



Questions and Answers (Q&A) on the Release of the New Head Start Program Performance Standards

Q. What are Head Start Program Performance Standards?

- The Head Start Program Performance Standards are the foundation for Head Start’s mission – they provide the roadmap to delivering comprehensive, high quality individualized services for Head Start children and families and to supporting the school readiness and healthy development of children from low-income families.
- This is the first comprehensive revision of the Head Start Program Performance Standards since they were originally published in 1975, and comes alongside a landmark expansion of Head Start and improvements to the program by the Obama Administration.
- The Head Start Program Performance Standards set forth the requirements local grantees must meet to support the healthy cognitive, social, emotional, and physical development of children from birth to age 5. They encompass requirements to provide education, health, mental health, nutrition, and family and community engagement services, as well as standards for local program governance and aspects of federal administration of the program.

Q. Do these Standards also apply for Early Head Start?

- Yes. These new Standards apply to all Head Start grantees – Early Head Start, Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start programs. Rules or exceptions that apply to only one type of program are clearly noted throughout the rule.

Q. Do these new Standards go into effect immediately?

- Most of these Standards go into effect 60 days from publication, on November 7, 2016. Some provisions, such as the program duration requirements, go into effect on a different schedule. See the compliance table in the published Final Rule for details.

Q. Why did you change the current standards?

- The *Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007* required the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) to revise and establish new Head Start Program Performance Standards. The reauthorization law explicitly directed HHS to develop “scientifically based and developmentally appropriate education performance standards related to school readiness.”
- These new Performance Standards:
 - Continue to improve Head Start quality, building on advances in our knowledge about what works to support early healthy child development

- Uphold the important role of parents, families, and communities in contributing to the success of Head Start
- Significantly reduce bureaucratic requirements
- Incorporate the best research and science of early childhood education and development to enable Head Start to help communities focus on first-rate learning opportunities and achieve strong child outcomes

Q. How does Head Start measure grantee performance and do the new Standards change that?

- The Office of Head Start (OHS) assesses grantee performance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards, the Head Start Act, and other regulations through the Head Start monitoring system.
- The Head Start monitoring system measures the quality and accountability of Head Start programs across the country. It also provides grantees with opportunities for continuous improvement, while giving OHS a multi-year perspective on grantee performance with a focus on high quality.
- This system conducts on-site reviews and desk reviews. It disseminates its findings through formal monitoring reports. Recent monitoring reports for any grantee can be found on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC) website at <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/grants/monitoring/review-reports.html>.
- Over the next year, we will be redesigning the Head Start monitoring tools to align with the new standards.

Q. Consistent with the 2007 law, how do these new Standards incorporate the latest research in early childhood education to better prepare Head Start children for success in school?

- Since the Head Start Program Performance Standards were last revised in 1998, the knowledge base on early education has grown considerably, including more than 15 years of research on child development, brain development, and program implementation, and significant expansion of publicly funded early learning programs. The new education and child development standards reflect best practices in teaching and learning, integrate curriculum and assessment research, and support effective use of the [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework: Ages Birth to 5](#), and integrate new requirements from the Act. In addition, the education and child development standards take a birth-to-5 approach, which better reflects how children grow and learn.
- In addition, the new Standards include new minimum requirements for program duration. Research on content-rich instructional time, state pre-K, kindergarten, summer learning loss, and attendance conclude that program duration is important for achieving and retaining strong child outcomes. Combined with the new focus on effective teaching practices and the integration of stronger professional development, these standards provide the pathway for all Head Start programs achieving strong children outcomes.

Reducing Burden and Increasing Regulatory Transparency

Q: How do the new Standards reduce bureaucratic burden?

- We have reduced bureaucratic burden by:
 - Focusing on outcomes over processes and plans
 - Eliminating Head Start-specific requirements where government- or HHS-wide procedures exist
 - Giving grantees more flexibility in how to meet the requirements
 - Increasing transparency with simplified and streamlined standards
- Overall, the Standards reduce the prior 1,400 Head Start regulatory standards by approximately 30 percent, eliminating unnecessary and duplicative rules while setting an expectation for high quality that will drive program performance. Under these streamlined standards, programs across the country can better focus on achieving outcomes for children and families.

More Time to Learn

Q. Why are you making the school day and school year longer?

- The new Standards will increase the minimum duration of programs so that nearly all Head Start programs are operating for a full school day and full school year by August 2021, with a requirement that half of all children in each program participate for a full school day and year in 2019.
- Expanding the duration of learning time is important because research shows that half-day programs (roughly the level required under current program minimums) are less likely to provide the necessary exposure to high-quality early learning experiences that children need to be ready to succeed in school, and that longer programs promote better outcomes for children.
- A broad set of research—including research on full-day state-supported preschool programs, full-day kindergarten, instructional time, summer learning loss, and attendance—indicates the amount of time spent in high-quality programs is central to improving child outcomes.
- It takes time to provide the learning opportunities necessary to improve school readiness. It also takes time to provide the comprehensive child development services that ensure children are developing the social, emotional, and early academic skills needed to be ready to succeed in kindergarten. Teachers in half-day programs have less opportunity to conduct the full scope of learning activities that will ensure children achieve success. Research shows that increased program duration in high-quality programs is linked to better child outcomes.
- Preschoolers in programs operating under the minimums in the prior Head Start Standards receive less than half of the early learning services that children in full school day, full school year programs receive. Under the new program minimums, they will receive more than double the amount of time

and exposure to Head Start's high-quality services and learning opportunities. A third of our preschool programs already provide a full school day and full school year; and some actually go further and serve children in a year-round program that covers families' full working day and year. Some programs come close to the new standards but do not quite meet them and will have to modestly expand their program day or year.

Funding

Q. How much will the new Standards cost?

- The rule includes a detailed estimate of all the costs associated with the new Standards. Many of the rule's requirements are not effective immediately and will be implemented over a number of years. The rule estimates the cost of full implementation by August 2021 to be about \$1 billion in additional funding above the funding Congress has already provided to increase the number of children attending full school day and year Head Start programs.
- In fiscal year (FY) 2016, Congress appropriated \$294 million to increase the number of children attending Head Start for a full school day and year, which provides an important down payment on meeting the new duration requirements in the rule. Building on this progress, the President's FY2017 budget requests an additional \$292 million to expand the number of children attending full school day and year Head Start programs.
- Head Start is a critical investment for our children and has strong bipartisan support. We look forward to working with Congress to ensure that there is sufficient funding for the quality improvements in this rule.

Q. What will happen if the Standards are implemented without additional funding appropriated by Congress?

We recognize that expanding the duration of Head Start programs requires resources. As noted above, Congress provided new funding in FY2016 to increase full school day and full school year offerings in Head Start and the President's FY2017 budget builds on this progress, requesting additional funding to increase the number of children able to attending full school day and year programs.

We are committed to working with Congress to ensure there is sufficient funding for these quality improvements and avoid harmful cuts in the number of children served.

- To minimize potential slot loss associated with increased costs of providing longer duration in Head Start center-based programs, the Final Rule includes graduated implementation dates for these requirements. By August 2019, at least half of all children in each Head Start program will participate in a full school day and full school year program, with the requirement expanding to nearly all Head Start slots in August 2021.
- As a last resort, the rule grants the HHS Secretary new authority to adjust or to determine whether to modify the duration requirements in the event that available funding is too low.

Q: How will strengthening Head Start Standards produce higher returns on taxpayer investment?

- There is no question that high-quality **early learning programs yield significant benefits** to children and society. Early learning programs have short- and long-term effects on children’s math, reading, and behavior skills; can reduce grade retention, teen pregnancy, and the need for special education services; and in the long-term, can increase lifetime earnings and reduce crime.
- To maximize the effectiveness of Head Start and yield a high rate of return on investment, it is essential to pair these improvements to the early learning experiences provided by Head Start with increases in program duration.

Comprehensive Services

Q. Do the Standards maintain Head Start’s comprehensive approach to supporting children and families?

- Yes. The new Head Start Standards retain the key role comprehensive services play in preparing children to succeed in school and in life. Health, mental health, nutrition, and parent engagement services are retained, updated, and strengthened since they are core elements to ensuring children arrive at kindergarten ready to succeed.

Q. How do the Standards support the critical role that parents and families play in their children’s development?

- Head Start has long recognized the importance of parents in the learning and development of their children. The new Standards retain current parent engagement requirements, including family partnership services that help families identify needs and achieve goals, teacher-parent conferences, at least two home visits per year, and working with parents to support successful transitions out of Early Head Start and Head Start and into preschool and kindergarten.
- The Standards strengthen parent involvement in child learning with evidence-based programs and more engagement services focused on supporting parents’ engagement in child development. They also give programs additional flexibility to target services to families with the greatest need.
- Finally, the Standards maintain an important leadership role for parents in the governance of Head Start programs as members of Head Start Policy Councils and parent committees.
- All of these components are critical to recognizing the foundational role of parents in Head Start and for ensuring that parents and programs are working together to help each child succeed.

Q. How do the new Standards support data-driven decision making?

- The Standards include new requirements for programs to use data throughout their program management and service delivery to improve outcomes for children.

- The Standards require programs to set program-wide goals for high-quality comprehensive service delivery and school readiness outcomes, collect data on these goals, and make adjustments to spur continuous quality improvement and ensure high quality services.
- In addition, the Standards require programs to aggregate and analyze child assessment data at least three times per year and use data to target professional development, as well as collect other data to direct continuous improvement in education service delivery.

Q. How are education practices strengthened in the new Standards?

The Final Rule significantly updates and restructures the early learning and child development requirements to more effectively promote high quality teaching practices and stronger curriculum implementation that better support focus on the skill development and growth needed for strong child outcomes and success in kindergarten and beyond. Programs will create a system of evidence-based professional development that builds teacher skills and core competencies.

- The Standards affirm the role of parents in the education of their children, and require programs to implement intentional strategies to engage parents in their children’s learning and development and support parent-child relationships, including specific strategies for father engagement.
- Given recent research that indicates suspensions and expulsions occur at high rates in non-Head Start preschool settings, and the serious long term consequences of preschool expulsion, the Performance Standards affirm a longstanding practice of Head Start by requiring all programs to prohibit expulsion in Head Start and Early Head Start settings, and reserve temporary suspension as a last resort for extraordinary circumstances. Further, the Standards require programs to take steps, based on best practices, to support the social, emotional, and other developmental needs of children who demonstrate serious behavioral issues.

Q. How are health and safety practices addressed in the new Standards?

- The new Standards reflect research and best practice and maintain, clarify, and strengthen requirements for programs to provide high quality health services to support child health, school readiness, and long-term outcomes.
- The Standards maintain the scope and quality of existing health services, including dental health, nutrition, and the requirement that children are screened for vision and hearing within 45 days of starting the program. Many of the requirements are restructured and reorganized to make them easier to understand and implement.
- The new Standards retain strong requirements to ensure the safety of children. Key health and safety practice requirements are retained and clarified. We require programs to implement a system of health and safety policies, practices, and procedures, including ongoing training, oversight and correction, and continuous improvement to ensure child safety, consistent with *Caring for Our Children Basics* that was published by HHS last year.

- In addition, we strengthened background check requirements for program employees so new staff complete more comprehensive background checks and that all staff update these checks every five years.
- Mental health service requirements are also strengthened in the new Standards. We require programs to proactively engage mental health consultation to support effective classroom management, as well as support teachers and parents in addressing challenging behaviors and promoting children’s social, emotional, and behavioral health.

Q. How are dual language learners supported in the new Standards?

Dual language learners (DLLs) represent more than 30 percent of children entering Head Start, and the new Standards put forward important new requirements to ensure that Head Start effectively serves these children and families so that all Head Start children arrive at kindergarten with the skills they need to succeed in elementary school and beyond. The Standards reflect research on how DLLs most effectively learn English and key academic skills, ensuring programs approach DLLs in a way that acknowledges bilingualism as a strength.

- For infants and toddlers, programs must implement teaching practices that focus on the development of the home language while also providing experiences in English. For preschoolers, programs must focus on both the continued development of the home language and English language acquisition. These approaches are based on the best research on brain and language development.
- The Standards also include requirements for programs to assess DLLs in the language or languages that best capture their skill level and to assess their language development in both their home language and English, using an interpreter as needed.
- Finally, to ensure programs are taking a comprehensive approach to meeting the needs of children who are DLLs and their families, programs must find effective ways to communicate with non-English speaking parents. The Standards require all programs develop and implement an informed and coordinated program-wide management approach to supporting the school readiness of DLLs.

Q. How are children with disabilities supported in these new Standards?

- The new Standards maintain Head Start’s longstanding commitment to serving children with disabilities, retaining key existing standards and updating and strengthening other standards. The Standards maintain the long existing practice in Head Start for the full inclusion and participation of children with disabilities in all program activities, and the requirement that at least 10 percent of program enrollment be children with disabilities eligible for services under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA).
- All programs will develop and implement an informed and coordinated program-wide management approach to supporting the school readiness of children with disabilities in order to ensure that all children receive the appropriate supports and services they need to succeed.

- The Standards include a new requirement that programs provide necessary supportive services for children who have delays significant enough to interfere with school success but who are not eligible for IDEA services. And the Standards maintain but strengthen the requirements to work with parents of children with disabilities to help them best support their children’s healthy development.

Q. How do the new Standards strengthen support for children and families experiencing homelessness and children in foster care?

- The Standards ensure critical supports and continuity for children experiencing homelessness or in foster care, including:
 - The new Standards require programs to actively recruit vulnerable populations, including homeless children and children in foster care, and provide programs with the flexibility to define these populations based on their community assessment.
 - Moreover, if a program determines from the community assessment there are families experiencing homelessness in the area or children in foster care that could benefit from services, the programs may reserve enrollment slots for these populations when a vacancy occurs.
 - Finally, programs are required to make significant efforts to support transitions to other Head Start or Early Head Start programs for children experiencing homelessness or in foster care when they move out of the community. If Head Start or Early Head Start is not available, the program should assist the family to identify another early childhood program that meets their needs.

Quality

Q. You say the new Standards are based on research and evidence. What sources of research and consultation did you use to inform the rulemaking process?

- The Standards build upon extensive information received from researchers, practitioners, and other experts; recommendations from the Secretary's Advisory Committee Final Report on Head Start Research and Evaluation; public comment; as well as internal analysis of program data and years of program input. In addition, program monitoring has also provided invaluable experience regarding the strengths and weaknesses of the previous Performance Standards. Moreover, research and practice in the field of early childhood education has expanded exponentially in the 15 years since the Program Performance Standards governing service delivery were last revised. The new Standards have been built upon decades of research that has coalesced into a strong foundation for high-quality early learning experiences.
- The preamble of the Final Rule cites the research and responds to the comments that shaped each section of the new Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Q. Are any changes made to the Designation Renewal System (DRS)?

- No. There are no substantive changes made to the Designation Renewal System (DRS).
- The Head Start DRS was established in 2011 as an important mechanism to require lower-performing Head Start grantees to re-apply and compete for funding in cities and communities. This has ensured that Head Start families and children receive the best services and support possible, while positioning Head Start as a pioneer in delivering a full continuum of services for low-income children from birth through school entry in many communities.
- The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is currently conducting an independent evaluation of the DRS and expects preliminary results later this year.