

January 18, 2024

Office of Head Start
Attn: Director of Policy and Planning
330 C Street SW, 4th Floor
Washington, D.C. 20201

RE: Comments to the Administration for Children and Families Regarding Head Start Notice of Proposed Rulemaking [ACF-2023-25038]

To Whom It May Concern:

Thank you for the opportunity to comment in response to the Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) entitled “Supporting the Head Start Workforce and Consistent Quality Programming,” published by the Office of Head Start (OHS) on November 20, 2023. New America is an independent, non-profit policy and research organization, and our Education Policy Program works to strengthen and improve our nation’s education system so that all individuals - from birth to workforce - have equitable access to high-quality learning that prepares them for college, careers, and civic life in a time of rapid technological and social change. We bring intentional and sustained attention to the students, families, and communities that are least well-served by existing educational policies and practices.

We appreciate and share the Administration’s goals of strengthening Head Start’s ability to recruit and retain qualified staff, raise teacher wages, and provide consistent quality programming for children and families. We note that these proposals will come with a substantial cost when fully implemented and must be accompanied by greater federal funding for Head Start to enable programs to successfully implement new requirements and reduce any potential loss of spots for children and families, particularly for small and/or rural programs. Below we provide feedback on specific sections of the NPRM.

Workforce Compensation, Benefits, and Wellness (§1302.90)

As the NPRM makes clear, Head Start is currently experiencing a severe staff shortage, partly due to low wages and a lack of comprehensive benefits. Therefore, we support the proposed revisions in this section of the NPRM that would require programs to make progress to pay parity with kindergarten to third grade teachers for Head Start staff who work directly with children as part of their daily job responsibilities as well as the revisions requiring pay scales, minimum pay requirements, and certain benefits for all staff.



Our hope is that sustained increases in federal funding for Head Start will enable programs to make progress toward compensation increases by the proposed deadline of August 1, 2031. Because increased federal funding is not guaranteed and to avoid the requirements amounting to an unfunded mandate, we urge OHS to add clear checkpoints to break down the seven year period to include alignment with appropriations funding so that required wage and benefit increases do not result in reductions in the number of children and families served by Head Start.

Mental Health Services (§ 1302.17, 1302.91)

Because the harms of the use of exclusionary discipline on young children have now been extensively documented¹, we support the proposed language clarifying that suspension must be used only “as a last resort in extraordinary circumstances where there is a serious safety threat that has not been reduced or eliminated by the provision of interventions and supports recommended by the mental health consultant and the program needs time to put additional appropriate services in place.” We also support broadening the definition of suspension to include requiring a parent to pick up their child for reasons other than illness/injury in order to ensure that data accurately reflect the frequency of exclusionary discipline practices within Head Start programs.

Our own research has highlighted the positive impact the presence of mental health consultants can have on rates of exclusionary discipline. In our conversations with early educators, we repeatedly heard that there are not the necessary number of mental health consultants across many states to fill the current demand. Teachers expressed frustration at sometimes having to wait for a month or more to receive assistance from a consultant.² Therefore, we support the proposed change in §1302.91(e)(8) which expands who is considered a qualified mental health consultant to include those working under the supervision of a licensed mental health professional. For the same reasons, we support the proposed changes that would help clarify that, in the absence of qualified mental health professionals within a community, teleconsultation services can be utilized

¹ Lieberman, A. & Loewenberg, A. (2022). Reducing Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Early Childhood Education. Washington, DC: New America.
<https://www.newamerica.org/education-policy/reports/reducing-exclusionary-discipline-practices-in-early-childhood-education/background>

² Lieberman, A. & Loewenberg, A. Reducing Exclusionary Discipline Practices in Early Childhood Education.



to work with adults in the program. We hope OHS simultaneously makes strides to increase the pipeline of qualified mental health consultants.

Eligibility and Barriers to Access (§1302.14)

We support the proposed language encouraging programs to serve as many children with disabilities as possible. Increasing access to high-quality early learning environments is critical for children with disabilities as it is associated with long-term, positive academic and social-emotional outcomes.³

Again, we appreciate the Department's efforts to address issues facing Head Start programs across the country and the opportunity to share comments and feedback. Thank you for your consideration of these comments for the proposed rulemaking. If you have any questions, please contact Aaron Loewenberg, Senior Policy Analyst, at loewenberg@newamerica.org.

³ Karoly, Lynn A., M. Rebecca Kilburn, and Jill S. Cannon. (2005). Proven Benefits of Early Childhood Interventions. Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation. https://www.rand.org/pubs/research_briefs/RB9145.html.

