

Head Start Program Core Elements

MARCH 2026 – Across the early learning landscape, the Head Start Program¹ is upheld as a benchmark for high quality early learning and care due to its commitment to a comprehensive, development-focused strategy, its approach to parent engagement, and its innovative local design. A large body of research has found this unique program design to be highly effective, benefiting children and their families in both the short and long term.² In its 60-year history, Head Start has adhered to essential quality components and, as our understanding of best practices has evolved, continued to improve and refine delivery of services through changes in both federal law and regulations. As the program continues to evolve, the following five elements will remain key to its integrity:

- 1. Prenatal–Five:** Aligned with the most critical period of brain development, Head Start promotes school readiness by offering early learning and care from prenatal to age five, ensuring children receive consistent, developmentally-appropriate support as their needs evolve.
- 2. Comprehensive Services:** Head Start pairs high-quality education with comprehensive services that support a child’s overall health and development and promote family stability and self-sufficiency, addressing the full range of factors that influence child and family well-being and creating the conditions for long-term success.
- 3. Family Engagement and Partnership:** As their child’s first and best teacher, Head Start engages parents as partners in their child’s learning and in program operation and governance, while also providing them with the tools and resources they need to strengthen their families and enhance their children’s outcomes.
- 4. Community Driven:** Local grantees design and deliver services based on their community’s specific needs and resources, allowing for flexibility and innovation while also ensuring geographic coverage across the state.
- 5. Support for Those with the Greatest Needs:** This includes prioritizing children from families with the lowest incomes, with disabilities, experiencing homelessness, and in foster care. Head Start offers comprehensive early learning and family supports to those most removed from opportunity to help them succeed in school and in life.

The following organizations stand in support of these Core Elements:

Acelero, Inc.

Child Care Associates

Child Care Aware of America

Early Care & Education Consortium

First Five Years Fund

National Head Start Association

National Migrant and Seasonal Head Start Association

Save the Children

Start Early

YMCA of the USA

¹Inclusive of Head Start Preschool, which serves children ages 3 to 5, Early Head Start, which supports infants, toddlers under age three, pregnant women, and their families, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start.

²National Head Start Association, “Head Start’s Impact,” <https://nhsa.org/about-nhsa/our-impact/>.