

# Policy Brief | Head Start Workforce

## REPORT OVERVIEW

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Head Start (HS)\* programs are an integral part of the early education system in the United States, with a total of 3,350 programs nationwide, serving 825,761 children and families.<sup>1</sup> HS staff work with the nation's most vulnerable children, including children living in poverty, experiencing homelessness or in foster care, and children with disabilities. An increasing number of dedicated staff, however, are choosing to leave HS at a startling rate, jeopardizing the care, learning, and well-being of a large portion of children. Over the past five years, the Program Information Report (PIR) points to high staff turnover, with 17% of HS staff leaving in the most recent 2022-2023 reporting period. A disproportionate number of HS staff who leave are in teaching positions, accounting for 62% of the staff turnover. Reasons for staff leaving early childhood are multifactorial, including stress,<sup>2</sup> heavy workloads and work intensification;<sup>3</sup> site closure and low salary compensation.<sup>4,5,6</sup>

It is still not clear whether these staff turnover factors changed during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>7,8</sup> Recent literature, the Program Information Report, and unpublished data from HS administrators and leadership across the country have been synthesized in this policy brief to give an update and snapshot of staff shortages and reasons for departures during the COVID-19 pandemic. Ultimately, low compensation persists as a primary driver in turnover, and teaching staff continues to be the group with the highest number of departures. HS staff compensation must be revisited to better provide competitive wages and benefits that will encourage retention of staff and decrease the turnover rate.

\* The term Head Start includes Early Head Start and Head Start unless otherwise noted in the text.



## HEAD START PROGRAMS

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Head Start programs are major employers in the early childhood sector. According to the 2022-2023 Program Information Report, there are 3,350 programs across the nation, employing 229,954 Head Start / Early Head Start staff and 18,272 contracted staff for a total of 248,226.<sup>9</sup> Achieving its mission of promoting self-sufficiency, 24% of current employees and 12.4% of contracted staff are former Head Start or Early Head Start parents.<sup>10</sup>

### Head Start Benefits

Head Start programs serve America's most vulnerable children: children from birth to age 5 living in poverty, children experiencing homelessness, and children in foster care. By supporting child development, health, dental, nutrition, parenting, mental health, and family services, Head Start programs aim to buffer the effects of poverty and prepare children for school, support a healthy foundation, and engage parents in the education of their children. The benefits of Head Start have been documented through extensive research studies as follows:

- Children who attend Head Start have significant gains in language and literacy, math, and social-emotional development.<sup>11,12,13</sup>
- Head Start graduates are more likely to perform better in kindergarten than children without Head Start services.<sup>14</sup>
- Children who attend Head Start show better school adaptation, reduced social problems, lower levels of juvenile delinquency, lower dropout rates, lower grade retention, and lower welfare usage.<sup>15</sup>
- Children who attend Head Start also have beneficial long-term outcomes into adulthood; they are more likely to graduate from high school, attend college, and receive a post-secondary degree, license, or certification.<sup>16</sup>
- Children in foster care who receive Head Start services demonstrate more school readiness skills than children who do not receive Head Start services.<sup>17</sup>
- Intergenerational effects of Head Start and Early Head Start are a protective factor for children disproportionately impacted by poverty and Adverse Childhood Experiences.<sup>18</sup>

In sum, children who attend Head Start fare better than children who do not receive services. Yet these outcomes are threatened by the current turnover trends among Head Start staff. Research has found that children who attend Head Start programs with high turnover rates show less gains in language skills such as vocabulary and literacy.<sup>19</sup> It is critical to the education, health and well-being of young children to understand the root causes of HS staff turnover and to identify potential solutions.

# HEAD START STAFF TURNOVER

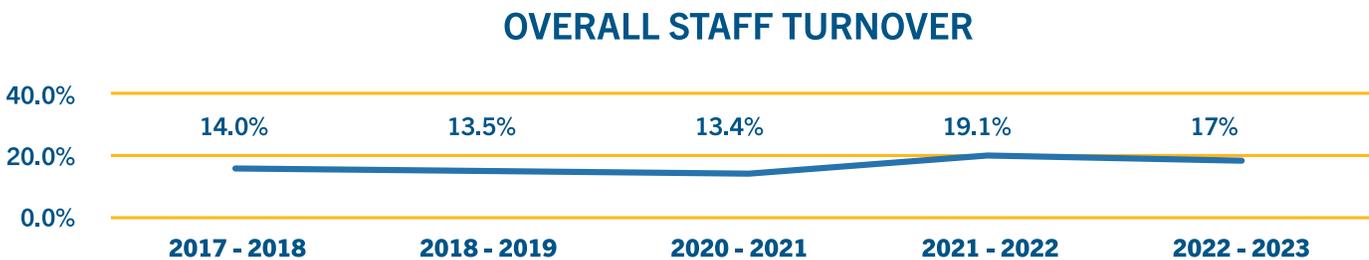
The sections below draw upon data using the Program Information Report for years 2017-2023, and a survey conducted between May 2021 and October 2021 with a workforce learning community comprising of HS directors and managers across the nation experiencing similar ongoing workforce challenges.

## Head Start Overall Staff Turnover

The turnover rate among Head Start staff has fluctuated across the last five program years from 14% to 19% and down to 18% in 2022-2023. This rate includes all positions vacated during the program year. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the turnover rate among Head Start staff remained steady at an estimated rate of 14%.<sup>20</sup> At the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic (2019-2020), the turnover rate was unknown as reporting of program data was interrupted that year. We know, however, from national trends that turnover rates increased in early childhood sectors during the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, and this is reflected in the 2021-2022 program year.<sup>21,22</sup>

### FIGURE 1

Overall Head Start Staff Turnover



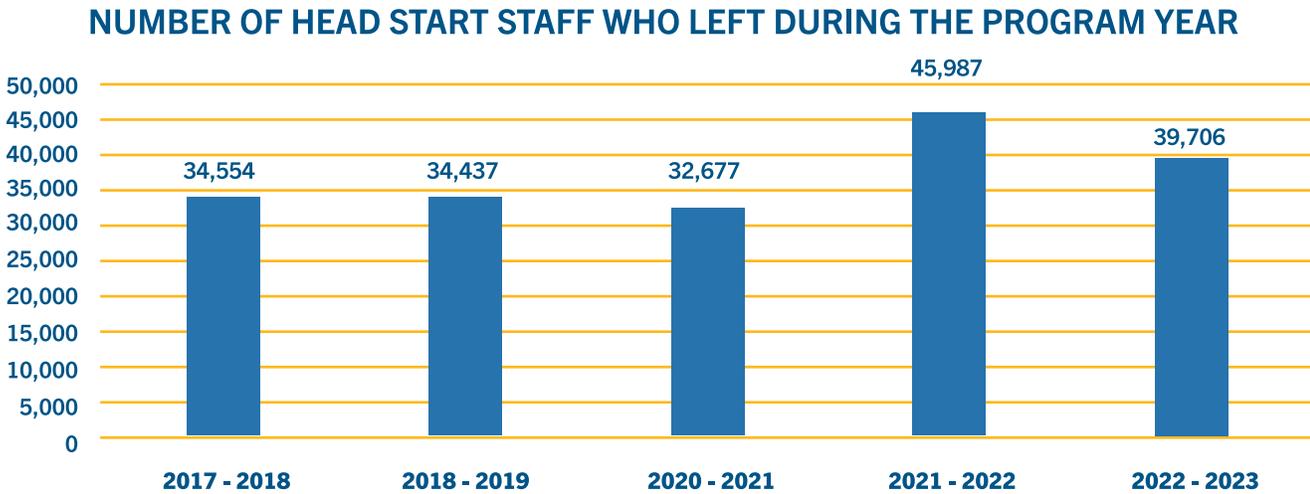
Note: Data from Program Information Report Staff Qualification Report from 2018 to 2023.

## COVID-19 Pandemic Turnover

At the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic (2021-2022) Head Start programs were experiencing a staffing loss of 45,987, accounting for 19% of all Head Start employees nationwide. While the turnover rate has slightly declined in the 2022-2023 program year to 17%, program managers continued to struggle to fill vacancies.<sup>23</sup> Overall, compared to the onset of the pandemic, subsequent years show an upward turnover trend. Figure 1 provides staffing turnover by percentage, and Figure 2 provides staffing turnover by number of Head Start staff.

## FIGURE 2

The Number of Head Start Staff Who Left During the Program Year



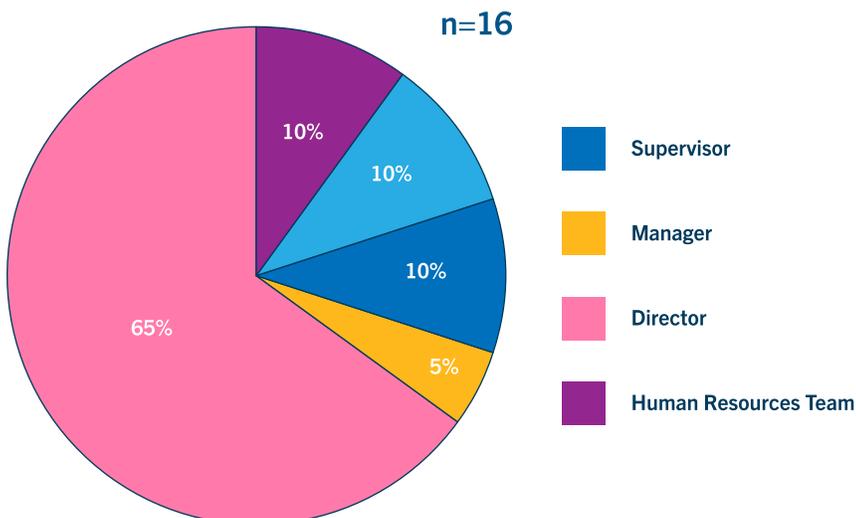
Note: Data from Program Information Report Staff Qualification Report from 2018 to 2023.

## Leadership Learning Community Survey Data on Overall Head Start Staff

To further inform the Program Information Report data, a HS Learning Community was developed. Survey data was collected at the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic, between May 2021 and October 2021, from a workforce learning community comprising HS managers and supervisors across the nation (n=16).

- Eighty-eight percent of survey respondents reported experiencing staffing shortages.
- Teacher vacancies were the most common vacancy.
- Other positions showing turnover patterns include bus drivers and family services and fiscal employees.
- The most common reason provided by staff who left was leaving for a higher-paying position (Table 1).

### SURVEY RESPONDENTS BY JOB TITLE



**Table 1**  
Turnover Reasons

**REASONS STAFF PROVIDED FOR NOT RETURNING TO HEAD START (FALL 2021)**

They found higher pay elsewhere	61%
Desired career change	29%
The job required too much for too little pay	25%
No longer wants to work with children	8%
To avoid/minimize risk of COVID-19	32%
Decided to retire early	32%
Personal reasons such as moving, staying at home after having a baby	32%
Going back to school	13%
Other	10%
Unknown	3%

**Persistent Vacant Positions: Overall Staff**

Data trends over the past several years also provide insight into how well HS programs have been able to fill vacant positions. Before the COVID-19 pandemic, the Program Information Report shows programs were able to replace more than 70% of all vacant positions. In 2020-2021, however, this percentage declined to 57%, and 54% in 2021-2022. This was a 19-point reduction in filling vacant positions between 2017-2018 and 2021-2022. There was a three-point recovery in filling vacant positions from 2021-2022 to year 2022-2023 (57%). However, overall, in the last three years, programs have struggled to fill vacant positions, see Table 2 and Figure 3.

**Table 2**

Head Start Program Information Report Data on Turnover

**HEAD START STAFF PROGRAM INFORMATION REPORT DATA**

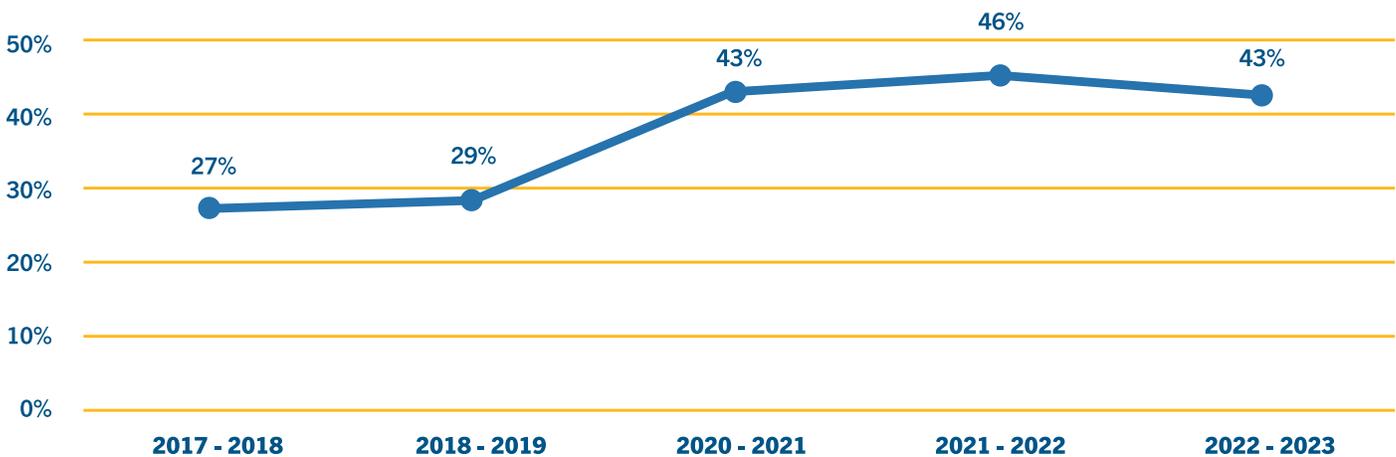
	<b>PROGRAM YEAR 2017 - 2018</b>	<b>PROGRAM YEAR 2018 - 2019</b>	<b>PROGRAM YEAR 2020 - 2021</b>	<b>PROGRAM YEAR 2021 - 2022</b>	<b>PROGRAM YEAR 2022 - 2023</b>
<b>TOTAL HS STAFF</b>	246,001	254,212	243,672	240,669	229,954
<b>HS DEPARTURES</b>	34,554	34,437	32,677	45,987	39,706
<b>FILLED HS VACANCIES</b>	25,179 (73%)	24,573 (71%)	18,494 (57%)	24,986 (54%)	22,790 (57%)
<b>UNFILLED HS VACANCIES</b>	9,375 (27%)	9,864 (29%)	14,183 (43%)	21,001 (46%)	16,916 (43%)

Note: Data from Program Information Report Staff Qualification Report from 2018 to 2023.

**Figure 3**

Trend in Unfilled Vacancies at the End of the Year

**TREND IN UNFILLED VACANT POSITIONS AT THE END OF YEAR 2017 - 2023**



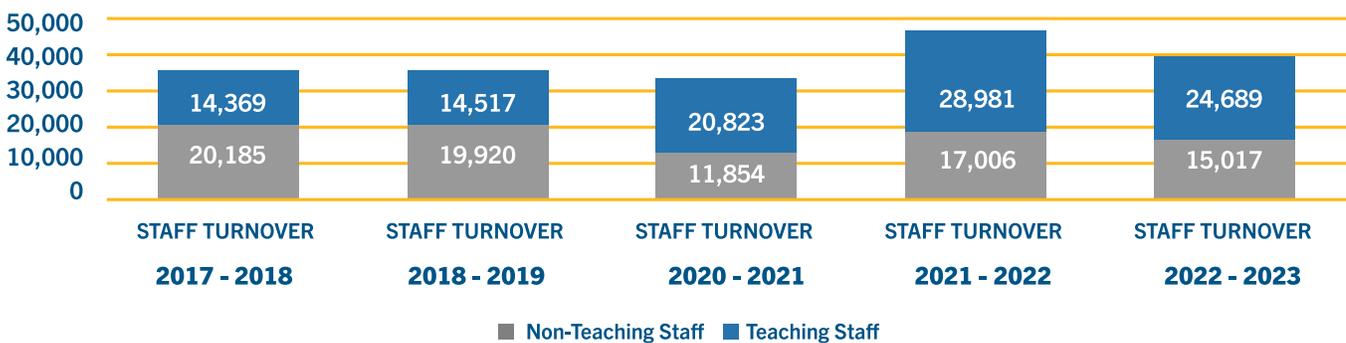
## HIGHEST TURNOVER GROUP: HEAD START TEACHING STAFF

A disproportionate number of vacated Head Start positions are non-supervisory teaching positions. Of the total positions vacated in the 2022-2023 program year, 62% (24,689) were in teaching positions including teachers, preschool assistant teachers, family childcare providers, and home visitors, see Figure 4. This is approximately 1.7 times the 2017-2018 educator turnover. The survey conducted between May 2021 and October 2021 with Head Start managers and directors also indicates that teachers were the largest group of Head Start staff who left programs.

**Figure 4**

Non-Teaching Staff Turnover from 2017-2023

### PIR HEADSTART NON-TEACHING VS. TEACHING STAFF TURNOVER

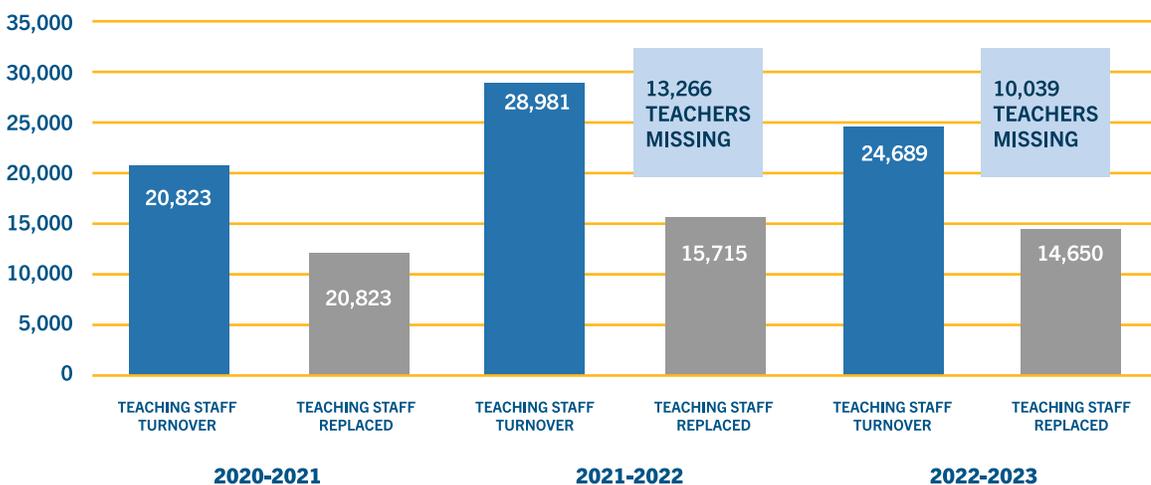


### Persistent Vacant Teaching Positions

While Head Start teaching positions are being replaced, it is not fast enough to meet the continued high turnover rate. From the Program Information Report of 2022-2023, of the 24,689 teaching vacancies, 12,812 were teachers who left the program, and 6,967 of those positions remained vacant (3,072 preschool assistant teachers, family childcare providers, and home visitors remained vacant), potentially impacting thousands of classrooms, hindering the program’s ability to provide educational services. The HS Leadership Learning Community survey completed by HS managers and supervisors across the nation (n=16) showed the following:

- 32% reported that 15%-40% of teacher positions had been vacant for the last 6 to 12 months
- 19% reported that 15%-40% of home visitor positions have been vacant for the last 6 to 12 months

### PIR HEADSTART STAFF TURNOVER



# REASONS FOR HEAD START STAFF TURNOVER

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## HS Leadership Learning Community Survey

The surveys completed by HS managers and directors reported several reasons why staff left during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. As with previous findings, salary and financial compensation were the most common reason staff left HS (see Table 1). Staff reported finding jobs with higher pay elsewhere, or jobs with pay at par that required less work than their current position. The next most common reasons for HS staff leaving included minimizing the risk and exposure to COVID-19, early retirement, and personal and family responsibilities. These reasons parallel reports regarding overall U.S. workers (non-HS workforce) who left a job in 2021, which indicate low pay as the main reason for leaving and roughly half reporting childcare issues as another reason for leaving. Although low pay seems to be the most common reason cited for leaving a job in 2021 across all sectors, the proportion of U.S. workers citing low pay compared to HS staff was markedly different at 33% and 60%, respectively.

### Wages

Head Start staff is composed of highly trained early childhood professionals, but they are often undercompensated. Approximately 55% of Head Start and Early Head Start teachers have a bachelor's degree and 31% are proficient in another language besides English. Wages do not reflect the professional growth and development of this workforce, which reverberates with the well-documented finding that low compensation is the most common reason cited for leaving among HS staff. Low compensation driving departures among HS staff existed before the COVID-19 pandemic and was likely exacerbated during the pandemic. Moving forward from the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic to the endemic phase of COVID-19, the persistent low wages of HS staff will continue to be problematic with the implementation of Universal Transitional Kindergarten (TK) or Universal Pre-school initiatives throughout the U.S. that will be competing for qualified staff with better wages. In addition, in many states, the minimum wage has increased at a faster rate than the wages of HS staff, creating further challenges to support basic living needs.<sup>24, 25</sup>

### Workload

The Program Information Report indicates that mental health services for HS children and families dramatically increased during the pandemic, from 10.7% in 2019 to 41.9% in 2021, and continue to rise, to 48.8% in 2023. These services reflect the increase in requests for mental health consultations and an increase in teachers reporting challenging behaviors in the classroom. This finding suggests HS staff may have experienced an increase in workload to support children and families during the peak of the COVID-19 pandemic. This increase in workload is supported by additional studies highlighting that early childhood education providers in general (HS and non-HS) experienced an increase in stress and workload. These changes and job demands coupled with low salaries likely contributed to high turnover during the COVID-19 pandemic.<sup>26, 27, 28</sup> Although the survey results from the HS Leadership Learning Community included a small sample size of managers and directors the data corroborate these reasons for high turnover with many HS staff leaving because the job required too much for too little pay.

Changes in workload were also exacerbated by overall HS staff shortages. For example, existing staff shortages typically require HS teachers to tackle multiple roles in order to continue supporting and teaching children. The COVID-19 pandemic contributed to an increase in workload among HS teachers and staff due to high turnover and unfilled positions. HS staff also experienced increases in responsibilities and job demands due to constantly changing COVID-19 pandemic guidelines and policies such as developing and implementing strategies to support socially distanced child drop-offs and added time to clean and sanitize surfaces.<sup>29</sup>

## IMPLICATIONS OF HIGH STAFF TURNOVER

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### **Programs and Operations**

#### **Program Closures and Decline in Enrollment**

High staff turnover has implications for sustainability of HS services. HS programs that do not have sufficient staff may struggle to provide ongoing care, services, and core components of HS to children and families. While HS programs may have funding and resources for programming and services, without staff this leads to many classroom closures or delays in opening classes, and a decline in overall program enrollment.

#### **Non-Compliance with Performance Standards**

Staff shortages may also place HS programs at risk for non-compliance with state licensing and Head Start Performance Standards. Administrators may often need to be in the classroom to provide direct services, delaying monitoring activities. These challenges potentially jeopardize the quality of services, and the ability to ensure safety for staff, children and families.

#### **Quality Enhancement and Innovation**

Head Start has led the early childhood field with innovation and high-quality comprehensive services for children and families. Staff shortages have implications for program administration and leadership. Leaders spend the majority of time attempting to fill positions, training staff, leaving little time to develop strategies to enhance HS programming and services. Programs, for example, may have to prioritize hiring, maintaining child enrollment and compliance instead of identifying ways to address unmet child and family needs through existing programming and services.

## **Children and Family Services**

### **Learning**

Teachers are essential to a child's learning.<sup>30</sup> High turnover among teachers can reduce the quality of early learning environments and negatively impact children's language, literacy, and socio-emotional development.<sup>31, 32</sup> Teacher well-being can support more attentiveness to the classroom environment and the psychological resources to promote positive interactions with young children.<sup>33</sup> In contrast, an increase in workload and accompanying stress may lead to HS staff burnout that can have detrimental effects on children's externalizing behaviors and contribute to lower academic achievement.<sup>33</sup>

### **Health and Social Services**

High staff turnover and shortages have several implications for children's health and well-being. Staffing issues may create challenges with implementing several HS health and development assessments. For example, current HS services focus on evaluating child's health status, including well child exam, immunizations, height and weight trajectories over time, ensuring lead and anemia screenings are received, and repeated assessment of developmental milestones. Without enough staff there may be missed opportunities to identify problems with healthy growth, nutritional deficiencies and developmental delays. Family-level services may also be compromised that are critical to the health and well-being of children, such as maternal depression screening and assessments of food and housing security.

### **Safety**

Keeping children safe while attending HS early childhood education centers is also compromised with staff shortages. Safety issues may arise if the appropriate and recommended staff-child ratios are not in place. Without appropriate child supervision children are at risk to sustain injuries due to potential indoor and outdoor hazards, as well as peer-to-peer interactions. These risks create for health and safety violation, impacting care, ultimately leading to program closures or poor enrollment.

## RECOMMENDATIONS

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There is an urgent call for the Office of Head Start to implement a plan to address the continued increase in Head Start workforce turnover and shortages. A stable workforce is needed to uphold the Head Start mission and delivery of high-quality services to the most vulnerable children and families. Actionable steps in the following areas are critical to effectively address the persistent and increasing HS workforce turnover:

- **Wages:** The well-documented lack of competitive wages is a major reason for turnover. A national and localized plan is needed to provide wages that align with K-12 staff, account for regional cost of living, and reflect current market salaries locally and regionally. Supporting wages with these components in mind can offer salaries that are competitive in order to retain HS staff. The Office of Head Start should provide plans to achieve these salaries with a gradual rollout and specific timeline.
- **Benefits:** Benefits are equally important to wages. Providing benefits such as medical, dental, and vision insurance can help offset the cost of basic services needed by staff and their families. Comprehensive benefits may offset slightly lower wages, which can be an effective strategy for HS staff retention and recruiting. Offering additional benefits, such as retirement plans and childcare reimbursement, can also promote retention.
- **Workload:** Ongoing health and well-being initiatives for HS staff should include increasing resources, additional support staff, and time to meet the job demands.
  - **Caseloads:** Regulations and performance standards should be implemented that include caseload thresholds for children with disabilities and behavioral needs. For example, in California, state licensing policy provides a 1:4 teacher to child ratio for children 18 to 36 months, however, if 3 of 4 children have special needs or a disability this poses significant challenges for staff without additional time, support, and resources.
  - **Duties and Responsibilities:** Head Start programs have many requirements to ensure quality services are being provided to children. Too often additional initiatives or priorities are established at the national level and implemented without removing pre-existing responsibilities, duties, documentation and requirements. This increase in responsibilities and duties is required of staff without additional pay or time. The workload of Head Start staff and programming should be evaluated yearly at a national level to find ways to streamline processes or achieve balance by exercising flexibility to decrease requirements or the number of initiatives for every new one added. Yearly review of initiatives should also incorporate added funding to allocate the resources and appropriate number of staff to effectively carry out pre-existing and new responsibilities and requirements.
- **The Program Information Report and Data Trends:** Additional measures should be included to assess manageable workloads, burnout, and well-described factors related to staff turnover. Capturing more specific reasons as to why staff are leaving on an ongoing basis can provide trends over time and help identify solutions to prevent staff turnover.

Suggested Citation: Vicente, D. & Guerrero, A.D. (2024). Policy Brief: Head Start workforce. UCLA Health

## Endnote

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