

A New Proposed Rule Could Reshape Head Start. Here's What Kinship Families Should Know.

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For more than 60 years, Head Start has provided high-quality early childhood education, health, nutrition, and family support services to low-income children and their families, including many kinship families. Each year, Head Start and Early Head Start serve more than 700,000 children nationwide. Now, a new proposed rule, published on August 7, 2026 by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF), would substantially rework how the program operates. The National Head Start Association has described the rule, [*Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs*](#), as a wholesale rewrite of the Head Start Program Performance Standards—the federal regulations that set the requirements local Head Start programs must follow—revising or removing nearly all of the current regulatory requirements and adding a number of new ones.

In practical terms, the current Performance Standards run about 133 pages, and the proposed replacement would run closer to a dozen. The rule would dramatically reduce the number and detail of federal standards governing Head Start, shifting many decisions currently made at the federal level down to states and local programs. It would refocus federal requirements on education, nutrition, and physical activity; emphasize local control and partnerships between programs, parents, and caregivers; lower the cap on how much of a program's federal grant can go toward administrative overhead; and remove a wide range of regulations in favor of state and local authority.

A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking, or NPRM, does not take effect on its own, so nothing about how Head Start operates today will change because of this proposal alone. When federal agencies, like ACF, seek to change existing regulations, federal law requires that they first publish the proposal in the Federal Register and hold an open public comment period. The agency must review and respond to the comments it receives—including making changes to the rule where warranted—before issuing a final rule. As a result, the proposed rule could still change substantially before finalization, be withdrawn, or face legal challenges that delay it further. Head Start agencies and families that benefit from Head Start are encouraged to proceed as normal until a final rule is published.

This proposed rule is particularly relevant to kinship families because of the special status they hold within the program. Head Start is one of relatively few federal programs where children in foster care and children receiving Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) child-only grants are categorically eligible, regardless of family income. That status does not change under this proposal, but because Head Start is often one of the first and most accessible supports available to kinship families, the broader reorganization of the program's standards and operating procedures would have meaningful effects on many kinship families. Kinship families and the programs that serve them may want to follow how this proposal develops in the months ahead and

contribute their unique experience and expertise to the discourse around these proposed changes.

What the Rule Would Change

The proposed rule touches nearly every part of how Head Start programs operate, and a full accounting is beyond what a newsletter article can cover. However, several changes that have drawn particular focus from providers and advocates are worth naming because of the impact they could have on kinship families.

Documentation requirements for eligibility. The proposed rule would no longer allow a parent or caregiver's own signed statement to serve as proof of income, homelessness, or a child's age — families would need to provide formal documentation instead. It would also remove a current provision that lets programs enroll a child without age documentation, such as a birth certificate, when a family can't provide it. ACF frames both changes as program integrity measures, intended to guard against misuse of federal funds and help ensure that limited Head Start slots go to children who actually meet eligibility requirements. While neither change targets kinship families specifically, and categorical eligibility would be unaffected, documentation requirements could pose unique barriers for kinship families, as kin caregivers who take in a child outside the formal foster care system and do not receive TANF child-only often do not have access to that child's birth certificate, income records, or other documentation, and this shift toward more documentation could land harder on families whose circumstances make that paperwork harder to gather.

Administrative cost cap. Head Start programs currently can use up to 15% of their federal grant to cover administrative costs — things like management, data systems, and other overhead that keep a program running, as distinct from direct services to children and families. The proposed rule would lower that cap to 5%, meaning a much smaller share of a program's federal funding could go toward those functions. ACF frames the change as redirecting resources from overhead toward direct services. Some providers and advocacy organizations have raised concerns that many programs already operate close to the current threshold, and that a lower cap could force cuts to staff or other administrative functions and make it harder for some agencies to sustain operations over time.

English-only instruction. The proposed rule would require Head Start programs to conduct education in English, replacing a current requirement that programs support children in both English and their home language. For children who do not speak English, instruction would be required to focus on English language acquisition. Programs would need to update curricula and materials and ensure staff are able to teach accordingly, with an exception for Tribal programs where the language relates to Tribal heritage.

Staff-to-child ratios and qualifications. The proposed rule would remove federally set limits on group size and staff-to-child ratios, deferring instead to each state's child care licensing standards, and would remove many current requirements around staff qualifications and professional development. ACF points to research that finds little

connection between ratios and child outcomes within the ranges states already permit, and notes that current federal ratios are stricter than nearly every state's own standards. Some providers and advocacy organizations have raised concerns that these requirements have long underpinned program quality and consistency, and that loosening them at the same time as easing staff qualification rules could mean less individual attention and worse educational outcomes for children.

Health, developmental, and disability-related requirements. The proposed rule would loosen several requirements tied to how programs support children's health and development. It would remove detailed procedures for referring and coordinating services for children with disabilities, beyond what's already required under the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act (IDEA) and the Head Start Act, along with several current requirements around mental health support for children and families. It would also remove the specific timelines programs currently use to track health, developmental, vision, and hearing screenings, as well as whether children are up to date on well-child checks and dental care. Programs would still be required to conduct screenings and meet statutory requirements for disability services, but with more flexibility on timing and process. ACF frames these changes as removing duplication with protections already guaranteed elsewhere in federal law, and argues that some current health and mental health requirements have been overly prescriptive, limiting programs' ability to design services that fit their own communities. Some advocates have argued that these tracking requirements function as an early-warning system for health and developmental needs, and they are concerned that removing them could mean some needs go unnoticed longer.

What the Administration Says

In presenting these changes, ACF has described the proposed rule as necessary to reduce federal bureaucratic burden, defer to state and local decision-making, and refocus federal oversight on core statutory priorities: school readiness and child outcomes, child health and development, and parental engagement. ACF estimates that the changes would generate approximately \$2.2 billion annually in cost reductions once fully implemented in 2031. The agency believes these funds could be reinvested by grant recipients into up to 268,000 additional funded slots for children and families. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. has framed the proposal as a renewal of the program, saying the intent is to remove unneeded bureaucracy while "trusting parents and local communities." ACF Assistant Secretary Alex J. Adams has said that the current standards have required programs to spend significant time and attention on complying with detailed federal requirements, and that the proposed changes are meant to let program staff redirect more of that attention toward working directly with parents and caregivers and meeting their communities' needs.

What Advocates Are Saying

Several national organizations that work closely with Head Start programs have raised significant concerns about the scope of the proposed changes. Broadly, they warn that the changes could lead to worse program quality, threaten the financial sustainability of

some providers, and cause particular harm to children with disabilities. Much of this concern centers on the role the current Performance Standards play in setting a science-based, minimum floor of quality across every Head Start program in the country, regardless of geography — a floor advocates credit with helping drive the program's decades-long track record of positive outcomes. Network partner ZERO TO THREE, which has pointed to Head Start's track record as one of the country's most effective early childhood programs, argues that the proposal "runs counter to decades of evidence" connecting strong performance standards to program quality and child outcomes.

The National Head Start Association has made a related point, arguing that national standards and local flexibility aren't inherently at odds—that local leaders need room to respond to their own communities, but that every Head Start family should still have the same baseline of quality and safety no matter where they live. Some advocates have argued that without a consistent federal floor, the quality of care a child receives could end up varying dramatically based on where a family happens to live. Others have gone further, describing the proposal as a step toward dismantling the program.

Not all of the response has been flatly oppositional, however. Some advocates and providers have acknowledged that current federal requirements can be overly prescriptive and create real administrative burden for programs. The National Head Start Association has stressed that it is withholding judgment on the proposal until it has carefully reviewed each provision, and has said that it is in favor of reconsidering requirements that consume staff time without helping children. At the same time, the organization has cautioned that accountability needs to be preserved, not eliminated, and that the true test of the proposal will be whether children and families end up with stronger results, not how many regulatory pages are removed.

Still Being Sorted Out

Because this rule would touch nearly every part of how Head Start programs are required to operate, national organizations, providers, and researchers are still working through its full text and modeling out its potential effects. It's not yet clear how any given provision would play out at the program level, or how much individual Head Start agencies would choose to change if the rule is finalized as proposed. ACF itself has been clear that removing a federal requirement does not prevent states or individual programs from choosing to maintain the same standard voluntarily, meaning many current standards could remain in practice even when they're no longer federally mandated.

Comments on this proposed rule are open through October 6, 2026. Organizations across the field are continuing to develop resources to help explain the proposal in more depth, and interested parties are encouraged to seek those out as they become available. Anyone interested in submitting a comment can do so directly at [regulations.gov](https://www.regulations.gov).