



The Death of Head Start by 1,000 Cuts
A Statement by Executive Director Mai Miksic
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The Trump Administration failed in 2025 in its efforts to defund Head Start. Now they're taking a different approach – weaken the standards so extensively that the heart of Head Start slows to a stop.

Head Start is so much more than a child care program. It was specifically created to lift children out of poverty with welcoming classrooms for children with diverse language skills, ethnicity, race, and ability. The emphasis on low teacher-staff ratios makes sure kids get lots of attention and instruction. Children's health and nutrition needs are met. *It is metaphorically and, sometimes literally, a big hug for the whole child.*

On August 6, 2026, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) proposed the largest overhaul of the Head Start Program Performance Standards in the program's history. The proposed rule changes would cut the standards by more than 90%. Head Start would survive on paper. What makes it Head Start would not.

Here is what a thousand cuts actually take away.

Fewer children would receive medical screenings and care. The HHS proposal eliminates developmental screenings within 45 days of enrollment, the medical and dental screenings within 90 days, and any requirement to follow up when a need is found.

Fewer children will get the highest quality education. The HHS proposal removes most standards for teacher training, coaching, curricula, group size, and teacher-child ratios, replacing them with state licensing rules. At a time when there are states actively working to deregulate early care and learning, this is a dangerous move.

Fewer children will be protected from abuse and neglect. The HHS proposal removes the annual staff training on preventing child abuse and neglect, and the requirement that children be supervised at all times. Even HHS's own analysis concedes this "could introduce some risk."

Fewer children will continue to be enrolled. The HHS proposal eliminates the prohibitions on suspending and expelling three- and four-year-olds, the exact protections Children First has spent years working to extend across Pennsylvania.

Fewer children and families will be able to fully participate. The HHS proposal mandates that teachers, counselors, and program administration only speak English, even if children and their families are not English-proficient.

The Trump proposal presumes a \$2.2 billion savings that will come from “fewer teachers, more children per classroom, shorter days, fewer home visits, less health and mental health support.” Clearly none of those savings are going to additional openings for kids or other program enhancements.

Together we fought back the Head Start cuts last year – a broad coalition of parents, teachers, program directors, pediatricians, mayors, and members of Congress from both parties.

This is the moment for your voice again.

Members of the public – like you – are able to voice your opinion, life experiences, academic research, or general passion for Head Start in response to the proposed changes. [Until October 6th on the HHS website, you can submit your public comments, which HHS must read and report on before finalizing anything.](#) We’ll be sharing tools with you within the next two weeks if you want some guidance on drafting impactful public comment.

Congressional pressure on HHS is another tactic to protect Head Start. Congress created Head Start, Congress funds it, and there is precedence in Congress protecting it from past threats. [Tell Senators John Fetterman and Dave McCormick why Head Start is important to you and that THEY MUST FIGHT TO PROTECT IT by pressuring the Trump Administration to withdraw the proposal.](#)

I was a Head Start kid and you can draw a line from those Head Start mornings with picture books to a graduate degree from Columbia University to the Executive Director of this outstanding organization. I fear for the future of Head Start kids if these proposed changes take effect.

Sixty-one years ago, this country decided that a child's future should not be determined by her family's income. Tens of millions of us lived on the right side of that decision. Now let's be vigilant and LOUD so tens of millions more will also have that chance.