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More Funds Needed for Head Start Programs for Equal Opportunity

A \$10 Billion investment in Head Start and Early Head Start could greatly equalize access to quality early education for children birth to age 5 in all states

NEW BRUNSWICK, NJ – Access to Head Start and Early Head Start for children living in poverty is too low and varies greatly across the states, according to the *State(s) of Head Start and Early Head Start: Looking at Equity*, a new report released today by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education. The report finds that federal investment is needed to increase access for families in poverty and address racial and ethnic disparities in enrollment.

Research showed significant drops in enrollment of children in poverty in Head Start and Early Head Start due to the Covid-19 pandemic with 257,000 fewer children in Head Start and 22,000 fewer in Early Head Start enrolling nationally. Progress enrolling children in poverty in Head Start had stalled around 40% before the pandemic despite a national decline in child poverty over the last decade. Early Head Start did show some progress during this time but reached less than 10% of eligible infants and toddlers at its peak.

Programs varied greatly across states in funding per child, staff salary, access and observed quality with higher percentages of enrollment of children in poverty in Head Start in North Dakota at 56% and lower numbers in Nevada at 9%. Early Head Start enrollment was highest in Kansas at 20% and lowest in Indiana at 5% of eligible children being served.

Inequalities were found by race and ethnicity in Head Start and Early Head Start enrollment. More diverse states enrolled a lower percentage of children in Head Start. Head Start funding per child and observed instructional quality were lower in states with higher percentages of Black children enrolled in Head Start, higher percentages of Black children in the total population and higher percentages of Black teachers in Head Start.

Specific data comparisons on enrollment by race and ethnicity include:

- 33% of Black children in poverty attended Head Start, compared to 25% of White children in poverty, 23% of Asian children in poverty, and 28% of children of other races in poverty.
- 27% of Hispanic/Latinx children in poverty attended Head Start compared to 32% of Non-Hispanic/Non-Latinx children.
- Early Head Start enrolled 10% of Black children in poverty, 9% of children of other races in poverty, 8% of White children in poverty, and 6% of Asian children in poverty.

- Early Head Start enrolled 9% of Hispanic/Latinx compared to 9.4% of Non-Hispanic/Non-Latinx children in poverty.

As low salaries are a problem for Early Head Start and Head Start quality, a first step is to provide \$2.5 billion in added funding each year to improve salaries and raise quality. We propose an additional \$10 billion in federal funding to bring all states up to the enrollment levels of the top five states for Head Start and Early Head Start access at the current per child rates. Leveling all states up, rather than shifting existing funding between states or between Head Start and Early Head Start would reduce the inequalities identified in this report, both between and within states. The report is available in full [here](#).

“Inequities in access to Head Start and Early Head Start could be substantially erased by upping Head Start funding \$2.5 billion each year for the next four years, for a total of \$10 billion in new funds targeted on equity,” said **Allison Friedman-Krauss, Ph.D., a research professor and NIEER’s lead author of the report**. “This additional funding would also go to raising teacher compensation and program quality.”

“More than half a century after Head Start’s launch, it is long past time Congress came together across party lines with a plan for Head Start and Early Head Start to serve the majority of eligible children in every state” said **Dr. Steven Barnett, NIEER co-director and Rutgers Board of Governor’s Professor of Education**. “Despite steady declines in child poverty, Head Start serves the same percentage of children in poverty it did a decade ago, leaving far too many children behind, a problem that the pandemic has now exacerbated greatly.”

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The State(s) of Head Start and Early Head Start: Looking at Equity report was supported with funding from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation. For more information and detailed state-by-state profiles, please visit www.nieer.org.

The National Institute for Early Education Research at the Rutgers Graduate School of Education, New Brunswick, NJ, supports early childhood education policy and practice through independent, objective research and the translation of research to policy and practice.