

# United States Senate

WASHINGTON, DC 20510

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The Honorable Susan Collins  
Chair  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Patty Murray  
Vice Chair  
Senate Committee on Appropriations  
Washington, DC 20510

The Honorable Shelley Moore Capito  
Chair  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,  
HHS, Education, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

The Honorable Tammy Baldwin  
Ranking Member  
Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor,  
HHS, Education, and Related Agencies  
United States Senate  
Washington, D.C. 20510

Dear Chair Murray, Vice Chair Collins, Chair Baldwin, and Ranking Member Capito:

We request that as you weigh difficult budget choices for the Fiscal Year 2026 Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education appropriations bill, you provide the highest feasible funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG), Head Start, Early Head Start, Preschool Development Grants, and early intervention services available through the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C (Grants for Infants and Families) and Part B Section 619 (Preschool Grants). Together, these programs provide children with the early learning experiences that they need to succeed in school, work and life, and they support parents in their efforts to provide for their families.

Accordingly, we specifically request that the Fiscal Year 2026 appropriations bill provide the following:

- Child Care and Development Block Grant (CCDBG) – An additional \$3.65 billion (for a total of \$12.4 billion), which will expand the base CCDBG budget to help grow the supply and availability of care for more families.
- Head Start – An additional \$1.94 billion (for a total of \$14.91 billion) to sustain and support the Head Start workforce, provide flexibility to address local quality improvement priorities, address incidents of childhood trauma, support the expansion of Early Head Start and Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships, and restore critical purchasing power while addressing deferred maintenance issues and facility constraints.
- Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) – An additional \$392 million for early intervention services provided under IDEA Part C (for a total of \$932 million) and \$83 million for preschool special education services under Part B, Section 619 (for a total of \$503 million). This funding is essential to ensure that young children with disabilities are ready to learn when they enter school.
- Preschool Development Grants Birth through Five (PDG B-5) program – Robust funding to support states' and territories' efforts to increase the quality and efficiency of existing early learning programs and systems.

Funding for early care and education programs represents one of our greatest opportunities for a significant return on federal investments. Child care enables parents to work productively, contribute to our economy, and gain and maintain financial stability for their families. In addition, research has demonstrated that high-quality early childhood education is an effective strategy for improving the developmental outcomes and long-term success of children, especially low-income kids. Renowned economists, including Nobel Laureate James Heckman and former Federal Reserve economist Art Rolnick, have demonstrated that high-quality early education can produce up to \$16 in benefits for every \$1 spent. This substantial return on investment is derived largely from long-term savings associated with a reduced need for special education, improved health outcomes, higher rates of high school and college graduation, decreased dependence on welfare programs, and increased workforce productivity of children who receive a high-quality early education.

Despite the promise of substantial returns, federal early childhood programs reach only a fraction of eligible children and families. According to the U.S. Government Accountability Office, only approximately 14 percent of children who are eligible for federal child care assistance receive it. Furthermore, CCDBG and Head Start programs serve just a fraction of eligible families. Recent data shows that only 15 percent of eligible families received a subsidy under CCDBG. Additionally, only 36 percent of eligible families had access to Head Start and 11 percent of eligible families had access to Early Head Start. Similarly, federal investments in both the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) Part C infant and toddler program and Part B, Section 619 preschool program have failed to match increases in both the number of children served and inflation. In addition to increasing families' access to these programs, federal funding also helps states that are working hard to improve the quality of their early childhood education programs.

These investments are crucial in light of the Administration's recent attacks on Head Start, which are contrary to the Head Start Act and the fiscal year 2025 appropriations act. Additional funding is especially important to counter the Administration's efforts to freeze funds, close regional offices, and delay payments and grant renewals. Laying off staff at the Office of Child Care and the Office of Head Start within the Department of Health and Human Services, which administer program regulations, provide support to providers and disburse funds, only serves to undermine these essential programs. As providers around the country face challenges and uncertainty, robust funding for affordable child care and early childhood education is especially important to ensure that the families who rely on these services can continue to depend on them.

High-quality, affordable child care and early childhood education remains out of reach for many families. In more than half of states in our country, the average annual cost of full-time, center-based child care is more expensive than the average annual cost of in-state college tuition. Half of Americans live in places with a shortage of licensed child care providers or slots, which particularly affects rural populations. While these workforce shortages have existed for years, these issues have only been exacerbated by the pandemic and its aftermath. Now is the time to increase the federal investment in early care and education and help all children achieve their full potential.

We are grateful for your work to provide historic and bipartisan investments in child care in recent fiscal years. We were particularly pleased to see the large increases in CCDBG and Head Start funding appropriated for Fiscal Year 2024. Yet, further investments are critical to fully address gaps in the affordability, availability, and quality of child care. The pandemic shined a light on how critical child care is to our economy and the financial stability of families, as well as the precarious state of our child care infrastructure due to chronic underinvestment.

Underinvestment in child care not only limits opportunities for children, but it also drives economic hardship for working parents, especially mothers; child care workers, who are primarily women; and employers who struggle to recruit and retain workers. Families are facing an even smaller supply of care options, and the sector needs sustained investments to continue building a more stable future. Child care is a crucial part of our economic infrastructure, and we need to treat it as such.

Improving the long-term outcomes of our nation's most vulnerable children is crucial to the future health of our economy. Investing in high-quality early care and education is a proven strategy for achieving this goal, and it is vital that all children are able to benefit from high-quality early education. We therefore ask that you support robust funding for the Child Care and Development Block Grant, Head Start and Early Head Start, and Preschool Development Grants so that children and families continue to have access to affordable, high-quality early education options and states can continue to work towards improving the quality of their early childhood education systems. We also ask that you continue to support robust funding for Part C and Part B Section 619 of IDEA, which support critical early intervention services for infants and toddlers.

Thank you for your consideration.

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