



# Building the Foundation

## Head Start Strengthens Early Learning Nationwide

Head Start provides funding directly to local grantees who operate in **rural, urban, and suburban communities** across the country and tailor programs based on their community's specific needs and resources. With a proven record of improving outcomes for the children and families it serves, many cities and states have built their early learning systems around Head Start and rely on these grants, paired with other funding sources, to serve children from a variety of backgrounds. Further, as states increasingly invest in preschool, Early Head Start is often the only source of free early learning services for children under three. **In this way, Head Start has become inextricable from child care and early learning systems nationwide, helping to maximize the reach and impact of local, state, and federal funds.**

### Impact On City and State Preschools

With its 60-year history, Head Start predates many other public funding sources for child care and preschool, and cities and states have built their early learning systems on the foundation of Head Start programs. Consider the following examples:



In recent years, **Michigan's Great Start School Readiness Program** (GSRP) has prioritized serving more children in school-day programs (6.5 hours per day), rather than part-day programs (3 hours per day), and have relied on GSRP-blended slots that are funded partially by GSRP and partially by Head Start to increase the supply of school-day seats.



In **Omaha**, Head Start is part of an **integrated preschool program** providing services to 899 students through Head Start and Early Head Start, enhancing existing programs to ensure children's school readiness and social-emotional and mental health and offering support for families.



Through a **partnership** among local school districts and Head Start grantee **Community Action Project of Tulsa County (CAP)**, **more than 70% of Tulsa's 4-year-olds** attend preschool. More than 1,600 children attend CAP classrooms, which are often adjacent to public schools, helping to ensure continuity of services from birth to kindergarten. The partnership **has been highlighted** for its success in pooling resources and expertise to provide services that exceed the capacity of any one organization.



To maximize use of existing resources, **West Virginia's Universal Pre-K** requires 50% of preschool classrooms to be a collaboration between school districts and community programs, including Head Start grantees. In the 2023-2024 school year, the collaboration rate was 83% with 12% of 3-year-olds and 5% of 4-year-olds attending Head Start.



In partnership with **D.C. Public Schools**, Head Start funds directly support pre-k for 250 children across six elementary schools, as well as providing supplemental services to both eligible and non-eligible children in 28 classrooms. This includes employing Family Service Specialists to support regular attendance, transitions to kindergarten, and access to food, transportation, and other essentials.

## Impact On States

Head Start accounts for **more than 10 percent of total preschool enrollment** in many states, and in some states as much as 20 percent.

While state and local leaders are increasingly prioritizing funding for early learning, Head Start will continue to play a critical role in serving the most vulnerable children and families, particularly as states face budget constraints. To make the most of limited state resources, the **National Governors Association recommends** ongoing efforts to develop comprehensive, statewide strategies that utilize all avenues for a mixed-delivery system, including strong coordination with Head Start Collaboration offices.

## Impact On Child Care Supply

Head Start is a key source of child care nationwide, particularly in rural communities where Head Start might be the only licensed child care option. In a **2018 analysis**, 86% of rural counties nationwide had Head Start centers, and in 10 states, 48 rural counties would have no child care options without Head Start.

Head Start also plays a significant role in providing care for infants and toddlers. While free or low-cost preschool is available in many states, Early Head Start is often the only source of free early learning services for children under three. Where state investment in preschool has created additional capacity for 3- and 4-year-olds, **providers have converted their Head Start slots to Early Head Start slots**.

Additionally, **Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships** have helped expand access to Head Start's signature education, health, and nutrition services in a variety of settings, benefitting all children in the care of participating providers and extending the reach and impact of federal dollars. Ongoing funding for Early Head Start is essential to sustaining this vital support for children under three and their families.

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### Head Start In Rural Counties

In **Graham County, Arizona**, Head Start serves around 84% of children under 5 in poverty, and Head Start slots made up 90.4% of the share of total licensed child care slots.

In **Braxton County, West Virginia**, Head Start serves an estimated 88.8% of children under 5 in poverty.

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## For More Information

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### Policy

Amanda Guarino  
aguarino@ffyf.org

### Legislation

Sarah Rubinfeld  
srubinfeld@ffyf.org

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