



Head Start Under Threat: What the Field is Saying

A summary of partner statements, resources, and actions

Compiled August 14–17, 2026

Over the past few months, HHS has advanced two related sets of proposed changes to Head Start. National, state, and local partners across the early childhood field have raised serious concerns about both. Below is a summary of what our partners are saying, followed by concrete actions and resources for you and your organization. The content below reflects our partners' own statements and comments — we agree with what they've said and are sharing it here with full source attribution.

BACKGROUND: TWO RELATED PROPOSED RULES

On May 12, 2026, HHS's Administration for Children and Families (ACF) published a narrower proposed rule, "Restoring Flexibility To Support Head Start Program Access" (Docket ACF-2026-0364; RIN 0970-AD21), which would rescind the 2024 final rule's wage and benefit requirements for Head Start staff. Its comment period closed June 11, 2026. The Center for American Progress, the Southern Education Foundation, and a coalition led by CLASP, CAP, the National Women's Law Center, and NAEYC (joined by more than 100 national, state, and local organizations) all submitted comments opposing the rescission.

Source: [Federal Register notice](#)

On August 7, 2026, ACF published a much broader proposed rule (Docket ACF-2026-0595) that would rescind and replace the full Head Start Program Performance Standards — eliminating an estimated 80% of current standards, including federal staff-to-child ratios, teacher credential requirements, disability service guidelines, and protections for children experiencing homelessness, in favor of state child care licensing minimums. Its comment period is open now through October 6, 2026. This is the proposal most of the statements below are responding to.

Source: [HHS/ACF press release](#) | [Federal Register notice](#)

Date	What Happened
May 12, 2026	ACF-2026-0364 published — proposal to rescind the 2024 wage/benefit standards for Head Start staff
June 11, 2026	Comment period closed for ACF-2026-0364 (CAP, SEF, and the CLASP/CAP/NWLC/NAEYC coalition submitted opposition comments)
August 7, 2026	ACF-2026-0595 published — broad rewrite/rescission of the full Head Start Program Performance Standards
October 6, 2026	Comment period closes for ACF-2026-0595 — OPEN NOW

WHAT THE FIELD IS SAYING

Organizations listed alphabetically. Each summary reflects that organization's own published statement or comment.

Center for American Progress (CAP)

In a formal comment on the wage/benefit rescission rule (ACF-2026-0364), CAP urges HHS to revoke the 2025 rule, reinstate the 2024 rule, and work with Congress on sufficient funding, fair compensation for Head Start staff, and protecting existing quality standards. CAP notes Head Start lead teachers earn an average of \$30,000–\$40,000 a year — often far less than similarly credentialed public school kindergarten teachers (\$63,000 average) — and argues low pay, not the 2024 standards, is the true driver of staff turnover and classroom closures.

Source: [CAP Public Comment on ACF-2026-0364 \(June 11, 2026\)](#)

Children's Equity Project (CEP)

CEP's report, “Lowering the Bar,” examines how replacing Head Start's federal standards with state child care licensing requirements would weaken early learning quality and consistency for children nationwide.

Source: [“Lowering the Bar” report](#)

Civil Rights and Disability Organizations (joint statement)

Eight national civil rights and disability organizations — Children's Defense Fund, EdTrust, Legal Defense Fund, NAACP, National Center for Learning Disabilities, National Urban League, The Arc, and UnidosUS — issued a joint statement opposing the proposed rule, arguing it would enable discriminatory enrollment practices and roll back protections against corporal punishment, seclusion, and expulsion. The statement emphasizes the demographic makeup of who Head Start serves — roughly 29% Black children, 40% Latino children, and 15% children with disabilities, by the coalition's count — and warns proposed removals include teacher training requirements, class size limits,

bilingual education support, and medical/dental screenings. The organizations are urging the administration to withdraw the proposal and calling on Congress to intervene.

"Head Start will exist in name only, offering unequal services based on where the child lives."

— Joint statement

Source: [Civil Rights and Disability Organizations' Joint Statement in Opposition to Administration Efforts to Dismantle Head Start \(EdTrust\)](#)

CLASP, CAP, National Women's Law Center & NAEYC (coalition sign-on letter)

More than 100 national, state, and local organizations — including AFT, the American Academy of Pediatrics, Children's Defense Fund, MomsRising, NAFCC, the National Education Association, SEIU, YWCA USA, and ZERO TO THREE — jointly urged the Office of Head Start to maintain the 2024 Head Start Final Rule and abandon the proposed wage/benefit rescission, citing high staff turnover, underenrollment, and the risk of classroom closures.

Source: [CLASP/CAP/NWLC/NAEYC Head Start Sign-On Letter](#)

MomsRising

MomsRising is running a call-in campaign asking members of Congress to urge HHS to rescind the proposed rule changes, alongside a letter-to-the-editor tool and a social media toolkit. Their materials warn the changes would raise paperwork and eligibility barriers for families, worsen classroom ratios, lower teacher credential requirements, remove disability service guidelines (Head Start currently enrolls at least 10% children with disabilities), and hit rural communities hardest, since Head Start is often the only reliable early learning option available there.

Source: [Call Congress / submit a letter to the editor](#) | [Social media toolkit](#)

National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC)

NAEYC opposes the Administration's proposal, warning it would eliminate core Head Start Program Performance Standards for health, safety, and quality — specifically removing protections governing staff-to-child ratios, group size, and staff qualifications. The organization notes Head Start has served more than 40 million children over 60+ years and currently serves roughly 700,000 children annually, and says it will provide resources to help educators submit comments during the 60-day comment period.

"This proposal crosses that line, removing critical standards such as those governing staff-to-child ratios, group size, and staff qualifications that exist because they support higher quality environments for children, and for their educators."

— NAEYC

Source: [NAEYC Statement on the Proposed Head Start Rule](#)

National Association for Family Child Care (NAFCC)

NAFCC's statement urges the administration to preserve the core Head Start Program Performance Standards while streamlining regulations collaboratively where appropriate. NAFCC notes nearly 10% of its members partner with Head Start, and warns that replacing federal standards with varying state licensing rules — which were never designed for Head Start's comprehensive, two-generation model — would create inconsistent experiences for children depending on their state.

Source: [NAFCC statement](#)

National Head Start Association (NHSA)

NHSA has published a five-part framework — access, affordability, accountability, local flexibility, and evidence-based standards — for evaluating whether the proposed rule truly serves children and families. Executive Director Yasmina Vinci said “fewer rules cannot mean fewer results,” stressing that Head Start's promise to families shouldn't vary by community. NHSA notes that programs remain open and unaffected during the comment period, which runs through October 6, 2026.

Source: [NHSA, “Fewer Rules Cannot Mean Fewer Results”](#)

National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER)

NIEER Director Steven Barnett's statement warns the broader proposal would eliminate roughly 80% of Head Start standards — including staffing ratios — could cut required daily instruction to just three hours for 128 days a year, and would newly mandate English-only instruction despite research favoring dual-language learning. A companion NIEER analysis found only a handful of states currently meet Head Start's staffing ratios (just 12 states, or 24%, meet the 1:4 ratio for one- and two-year-olds), and that nine states — including Mississippi, Louisiana, Georgia, and Texas — would see toddler-to-staff ratios more than double if the rule defaults to state minimums.

Source: [Statement by Steven Barnett](#) | [“Race to the Bottom” ratio analysis](#)

SchoolHouse Connection

SchoolHouse Connection's analysis focuses on the proposed rule's effect on children experiencing homelessness. It finds the rule would eliminate the regulations that carry out three Head Start Act requirements: identifying and prioritizing enrollment for children experiencing homelessness, allowing families to enroll while required documents are still being obtained, and coordinating with school-district McKinney-Vento liaisons. The organization has published a side-by-side comparison of the statute, the current regulation, and the proposed rule.

Source: [SchoolHouse Connection analysis](#)

Southern Education Foundation (SEF)

SEF opposes rescinding the 2024 wage and benefit standards, warning that Southern and rural communities — where early educator wages already lag national averages by roughly \$20,000 a year — would be hit hardest. SEF argues compensation and program access are not competing priorities, and that removing federal wage floors would deepen existing staffing shortages rather than solve them.

Source: [SEF Comment to HHS on ACF-2026-0364](#)

Start Early

Start Early formally opposes the proposal, citing risks to multilingual family services, administrative funding, disability supports, evidence-based staffing ratios, and parent/family engagement requirements. Start Early is coordinating advocacy through its “Together for Head Start” coalition.

“Head Start has never been only an early education program. Its strength comes from bringing together early learning, health, nutrition and family engagement to support the whole child and the whole family.”

— Celena Sarillo, President, Start Early

Source: [Start Early opposition statement](#)

ZERO TO THREE

ZERO TO THREE's statement warns the rollbacks would be especially damaging for infants and toddlers, citing the potential elimination of prenatal and postpartum care requirements in Early Head Start and the loss of mental health support services. The organization has offered leadership and Head Start families for media inquiries and is asking supporters to like and share its statement.

“Head Start's guiding standards are foundational to what makes these programs so effective. Rolling them back would undermine decades of progress.”

— Melissa Boteach, Chief Policy Officer, ZERO TO THREE

Source: [ZERO TO THREE statement](#) | [Share on LinkedIn](#)

ACTIONS YOU AND YOUR ORGANIZATION CAN TAKE

- 1. Submit a public comment by October 6, 2026.** Comments don't require policy expertise — the most effective ones are personal, explaining why strong Head Start standards matter to you, your family, your work, or your community. Submit directly at [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov) (Docket ACF-2026-0595), or use Start Early's step-by-step guide and customizable template.

Source: [Start Early's comment guide & template](#)

- 2. Call Congress.** Use MomsRising's call-in line to ask your member of Congress to call on HHS to rescind the proposed rule changes.

Source: [MomsRising call-in / letter-to-the-editor tool](#)

- 3. Review talking points before you speak or write.** NHSA's NPRM resource hub includes a talking-points document and five issue briefs (NPRM summary; children with disabilities; comprehensive health services; dual language learners; suspension and expulsion) to help keep messaging consistent across our field.

Source: [NHSA NPRM Resource Hub](#)

- 4. Spread the word inside your own network.** Share partner statements and advocacy resources with colleagues, families, and community partners. Use MomsRising's social media toolkit, and consider liking/sharing ZERO TO THREE's statement on LinkedIn.

Source: [MomsRising social media toolkit](#) | [ZERO TO THREE LinkedIn post](#)

- 5. Join a coalition.** Start Early is coordinating advocacy through its “Together for Head Start” coalition; sign-on opportunities like the CLASP/CAP/NWLC/NAEYC letter may reopen for this next round of rulemaking — worth watching partner channels for.

Source: [Start Early — spread the word / coalition resources](#)

UPCOMING AND ARCHIVED WEBINARS

As of August 15, 2026. Check back closer to the October 6 comment deadline — organizations are adding sessions as the NPRM review continues.

Upcoming

- **September 8, 2026, 2:00–3:15 PM ET** — “Federal Policy Update on Child and Youth Homelessness (Sept. 2026),” hosted by SchoolHouse Connection and the National Network for Youth. Covers FY2027 funding status for key federal programs and federal agency actions including the proposed Head Start rule, updated ED guidance on the Education for Homeless Children and Youth (EHCY) program, HUD notices of funding opportunity, Runaway and Homeless Youth Act (RHYA) program/regulation changes, and updated Foster Youth to Independence (FYI) Voucher guidance, plus opportunities to advance related legislation.

Source: [Register](#)

Archived (recordings available)

- **NHSA — three-part NPRM webinar series:** “Head Start Act 201: Comparing the Head Start Act to the Head Start Program Performance Standards” (July 30); “NHSA's Strategy, Principles, and Big Picture Around the Upcoming NPRM” (August 6); “Making Sense of the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM)” (August 12).

Source: [Recordings \(YouTube playlist\)](#)

- **Start Early — “Together for Head Start: A Webinar Series for Champions and Changemakers.”** Ongoing since October 2025 (16 episodes to date). Most recent: “Protect Head Start: Make Your Voice Count During the Public Comment Period” (August 12), focused on submitting an effective public comment.

Source: [Series page with all recordings](#)

No confirmed upcoming webinar dates were found (as of this writing) from CLASP, NAEYC, MomsRising, NIEER, NAFCC, ZERO TO THREE, the Children's Equity Project, CAP, or SEF.

RESOURCES

- [NHSA NPRM Resource Hub](#) — talking points, five issue briefs, and recorded webinars on the Head Start Act and the proposed rule.
- [Children's Equity Project, "Lowering the Bar" report](#) — analysis of state licensing vs. Head Start standards.
- [NIEER, "Race to the Bottom"](#) — state-by-state ratio comparison data.
- [SchoolHouse Connection homelessness-protections comparison](#) — side-by-side chart of statute, current rule, and proposed rule.
- [MomsRising social media toolkit](#) (Google Doc).
- [Start Early comment-writing guide & template](#).
- **Official documents:**
 - [HHS/ACF press release](#)
 - [Federal Register notice \(Aug. 7, 2026 NPRM, ACF-2026-0595\)](#)
 - [HHS Office of Head Start Information Memo on enrollment reductions \(ACF-OHS-IM-26-01\)](#)