



ECE Workforce Research Highlight

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Five Things to Know About Recruitment and Retention in Head Start in 2026

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National ECE Workforce Center Research Highlights provide a focused look at topics relevant to the ECE workforce. These topics emerge through technical assistance activities or learnings from the state or federal policy landscape.

Head Start is a federally funded program serving hundreds of thousands of children from zero to five and their families each year, with a focus on those experiencing poverty or other risks to healthy development.¹ Decades of research show that participation in Head Start is associated with positive outcomes for children and families, particularly when programs deliver consistent, high-quality services.^{2,3,4}

At the center of that quality is the Head Start workforce. Head Start educators are among the most highly trained early childhood professionals in the country,^{5,6} with federal standards requiring specific credentials and ongoing monitoring of teacher-child interactions.⁷ At the same time, the work is complex and demanding—educators support children and families with wide ranging and often intensive needs. Research has documented high levels of stress and burnout in the early care and education (ECE) workforce, with Head Start educators experiencing greater job demands and poorer well-being than other early educators.⁸

In recent years, Head Start programs across the country have faced persistent challenges recruiting and retaining qualified staff.^{9,10,11} Recent data show that the average turnover rate is 22.3 percent among pre-K education and child development staff, with nearly half of programs experiencing high turnover—indicating that workforce instability is widespread rather than isolated.⁹ Programs also report fewer qualified applicants than before the COVID-19 pandemic, alongside increased competition from K–12 settings.¹²

Addressing these challenges is critical to ensuring that Head Start programs can continue to deliver high-quality services to children and families. **In this research highlight, we share five key things to know in 2026 about recruitment and retention in Head Start.** These insights draw on new research conducted by the National ECE Workforce Center, including analysis of Program Information Report (PIR) data from the 2023–2024 program year, a review of research and policy literature, and focus groups with Head Start leaders conducted in fall 2025.

⁹ Authors' analysis of Program Information Report data.

1 Compensation is foundational to recruitment and retention, but not sufficient on its own.

- Based on our PIR analysis, compensation is the most frequently cited reason for educators who leave Head Start. Almost 1 in 4 (22%) of staff departures are attributed to higher compensation, with many staff moving to state pre-K or other early childhood programs.
- In both our PIR analysis and focus groups, Head Start leaders consistently identified low wages and limited benefits as the primary barrier to attracting qualified candidates and a key reason staff leave.
- At the same time, over half of staff departures are reported as “other reasons” in the PIR data, reflecting a broader set of factors including workload, job stress, issues with credentials, career changes, family needs, and educational pursuits.

Competitive compensation is the foundation for recruitment and retention, but improving pay and benefits alone is unlikely to stabilize the workforce without addressing broader job quality and working conditions.

2 Retention depends heavily on day-to-day working conditions and whether staff feel supported in the job.

- In focus groups, Head Start leaders report high levels of stress and burnout among staff, driven by increasing numbers of children with complex needs, staffing shortages, and difficulty maintaining adult-child ratios.
- Limited access to behavioral, mental health, and other specialized supports makes it harder for staff to meet children’s and families’ needs without becoming overwhelmed, according to focus group participants.
- Research finds that staff are more likely to stay when they have positive work environments (e.g., adequate staffing for paid time off, positive connections with colleagues), strong leadership and supports (e.g., leaders understand and advocate for staff supports, access to professional development opportunities), and manageable workloads—and more likely to leave when job demands are high and supports are limited.^{13,14,15}

Retention depends on making the work sustainable through adequate staffing, accessible supports, and manageable workloads.

3 Recruitment and retention challenges vary across programs and contexts.

- Turnover rates for education and child development staff differ by agency type: Programs in school systems have the lowest average turnover (17%), while Community Action Agencies and Tribal programs have among the highest (around 24%), according to PIR data.
- PIR data indicates that smaller grantees tend to experience higher turnover than larger, multi-program systems, which may have more capacity to stabilize staffing.
- Programs operate in different local labor markets and funding contexts, shaping their ability to compete for staff and sustain stable workforces.

Workforce challenges are widespread—but not uniform. Program structure, agency type, and local context all shape recruitment and retention.

4 Career pathways matter most when they are accessible, aligned, and rewarded.

- Focus group participants noted that career pathways can support recruitment and retention by helping staff build skills and advance, and many programs use grow-your-own models or internal career pathways to support parents who may become program staff and incumbent staff to pursue education while working.
- However, leaders report significant barriers, including the cost and time required to earn credentials, limited access to higher education programs, and misalignment between education requirements and compensation.
- Many staff leave before they can benefit from career advancement opportunities, particularly when compensation, workload, and job stability are not sufficient to sustain them in the role.

Career pathways are most effective when they are accessible, aligned with workforce needs, and connected to meaningful increases in compensation and advancement.

5 Lasting progress will require cross-system alignment, not just program-level fixes.

- Focus group participants highlighted that Head Start programs operate within a complex set of federal, state, and local systems that are often not well aligned, including the areas of compensation, qualifications, and funding.
- Leaders report that limited, siloed, or unpredictable funding constrains their ability to raise wages, improve working conditions, and invest in staff development.
- Partnerships with states, higher education, and workforce systems can help expand pipelines, align career pathways, and improve access to resources—but require coordination across systems.

Sustainable solutions will require coordinated action across federal, state, and local systems—not just individual program efforts.

Program and Policy Considerations

The findings in this brief point to several considerations for those working to strengthen the Head Start workforce:

- **Pair compensation with working conditions.** Efforts to increase wages may be most effective when combined with investments in staffing levels to provide adequate coverage for breaks, planning time, and leave; access to specialized supports; and manageable workloads.
- **Focus on day-to-day job quality.** Retention is closely tied to whether staff feel supported in their roles, including access to mental health and behavioral supports and strong supervision.
- **Tailor strategies to context.** Variation across program types, size, and local labor markets suggests that recruitment and retention approaches may need to be adapted rather than standardized.
- **Align career pathways with tangible benefits.** Education and credentialing efforts may be more effective when they are accessible and clearly connected to compensation and advancement.

- **Look beyond program-level solutions.** Many of the factors shaping recruitment and retention—including funding, compensation structures, and qualification requirements—are influenced by broader federal, state, and local systems.

Together, these considerations reinforce that strengthening the Head Start workforce will likely require coordinated strategies that address compensation, working conditions, and system alignment at the same time.

Conclusion

Recruitment and retention challenges in Head Start are widespread, persistent, and consequential—often resulting in classroom closures and fewer children served.¹⁶ While individual programs are innovating, they cannot solve these challenges alone. The evidence is clear: Stabilizing the workforce will require coordinated action to improve compensation; strengthen day-to-day working conditions; and better align funding and workforce systems across federal, state, and local levels. The path forward is not a single solution, but a set of reinforcing strategies that, together, make Head Start jobs sustainable, competitive, and valued.

Related Reading

[Early Findings From Three States Working to Strengthen ECE Workforce Compensation](#): This National ECE Workforce Center case study shares early findings from Connecticut, Maryland, and Minnesota as they address compensation challenges, including their multi-sector change teams that includes representation from Head Start.

[Multi-Sector & Multi-Partner Collaboration in Systems Change for the ECE Workforce](#): This National ECE Workforce Center brief describes the crucial nature of broad collaboration to create meaningful and sustainable change for and with the ECE workforce. It outlines best practices and strategies for effective collaboration among policy, program, and community leaders.

[Competitive Bonuses for the Head Start Workforce](#): This webinar from the Office of Head Start discusses strategies related to bonuses to support retention and recruitment of program staff.

[Spotlight on the Head Start Workforce: Program Strategies to Improve Well-Being and Increase Retention](#): This brief from the Administration for Children and Families describes strategies programs have used to improve staff retention and well-being.

Data Sources for this Highlight

Three sets of research and analysis support the key findings in this research highlight:

1. We conducted original analysis of the Program Information Report (PIR) data from the 2023-24 program year. Analyses included descriptive and comparative statistics to identify distributions and patterns of recruitment and retention across Head Start programs. We refer to this data source as “PIR analysis” when describing insights from these data.
2. We conducted seven focus groups in fall 2025 that included 21 Head Start leaders from around the country who represented a range of program size and structures. We conducted thematic analysis to identify recurrent patterns reported by the leaders. We refer to this data source as “focus groups” when describing insights from these data.
3. We conducted a review of research and policy literature policy from the last five years to identify the current state of recruitment and retention and to identify promising practices for addressing the staffing crisis in Head Start. We refer to this as “literature review” when describing insights from these data and provide direct citations for the referenced papers.

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Who Are We?

The National Early Care and Education (ECE) Workforce Center is a joint research and technical assistance center that equips state and local leaders to drive change in ECE workforce policy. This center uses a research-to-practice model to advance compensation and career advancement for early educators.

Learn more and get in touch with us at our website:
www.nationaleceworkforcecenter.org

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