self-confidence to be successful, whatever their career path.

Conclusion

For every unique Head Start example included in this compendium, there are dozens more that are not highlighted. The federal-to-local structure of Head Start has served communities and partnered with families through the inherent flexibility and local control built into the program by the Head Start Act.

Over the past 60 years, Head Start has evolved to meet changes in families' needs and preferences as well as updated research about the developing brains of young children. And yet Head Start's mission to serve children from the highest need backgrounds remains at the center of what the program does – whether it is a child who has a disability or is experiencing homelessness or navigating family instability due to economic hardships or other disruptions in the home environment.

As Head Start looks to the future, the Head Start community remains committed to that mission, as well as the proven program structure that enables it to happen effectively. Unique locations such as the base of the Grand Canyon, fish camps in Alaska, and on an army base to support military children with extra needs, tell just a part of the story. Creative curricula that include hands-on learning on a farm or in a museum, multilingual programming, or adaptations that meet the needs of children with disabilities or special challenges tell another part. The comprehensive services – dental and mobile health clinics, farm-fresh nutrition, deep parental support in meeting their job or education goals – tell yet another part of the story. Head Start is a national treasure – one that has already changed the lives of tens of millions of children and one that should be protected for future generations.

END NOTES

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⁵Children and Families Experiencing Homelessness, [U.S. Department of Health & Human Services](#) (accessed June 19, 2025).

⁶[PIR: Head Start Program Information Report \(PIR\)](#)

⁷[PIR: Head Start Program Information Report \(PIR\)](#)

⁸[PIR: Head Start Program Information Report \(PIR\)](#)

INDEX

<i>Alabama - 16</i>	<i>South Carolina - 10, 17</i>
<i>Alaska - 4, 19</i>	<i>South Dakota - 12, 26</i>
<i>Arizona - 17, 24, 29</i>	<i>Tennessee - 30</i>
<i>Arkansas - 6</i>	<i>Texas - 30,</i>
<i>California - 8, 14, 17, 29</i>	<i>Utah - 12</i>
<i>Colorado - 11, 17</i>	<i>Vermont - 15, 21</i>
<i>Connecticut - 17</i>	<i>Virginia - 11, 15</i>
<i>Delaware - 13</i>	<i>Washington - 27, 34</i>
<i>District of Columbia - 28</i>	<i>Wisconsin - 30</i>
<i>Florida - 10, 18</i>	<i>West Virginia - 25</i>
<i>Georgia - 14</i>	<i>Wyoming - 13</i>
<i>Hawaii - 29</i>	
<i>Idaho - 6</i>	
<i>Illinois - 22</i>	
<i>Indiana - 8, 25</i>	
<i>Iowa - 27</i>	
<i>Kansas - 28</i>	
<i>Kentucky - 31</i>	
<i>Louisiana - 5, 9</i>	
<i>Maine - 12, 32</i>	
<i>Maryland - 22</i>	
<i>Massachusetts - 7, 34</i>	
<i>Michigan - 19, 33</i>	
<i>Minnesota - 9, 33</i>	
<i>Mississippi - 31</i>	
<i>Missouri - 23, 32</i>	
<i>Montana - 15, 20, 21</i>	
<i>Nebraska - 9</i>	
<i>Nevada - 21</i>	
<i>New Hampshire - 34</i>	
<i>New Jersey - 9</i>	
<i>New Mexico - 19</i>	
<i>New York - 18</i>	
<i>North Carolina - 24,</i>	
<i>North Dakota - 18, 20</i>	
<i>Ohio - 4, 25</i>	
<i>Oklahoma - 25</i>	
<i>Oregon - 5</i>	
<i>Pennsylvania - 5</i>	
<i>Puerto Rico - 5</i>	
<i>Rhode Island - 22</i>	

