

MHSA's Annual Conference AM Breakout Sessions

Know Your Worth: Advocacy for Infant & Toddler Educators ✱

with Bonnie Spencer of EIC Training

What happens in infant & toddler programs shapes lifelong development. Grounded in brain science and early childhood research, this training empowers infant and toddler educators to advocate for their profession, articulate their impact, and clearly communicate why early relationships and responsive care matter.

Fund It, Grow It: Leveraging State Grants for Farm to School in Head Start Communities

with Abby Getman Skillicorn, MBA of Massachusetts Farm to School

What does it look like when early learners taste fresh local vegetables, adopt a dairy cow, and celebrate the harvest all within a Head Start classroom? It starts with the right funding and a community ready to grow.

Since 2023, the Massachusetts Department of Elementary and Secondary Education's Office of Food and Nutrition Programs has awarded MA FRESH Grants to early education programs across the state, helping bring farm to school programming to some of our youngest learners. These grants are proving that meaningful, lasting connections to local food don't have to be overwhelming - they can be built incrementally, joyfully, and with real impact for both children and families.

In this session, hear directly from Holyoke, Chicopee & Springfield Head Start about how they used the MA FRESH Grant to launch a farm to school transformation in their communities. Through teacher professional development with Mass Audubon and participation in the Mass Farm to School Institute, staff gained the knowledge and confidence to bring local food experiences into everyday learning. Their programs now feature taste tests, Harvest of the Month celebrations, and even a cow adoption through New England Dairy - engaging children and families in new and memorable ways. Whether you're just curious about farm to school or ready to apply for your first grant, this session will leave you with practical insights, real-world examples, and the inspiration to bring fresh, local food experiences to the young learners in your community.

From Behavior to Meaning: Neurodiversity-Affirming Support in Early Childhood Settings ✱

with Sara Rodrigues, LICSW of Balanced Learning Center

Early childhood professionals are often asked to respond quickly to behaviors without always having the tools to understand what those behaviors represent. This interactive session shifts the focus from compliance-based responses to meaning-making, exploring how sensory needs, communication differences, and environmental factors shape behavior. Participants will engage in real-world scenarios, practice reframing common interpretations, and develop concrete strategies to support regulation, autonomy, and inclusion in early childhood settings. This session emphasizes practical, sustainable changes that can be implemented immediately across classrooms and programs.

Patterns in Plain Sight: A Practical Approach to Quality Improvement with the Data You Have

with Marisa Barrett of Early Childhood Collective

Your program is already sitting on a data mine. Child assessments. Attendance records. Family engagement. It's all there. The question is what to do with it. This hands-on session is designed for people who don't consider themselves "data people." Using a simple three-question framework and real sample datasets, you'll learn to spot patterns, identify needs, and take small, confident steps toward quality improvement. No spreadsheet expertise required. You'll leave with a practical framework, a little more confidence, and a room full of colleagues who are figuring it out right alongside you.

From Preparation to Performance: Getting Staff Review-Ready

with Dr. Desiree Del Zio of D.E. & C. Consulting

Staff readiness is a critical driver of success during federal monitoring reviews. This session focuses on moving beyond basic preparation to building confident, capable teams who can effectively engage in interviews, classroom observations, and discussions with reviewers. Participants will learn practical strategies to coach staff, ensure consistent messaging, and create a culture of readiness that translates into strong performance during the review process.

Ideal Learning 101: Seeing and Strengthening What Is Already Possible in Head Start ✱

with Dr. Tobi Adejumo of Trust for Learning

Head Start programs already hold many of the values at the heart of ideal learning environments: strong relationships, respect for families, attention to the whole child, and responsiveness to local community context. This session offers participants a chance to step back, name those strengths, and consider how they can be made more visible and more intentional in daily practice. Using the Principles of Ideal Learning Environments as a shared language for reflection, participants will explore what children need to thrive and how those needs can be supported in Head Start settings. Rather than presenting ideal learning as something separate from Head Start, this session will focus on the ways programs may already be doing this work and where there may be room to grow, adapt, or try something new. Participants will also hear directly from examples of Head Start programs that are actively working to create and sustain ideal learning environments. These examples will center real, on-the-ground practice, including how programs navigate day-to-day logistics, communicate their approach within their agencies, and work within Head Start systems, such as funding requirements and documentation processes. These program examples will also surface a common tension many programs face: how to stay grounded in standards and requirements without letting systems of oversight narrow imagination, local design, or child-centered practice. Rather than dismissing these systems, participants will hear how programs are working within them while still holding onto their values and making space for thoughtful innovation.

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Building the Early Childhood Workforce Pipeline: Partnering with Vocational Programs

with Elizabeth Kennedy of Old Rochester Regional High School

This session highlights how Massachusetts Chapter 74 Early Education programs can partner with Head Start to strengthen the early childhood workforce pipeline. The presenter, a Chapter 74 Early Education teacher, and select high school students will share how vocational programs prepare students for careers in early childhood, the importance of early professional identity development, and how Head Start programs can effectively support, mentor, and retain young educators entering the field. Participants will gain practical strategies for collaboration while hearing directly from future early childhood professionals.

Flip the Script: Rethinking How We Work With Families *

with Marisa Barrett of Early Childhood Collective

What if the most powerful thing you could bring to a family visit or meeting wasn't a resource or a plan, but a different kind of presence? This hands-on session introduces the FLIP framework, a practical approach for home visitors and family service workers who want to move from advice-driven interactions to genuine partnership. Through relatable scenarios and real practice, you'll explore what it looks like to follow, listen, invite, and promote in ways that center family voice and build lasting trust. Come ready to reflect, share what's already working in your practice, and connect with colleagues who care just as deeply about the families they serve.

Lead Without Losing It: Building Resilient Early Childhood Teams

with Dr. Kim Germany of Achieve Now

Early childhood educators and leaders face increasing emotional demands that impact retention, performance, and program quality. This session equips leaders with practical strategies to build resilience, support staff well-being, and create emotionally healthy learning environments. Participants will identify key stressors affecting early childhood teams, apply emotional intelligence and self-regulation strategies, and explore leadership practices that foster trust and psychological safety. Aligned to the realities of Head Start programs, including trauma-informed care and family engagement, this session provides actionable tools leaders can use immediately to strengthen their teams, improve staff retention, and sustain a positive, high-performing program culture.

Risky Play Bucket Fillers: Supporting Confidence, Regulation, and Resilience

with Joanna Spotts of 

Spotlight on Early Learning

Supporting Confidence, Regulation, and Resilience This interactive session explores how developmentally appropriate risky play builds confidence, self-regulation, and resilience.

Participants engage in playful, hands-on activities while learning practical strategies for supporting "safe enough" risk in inclusive early childhood settings.

Calmer Classrooms, Stronger Programs: Practical Co-Regulation Tools for Head

Start * 

with Lee Sowles, MPH of Kind Mind

Head Start teams are carrying a lot, and many of the hardest moments in the day happen during predictable "hot spots" such as arrival, transitions, group time, mealtimes, and pickup. This interactive session will show Head Start Center Directors and Educators how to use simple, regulation-first practices to reduce escalations, strengthen connections, and create calmer, more consistent classrooms without adding one more thing to an already full plate.

Grounded in Kind Mind™ evidence-based, trauma-informed approach, this session begins with teacher support: practical tools and professional learning that help adults understand co-regulation and use it confidently during challenging moments. From there, participants will explore classroom practices that help children build regulation skills during everyday routines so they can reset, reconnect, and return to learning.

Finally, the session connects these practices to program-level impact, including more consistent routines across classrooms, increased teacher confidence, and stronger alignment across classrooms.

Participants will leave with practical strategies they can use right away, along with a clearer understanding of how regulation support can benefit educators, children, and the broader Head Start environment.

Data in Action: Mastering the Federal Review Data Tour

with Dr. Desiree Del Zio of D.E. & C. Consulting

Data tours are a critical component of federal monitoring — and a missed opportunity if not done well. This session focuses on how to prepare, structure, and deliver a compelling data tour that tells a clear and credible story of program performance.

Participants will explore how to align data with outcomes, anticipate reviewer questions, and ensure data integrity and accessibility throughout the review process.