

MEMO: Head Start Message Testing Project

Lead with children. Focus on tangible impact. Strengthen support.

Overview

Head Start has long enjoyed broad, bipartisan support. While the program has strong name recognition, however, there is significant opportunity to expand its reach and create stronger champions among both new and existing audiences.

In 2025–2026, First Five Years Fund, in partnership with First Five Action, conducted a comprehensive messaging project, including quantitative polling and qualitative focus groups, to identify which messages are most effective at building support for Head Start and turning that support into action.

Background

The Environment

Despite broad public support and decades of proven impact, we recognized an urgent need for persuasive Head Start messaging against a backdrop of growing uncertainty including:

- Proposed elimination of Head Start included in Project 2025;
- The January 2025 federal funding freeze, which interrupted funding and created uncertainty for programs and families;
- The April 2025 leaked Office of Management and Budget (OMB) memorandum proposing the elimination of Head Start;
- Service disruptions and temporary program closures during the 2025 government shutdown; and
- Unrest following the Administration's proposal to roll back the bulk of Head Start regulations.

At the same time, public enthusiasm for child care and early learning remains strong.

- Overall concerns about child care affordability run deep, with voters making a clear link between the cost of child care and parents' ability to work and find financial stability. In December 2025 polling, 73% of likely voters said the cost of quality child care is a problem, including 65% of Republicans, 72% of Independents, and 82% of Democrats.
- And in April 2025 polling, nearly 3 out of 4 voters (72%) said federal funding for child care and early learning programs for low-income families is a good investment, including 62% of Republicans, 64% of Independents, and 83% of Democrats. In the same poll, by a more than 2-to-1 margin, voters opposed eliminating funding for Head Start.

Taken together, these highlight the need for clear, compelling messages that cut through political noise and build support among audiences who are sympathetic but may not yet be champions. We also needed to test messages that would intensify support among policymakers and lawmakers across political parties.

KEY TAKEAWAY

Head Start doesn't need to manufacture support from scratch or reverse a downward trend. It needs to intensify the support that already exists using the messages that were found to resonate most.

The most compelling case for Head Start is straightforward:
Children. Services. Impact.

Background

The Objectives

This project sought to:

- Identify the messages that are most persuasive across all audiences, including the Hill, the Administration, advocates, and the general public.
- Understand which themes increase support among those who are not yet strong champions.
- Equip advocates with research-backed language that could consistently be used across communications.

The Research Approach

This project included both quantitative and qualitative research:

- **National Poll #1 (April 2025):** Conducted by UpONE Insights immediately following the leaked OMB memorandum, this survey measured baseline support among more than 1,000 registered voters nationwide.
- **Ad Testing (October 2025):** Conducted by BattleAxe Digital, this tested potential message frames before the next round of polling to give insight into messages worth testing.
- **National Poll #2 (December 2025):** Conducted by McLaughlin & Associates, this national survey of more than 1,600 likely voters tested the effectiveness of persuasive messages in support of Head Start among registered voters.
- **Focus Groups (April 2026):** Six online focus groups with Republican voters, Independent voters, and Hispanic voters explored how audiences understood and responded to Head Start messaging.
- **Stats Testing (August 2026):** Conducted by BattleAxe Digital, this tested the efficacy of specific Head Start statistics as tools of persuasion.

The Findings

The Starting Point

Name recognition and good will.

- In April 2025 polling, 4 out of 5 voters said they support Head Start.
- This was remarkably consistent across groups. Seventy-nine percent of both men and women supported the program, as did 80% of parents and nonparents.
- This tracked across age groups ranged from 71% of voters 18-34 to 85% of voters 65+.
- And across racial demographics, with 83% of Black voters, 79% of White voters, and 78% of Hispanic voters.
- We saw similar numbers in December 2025, with 87% of likely voters saying they support Head Start, including 84% of Republicans and Independents and 94% of Democrats.

NATIONAL POLL

4 out of 5 voters (79%)
support Head Start, including:

73%	Republicans
76%	Independents
86%	Democrats

The Findings

The Biggest Opportunity *Strengthening shallow support.*

Initial polling showed Head Start begins from a position of strength.

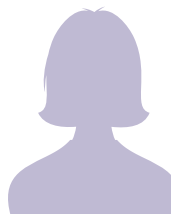
- The December 2025 poll showed that while there is strong name recognition for Head Start, there is a lot of room for growth in persuading people who are not yet strong champions.
- Although a majority of voters had a favorable opinion of Head Start, awareness was shallow. By a greater than 4-to-1 ratio (52% to 12%), the majority of Americans surveyed have a favorable opinion of Head Start.
- Nineteen percent had no opinion, and another 17% had never heard of Head Start. This provides an opportunity to fill a vacuum and expand the program's positive image with a new audience.
- After receiving a fuller description of the program, support skyrocketed 35 points, from 52% to an average of 87%.
- In ad testing, among respondents initially unfamiliar with Head Start, learning more had a strong effect on increasing positive views, indicating that individuals with limited prior knowledge are highly persuadable when introduced to Head Start's impact.

Focus Groups

Multiple participants across all six sessions demonstrated a limited awareness of the program.



"I don't really know too much about it. I've heard the name, but beyond that, I can't tell you much."



"I remember hearing about it, but I don't remember what it's pertaining to. It's just more so the name."

Takeaway

People respond to Head Start when they understand specifically what it does for children. There is a significant opportunity to build champions for the program among those who are open to Head Start but have not yet formed a strong understanding of what it does. Explaining Head Start in clear, concrete terms while drawing the connection to children dramatically strengthens support.

Recurring Themes

Children. Services. Impact.

Three themes consistently emerged across polling, focus groups, and message testing.

First, **people want to focus on children.** Messages that generated the most enthusiastic buy-in emphasized how the program helps children (particularly those facing the greatest challenges) get the strong start they need to succeed. When discussing services or parents, people responded best it was framed as a way to help ensure children have the resources, stability, and care they need to thrive.

Second, backing for the program grew when people learned specifics about comprehensive services provided by Head Start, including **child care, early education, health and developmental services, social skills, and preparation for the future.**

Finally, data points that were most effective in increasing overall support and the likelihood of taking action were **tied to impact**, specifically graduation rates and school readiness. People wanted to see that the program achieved something in the lives of children.

Recurring Themes

In Their Own Words: *Polling*

Given the opportunity to describe Head Start in their own words in the December 2025 poll, the top terms were “low income,” “early education,” “preschool,” and “prepare for school,” showing that the phrases with the most sticking power for people are tied to impact.

In Their Own Words: *Focus Groups*



“It is extremely important to help young children who have special needs. They do not deserve to be left behind in that regard. They should be helped where they need help.”



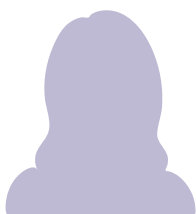
“I think it’s a huge benefit to the city and to the kids and to, like, society as a whole, just getting kids more prepared and ready for school and ready for real life.”



“I wouldn’t want to cut Head Start, only because it sounds like it’s helping the poorest of the poor.”



“Where do kids go if, you know, they don’t have a program like this? Do they just fall through the cracks?”



“Head Start can find out issues and tackle them a lot earlier rather than later on when they’re in third, fourth, or fifth grade and having problems because they fell behind.”



“I would wanna see some stats, like the success rate overall, and I don’t know, you know, we’d have to quantify what success rate means. Like how many of them go to college or, you know, graduate high school.”

In Their Own Words: *A Note From The Pollster*

“Across all of the focus groups, the overall positive view of Head Start was based solely on its description focused on its role as a federally funded, community-based program providing early learning, health, and nutrition services to young children experiencing poverty.

Participants liked that it supports children academically through early learning, that it supports working families, offers essential developmental screenings, and helps to break cycles of poverty.”

MESSAGING

Messages That Work

Intensifying Support, Motivating Action.

When we tested specific messages, a pattern quickly emerged. Most messages were popular. However, to expand awareness and turn approval into action, messages that focused on **children, services, and impact** performed best.

Among people who initially expressed low support for Head Start, the following messages increased their support by as much as

89%

Children with the Greatest Needs

"Head Start services are provided to children in poverty, kids facing homelessness, and children in foster care. Head Start offers education, medical screenings, nutrition, and other services to help break the cycle of need."

Comprehensive Services

"When a child enters a Head Start, they get more than a classroom. They find healthy meals, medical screenings and services, and a community that helps them build social skills and manage their emotions and behavior."

Impact

"Head Start gives struggling families in your community an opportunity to provide a more stable home life, the ability to work to become more financially secure, and the chance to raise healthier, more confident children ready to be successful in school."

Statistics That Resonate

Among the many points of data and statistics tested, two proved to be the most persuasive in building support for Head Start among the general public.

School Readiness: "Head Start improves children's early literacy and vocabulary development, helping them enter school ready to learn."

Graduation: "Low-income children who attend Head Start are 2.7% more likely to graduate from high school, 8.5% more likely to enroll in college, and 39% more likely to graduate from college."

Less Persuasive Messaging

Many messages we regularly use to talk about Head Start may resonate with supporters and targeted audiences, but were less successful in building new champions. These included:

- **Focus on Adults:** Messages focusing primarily on the services Head Start provides for parents or adults were less successful than those that centered on children.
- **Return on Investment:** Messages focused on return on investments for communities or other abstract benefits to society were much less persuasive than tangible descriptions of ways Head Start helps children and families. In the stats testing, an ROI stat ("Every \$1 invested in Head Start generates roughly \$7 in long-term benefits") did not meaningfully increase support.
- **Abstract Value:** This was reinforced in ad testing, where the least successful performer was, "From classrooms to careers, Head Start fuels growth by helping parents work and businesses thrive." This message was abstract and, notably, did not mention the benefit to children.

Takeaway

If we consistently lead with children, focus on tangible impact, and use clear language, we can turn general goodwill into stronger support and advocacy for the Head Start program.

Message Recommendations

We Have Opportunity.

Head Start has broad approval that deepens as people learn more about the impact the program has on children.

Lead with children.

They are our strongest messengers.

Make Head Start tangible.

Information can dramatically increase support. Specificity beats abstractions.

Use plain, concrete language.

The most effective messages don't need audiences to understand policy terminology or program mechanics.

Use stories and data.

Stories make the topic relatable, but strategic use of facts and data build integrity.

Build audiences.

The goal is both to persuade new people to support Head Start, but also to move supporters from general approval to active champions.

THE BOTTOM LINE

The biggest challenge with public Head Start support is not widespread opposition. It's insufficient understanding.

This research provides suggestions for using communications and messaging to turn Head Start's broad approval into deeper, more durable support.

By consistently leading with the messages that resonate most, the Head Start community can widen its reach and build a stronger foundation for future policy and funding decisions.

About First Five Years Fund

The first five years last forever. At First Five Years Fund, we work to protect, prioritize, and build bipartisan support for quality child care and early learning programs at the federal level. Reliable, affordable, and high-quality early learning and child care can be transformative, not only enhancing a child's prospects for a brighter future but also bolstering working parents and fostering economic stability nationwide. Learn more at www.ffyf.org.