



# Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunities for Families in Head Start Programs

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## Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunities for Families in Head Start Programs ACF-OHS-IM-25-04

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### Information Memorandum

**To:** All Head Start Recipients and State Agencies that Receive Head Start Collaboration Office Grants

**Subject:** Expanding Educational Freedom and Opportunities for Families in Head Start Programs

#### Information:

This Information Memorandum (IM) outlines Head Start programs' critical role in promoting parent choice to select the early care and education (ECE) providers that best meet their family's needs for their children, and recognizes that Head Start programs serve as the foundation for school readiness by preparing young children for academic and social success. Through this work, Head Start programs also help parents understand school choice options, including ECE, and can serve as a valuable resource to prepare families to effectively utilize the options in their communities. With this IM, we strongly encourage Head Start programs to facilitate parent choice in three key ways: 1) actively participating in state and local efforts to coordinate ECE enrollment and services and promote access to a variety of ECE

options in the state or local community; 2) engaging families to determine, develop, and improve their program model and consider how their program offerings respond to family needs and promote family choice; and 3) re-examining community partnerships and evaluating how they can be strengthened and expanded in ways that support family choice, including through connections to faith-based settings for families that desire this option.

## **Promoting Family Choice Through Active Participation in State and Local Efforts to Coordinate Early Care and Education**

Through this IM, we encourage Head Start programs to be active participants in state and local efforts to coordinate ECE enrollment and services to support families' access to options that best fit their needs. Programs should consider how they can enter or expand their participation in mixed delivery systems that provide families access to a variety of ECE choices. A mixed delivery approach to ECE offers families early learning experiences in a range of settings, including community-based and private child care centers, public schools, charter schools, faith-based settings, and family child care (FCC) homes, many of which operate Head Start programs. Well-integrated ECE services at the state or local level help promote a variety of options — including Head Start programs — to support parent choice and better align with family needs and desires for their children's education and care. Efforts to better integrate ECE service options within a state or community can help provide families with the choices they need to select the program that is right for their family, allowing more children and families to benefit from access to needed services.

### **Statutory and Regulatory Requirements that Promote Family Choice Through Coordination**

Several provisions within the Head Start Act (the Act) and the Head Start Program Performance Standards (the Performance Standards) direct Head Start programs and Head Start Collaboration Offices (HSCOs) to engage in state and local efforts that help families access their choice of ECE programs for their children's early care and education.

Section 642(e) of the Act and Section 1302.53(a)(2)(ii) of the Performance Standards lay out expectations for programs to establish collaborative relationships with elementary schools, state preschool and child care providers, and agencies that provide services to children with disabilities. Strong partnerships with state ECE leadership, local educational agencies, and other early childhood programs, including faith-based programs, are critical to foster opportunities for family choice in early childhood settings.

The Office of Head Start (OHS) encourages programs and HSCOs to coordinate with other early childhood programs and participate in state and local initiatives. Section 1302.53(b) of the Performance Standards requires programs to actively participate in coordinated systems at the state and local level to better promote a variety of early education services in their local community. More specifically, programs must establish memoranda of understanding with local agencies that manage publicly funded preschool programs (Section 642(e)(5) of the Act and 45 CFR § 1302.53(b)(1)). To the extent practicable, programs should also participate in their state or local quality rating and improvement system (QRIS) (45 CFR § 1302.53(b)(2)). State-based QRIS can help families understand the range of ECE choices available to them and determine the quality of such options. Programs should also participate in state education data systems through the sharing and integration of relevant Head Start data, to the extent practicable (45 CFR § 1302.53(b)(3)). Head Start participation in state efforts designed to communicate and track parent choices for their children help ensure that Head Start programs are an integral part of the state's ECE landscape and that parents have a full understanding of all choices in a mixed delivery system.

### **Strengthening a System of ECE Mixed Delivery Through Coordinated Enrollment**

Head Start programs have an opportunity to actively participate in state or local coordinated enrollment systems that streamline access to a diverse array of ECE providers — including Head Start, state-funded preschool, public pre-K, private child care centers, and family child care homes. QHS strongly urges Head Start programs to collaborate with state and local agencies to develop and refine these systems, ensuring they efficiently connect families to ECE options that best meet their needs. Coordinated enrollment, such as through a unified online application or community-based intake process, empowers parents by simplifying access to clear, actionable information — such as program schedules (e.g., full-day or part-day), eligibility rules (e.g., income or age criteria), and available slots — while eliminating wasteful redundancies like multiple applications. This efficient approach maximizes the use of ECE resources across a region or community, and ensures families can choose their preferred setting, including faith-based options, in line with the directive to enhance educational freedom. Head Start programs should take specific steps to support this effort, such as partnering with state and local education departments to integrate Head Start slots into shared enrollment databases and systems, providing real-time updates on openings in Head Start program locations, and joining local planning committees to advocate for family-friendly system designs, thereby aligning their recruitment and enrollment processes with broader state or local efforts to optimize resources and empower parents.

## **Determining, Designing, and Improving Head Start Program Models Based on Family Input**

Head Start programs are uniquely positioned to engage families to shape program models that enhance parental choice and align with community needs. Under § 1301.3(b) of the Performance Standards, families are required members of the policy council, a critical mechanism through which Head Start programs gather family input to continually improve services. QHS encourages programs to leverage the policy council and other engagement structures to ensure program designs reflect family preferences, support parental decision-making, and expand access to an array of ECE options, empowering families to choose the best educational paths for their children. To further this goal, Head Start programs may accept eligible children from outside their designated service areas when slots are available, offering families greater flexibility to enroll in a Head Start program that aligns with their preferred location, schedule, or educational approach — such as a center offering extended hours or a culturally specific curriculum — thereby broadening parental choice beyond geographic boundaries.

Section 1302.11(b)(1) of the Performance Standards requires programs to conduct a comprehensive community assessment to inform their program design and to ensure it reflects the needs of the community. The families served by Head Start programs are a central part of the community, and QHS strongly encourages programs to engage families in the community assessment process as programs determine, develop, and improve their program model. Programs can add questions in their parent surveys and self-assessments that explore the variety of parent options and needs in the community. Creating opportunities to gather input from families about their preferences and how they evaluate their ECE choices allows programs to integrate those preferences into their program design. Programs should consider how to ensure their available program options meet family needs and identify ways to promote choices to parents within their community.

A strong understanding of families' needs and preferences, as well as the range of available options in the community, allows Head Start programs to ensure their program options complement the other ECE programs available to families. Head Start programs can use this information to assist families in connecting to other programs that best meet family preferences and values, including services in faith-based organizations, charter schools, and private child care.

This includes during transitions for children out of Early Head Start and from Head Start Preschool to kindergarten. Sections 1302.70 and 1302.71 of the Performance Standards require programs to implement strategies to support successful transitions for children and their families at these key milestones. During

any transition, Head Start programs must collaborate with families to foster their continued involvement in and advocacy for the education and development of their child. In the transition to kindergarten specifically, programs are required to collaborate with local education agencies to support family engagement under Section 642(b)(13) of the Act, including working to provide training to enable parents to participate in decisions related to the educational choices for their children. As part of transition efforts, programs are also encouraged to help families understand school options in their local community.

## **Strengthening and Expanding Partnerships to Promote Parent Choice**

Strong community collaborations are a core tenet of Head Start services; many programs have long-standing partnerships with state and community agencies that assist them in providing a wide variety of services for children and families. Section 1302.53(a)(1) of the Performance Standards requires Head Start programs to establish ongoing collaborative relationships and partnerships with community organizations. These partnerships facilitate access to community services that are responsive to child and family needs.

As programs conduct their community assessments, programs should re-examine how community partnerships extend and strengthen program services in ways that support family choice. This may involve broadening community partnerships to include partners that fit parents' preferences, such as their need for full-day services, faith-based instruction, or options to keep siblings together. Head Start programs are also encouraged to explore partnerships with state and local Child Care Resource and Referral agencies to inform working parents of the variety of ECE options in their community. In addition to establishing ongoing partnerships, programs can connect parents directly to local and state organizations that train parents on educational options and parental rights; these may include parent training and resource centers, community parent resource centers, and statewide family engagement centers.

Section 1302.11(b)(2)(vii) of the Performance Standards requires that programs collect and use data on gaps in community resources to address the needs of eligible children and families. This data, combined with information on families' needs and preferences, allows programs to identify partners, including faith-based organizations or family child care options, that could expand programs' ability to support families in accessing the ECE services that are the best fit for them.

## **Layering Funding to Strengthen Partnerships and Support Family Choice**

Head Start programs and HSCOs can also collaborate with state and local community agencies as they examine their existing funding sources and consider how those funding streams may be leveraged more effectively within a mixed delivery system. Programs should consider how federal funds, such as those from Head Start, CCDF, and IDEA, can be effectively layered and braided to support broader access to services. Layered funding can be used to expand full-day, full-year services and comprehensive services that best serve families' needs or to free up resources for other purposes. Coordinating funding streams also allows programs to think more creatively about ways to partner with other programs and services, including partnering with faith-based organizations that offer early childhood opportunities that may be most desired by families in the community.<sup>1</sup>

Coordinating funding streams fosters innovative partnerships with diverse ECE providers — including charter preschools, family child care homes, and faith-based programs — and ensures families can access settings that reflect their values and needs. OHS urges programs to use this flexibility to participate in state and local mixed-delivery initiatives, reexamine program models based on family input, and build community collaborations that maximize educational freedom. By layering and braiding funding and listening to families, Head Start programs can help reduce or eliminate financial barriers and can empower families with limited resources to make informed ECE choices, e.g., selecting a program with a specific curriculum, quality rating, or convenient location. This can be accomplished by sharing clear information

on options and eligibility through a variety of mechanisms such as coordinated enrollment systems and parent workshops.

This strategic use of federal funds not only enhances family agency but also optimizes resources, reducing waste and aligning with the goal of making federal programs more effective for American families. Thank you for your dedicated efforts to support children and families in exercising their educational freedom.

Sincerely,

/ Captain Tala Hooban /

Captain Tala Hooban  
Acting Director  
Office of Head Start

<sup>1</sup> Head Start programs may partner with faith-based organizations when any explicitly religious activities (such as activities that involve overt religious content such as worship, religious instruction, or proselytization) are separate and distinct from the Head Start program, and the distinction is completely clear to the beneficiary or prospective beneficiary. See 45 CFR 87.3(d).

Historical Document