

## Head Start Program Core Elements

MARCH 2026 – Across the early learning landscape, the Head Start Program<sup>1</sup> is upheld as a benchmark for high quality early learning and care due to its commitment to a comprehensive, development-focused strategy, its approach to parent engagement, and its innovative local design. A large body of research has found this unique program design to be highly effective, benefiting children and their families in both the short and long term.<sup>2</sup> In its 60-year history, Head Start has adhered to essential quality components and, as our understanding of best practices has evolved, continued to improve and refine delivery of services through changes in both federal law and regulations. As the program continues to evolve, the following five elements will remain key to its integrity:

- 1. Prenatal–Five:** Aligned with the most critical period of brain development, Head Start promotes school readiness by offering early learning and care from prenatal to age five, ensuring children receive consistent, developmentally-appropriate support as their needs evolve.
- 2. Comprehensive Services:** Head Start pairs high-quality education with comprehensive services that support a child’s overall health and development and promote family stability and self-sufficiency, addressing the full range of factors that influence child and family well-being and creating the conditions for long-term success.
- 3. Family Engagement and Partnership:** As their child’s first and best teacher, Head Start engages parents as partners in their child’s learning and in program operation and governance, while also providing them with the tools and resources they need to strengthen their families and enhance their children’s outcomes.
- 4. Community Driven:** Local grantees design and deliver services based on their community’s specific needs and resources, allowing for flexibility and innovation while also ensuring geographic coverage across the state.
- 5. Support for Those with the Greatest Needs:** This includes prioritizing children from families with the lowest incomes as well as children with disabilities, experiencing homelessness, and in foster care. Head Start offers comprehensive early learning and family supports to those most removed from opportunity to help them succeed in school and in life.

A list of the national, state, and local organizations which stand in support of these Head Start Program Core Elements is found on the next page.

<sup>1</sup>Inclusive of Head Start Preschool, which serves children ages 3 to 5, Early Head Start, which supports infants, toddlers under age three, pregnant women, and their families, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, and American Indian/Alaska Native Head Start.

<sup>2</sup>National Head Start Association, “Head Start’s Impact,” <https://nhsa.org/about-nhsa/our-impact/>.

**The following national organizations stand in support of these Core Elements:**

Acelero, Inc.	National Head Start Association
Child Care Associates	National Indian Head Start Directors Association
Child Care Aware of America	National AgFamilies Head Start Association
Early Care & Education Consortium	Save the Children
First Five Years Fund	Start Early
	YMCA of the USA

**The following regional organizations stand in support of these Core Elements:**

New England Head Start Association	Region VI Head Start Association
Region II Head Start Association	Region VII Head Start Association
Region III Head Start Association	Region VIII Head Start Association
Region IV Head Start Association	Region 9 Head Start Association
Region V Head Start Association	Region X Head Start Association

**The following state organizations stand in support of these Core Elements:**

Alaska Head Start Association	Nebraska Head Start Association
Arizona Head Start Association	Nevada Head Start Association
Connecticut Head Start Association	New Jersey Head Start Association
Delaware Head Start Association	New York State Head Start Association
Florida Head Start Association	North Dakota Head Start Association
Head Start Association of Hawaii-Outer Pacific	Ohio Head Start Association
Head Start Association of New Mexico	Oklahoma Head Start Association
Head Start California	Oregon Head Start Association
Idaho Head Start Association	Pennsylvania Head Start Association
Illinois Head Start Association	Rhode Island Head Start Association
Indiana Head Start Association	South Carolina State Head Start Association
Iowa Head Start Association	South Dakota Head Start Association
Kansas Head Start Association	Tennessee Head Start Association
Louisiana Head Start Association	Utah Head Start Association
Maine Head Start Directors Association	Vermont Head Start Association
Massachusetts Head Start Association	Virginia Head Start Association
Minnesota Head Start Association	Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP
Missouri Head Start Association	West Virginia Head Start Association, Inc.
Montana Head Start Association	Wisconsin Head Start Association
	Wyoming Head Start Association

**STAND FOR  
HEAD START**