

Research Brief

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Head Start's Interaction with Federal, State, and Local Systems

Research questions and key findings from FACES 2019

1. How much involvement do Head Start programs have with state licensing and QRISs?
 - Most Head Start programs have some interaction with state licensing and quality rating and improvement systems (QRISs).
 - Most Head Start programs (89 percent) report that some or all of their centers are required to have a license to operate.
 - Most programs (87 percent) report that some or all of their centers participate in the state or local QRIS.
 - About one-quarter of the programs that have centers participating in a QRIS received their initial rating automatically or through an alternative pathway (that is, they met the standards to receive their rating without going through the full rating process).
2. How many Head Start programs receive funding from other federal, state, and local government sources or from private sources (such as foundations and parent tuition payments)?
 - Most Head Start programs (94 percent) receive funding from other sources in addition to Head Start.
 - Most programs (80 percent of all programs) receive federal funding from sources such as Title I and the Child and Adult Care Food Program.
 - For over two-thirds of all programs, additional funding comes from state or local pre-K funds.
 - About half of all programs receive non-Head Start funding that requires them to meet other standards or other guidelines.
3. How much do Head Start programs use different funding streams to serve children and families?
 - Many programs serve individual children whose participation is supported by other sources of funding in addition to Head Start funding.
 - A majority of all programs (57 percent) serve individual children whose participation is funded by both Head Start and state or local pre-K funds.
 - More than one-third of all programs serve individual children whose participation is funded by Head Start and child care subsidies.
 - To support the use of these various funding streams, all programs have dedicated financial management staff, and over two-thirds of program directors have training in financial management.

Introduction

High quality early care and education (ECE) experiences can play an important role in supporting children's development, particularly for children in families with low incomes (Heckman 2011). Recognizing this, there are many programs and initiatives at the federal, state, and local levels to expand access to and quality of ECE. At the same time, because of the range of funding streams, services, standards, and requirements that vary by state, there is no single interconnecting, coordinated network that works to achieve goals for children (Connors and Morris 2015). Head Start is an essential part of the programs and funding streams that provide ECE services to young children in the U.S. Head Start focuses on supporting children and families with low incomes, but also contributes to the broader effort to expand access to high quality ECE for all young children.

Programs and initiatives at the federal and state levels include incentives to expand access to high quality care to all children. The number and range of programs and initiatives, however, and the expectations that come with them, make the ECE service landscape a complicated one for providers to navigate. In addition to the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), Head Start programs or centers can be subject to other state regulations or program standards, including licensing and QRISs (see box on right).

Given Head Start programs can be required to participate in different systems, they might be required to meet standards beyond the HSPPS. On the licensing side, in some states, school-based programs (13 percent of Head Start programs are operated by school systems) are actually exempt from licensing requirements (Doran et al. 2022; Early Childhood Training and Technical Assistance System, n.d.). For QRIS, the HSPPS require programs to participate in their state or local QRIS if (1) the QRIS accepts Head Start monitoring data for documentation, (2) participation would not affect the program's ability to comply with the HSPPS, and (3) the program has not provided the Office of Head Start a "compelling reason" not to participate (45 C. F. R. 1302.53(b)(2)).¹ Many QRISs use licensing to define their lowest rating

Types of ECE regulations and standards discussed in this brief

- **Licensing** requirements set the bar that ECE centers must meet to legally operate. Licensing typically focuses on child-staff ratios, group size, and basic health and safety practices. Licensing requirements, and the amount of monitoring and enforcement, vary by state.
- **Quality Rating and Improvement Systems (QRISs)** operate statewide in most states (or in some localities within states) to define standards for different levels of quality, offer incentives to providers to increase the quality of the care they provide, and communicate information about quality to parents. Participation in a QRIS may be fully voluntary, or it may be mandatory for certain programs (typically defined by type of funding). Activities designed to rate and monitor programs vary across systems, and can also vary across levels of quality within a QRIS. Programs are required to provide documentation about how they meet the standards, and they are often rated and monitored by external observers.
- **Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS)** set requirements that Head Start programs must meet in a range of areas, including services to be delivered, family engagement, and observed classroom quality. Programs must demonstrate compliance with the HSPPS throughout their five-year grant cycle—for example, by providing documentation and having in-person classroom observations performed by monitoring staff. ▲

level or make it a prerequisite to participation (Kirby et al. 2019; National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance 2018). Some states allow Head Start centers to receive QRIS ratings through alternative or streamlined pathways that count Head Start requirements to determine a rating (typically a high one), but others require Head Start centers to go through the full rating process or meet additional standards to receive high QRIS ratings (Kirby et al. 2019; Maxwell et al. 2019). Head Start centers and programs may also be able to receive supports such as coaching or technical assistance (TA) from licensing systems or QRISs (Maxwell and Starr 2019).

Most Head Start programs and centers receive funding from a combination of federal, state, and local sources (Alamillo et al. 2018). These sources include Head Start and Early Head Start, state and local pre-K programs, and the Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF) (Exhibit 1). Head Start programs that receive various funding streams may have to meet a variety of standards and monitoring requirements and manage complex financial reporting requirements (Maxwell et al. 2016). For example, a classroom supported with two sources of funding might be required to meet two different sets of staff-to-child ratio standards and adopt the more stringent standards. In another scenario, individual children who are supported by two sources of funding might have to switch classrooms or teachers during the day in an effort by the program to meet distinct teacher qualification requirements of each funding stream (rather than trying to mix them).²

In ECE, the sources of funding programs receive determine the services they provide to children and families and the work they can do to improve quality (Barnett and Hustedt 2011; National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine 2018). For example, Head Start programs must provide comprehensive services to children and

their families. However, most Head Start programs and centers receive funding from multiple sources, and they may use this funding to supplement Head Start services—for example, offering high quality services to more children, offering additional services, or making additional investments in quality (Alamillo et al. 2018; National Survey of Early Care and Education Project Team 2014).

This brief provides information from spring 2020, from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2019 about how Head Start programs interact with other systems that support ECE. The findings can help policymakers and others who are working to strengthen alignment, coordination, and collaboration across the ECE system to better serve children and families.

How much involvement do Head Start programs have with state licensing and QRISs?

A majority of Head Start programs are involved with state licensing and quality rating and improvement systems (Exhibits 2 and 3). We also see that when centers within a Head Start program are required to have a license to operate, most participate in a QRIS.³

Exhibit 1. Description of key ECE programs and funding streams

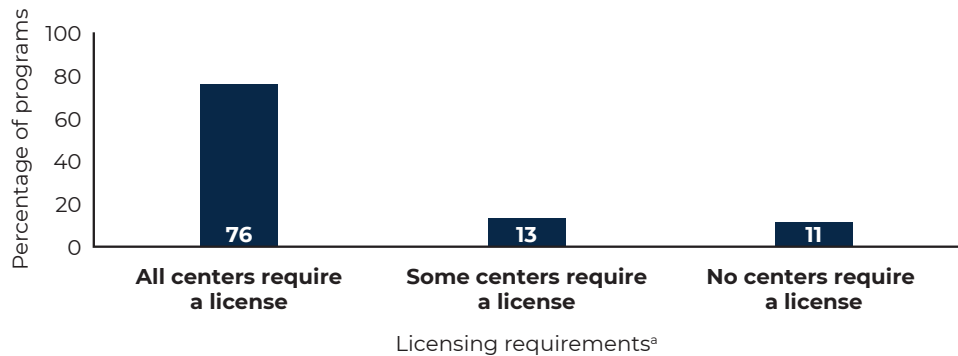
Program/ funding	Description	Ages of children
Early Head Start and Head Start	Federally funded program that provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, and nutrition to income-eligible children and their families. Programs are responsible for meeting the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).	Birth to 3 (Early Head Start), 3 to 5, not yet in kindergarten (Head Start)
State and local pre-K programs	State- or local-level publicly funded pre-K programs are designed to provide high quality education to children before they enter kindergarten. There is considerable variation in program features and whether programs focus on children of certain ages or children in families with low income, or are universal.	3 and 4
Child Care and Development Fund (CCDF)	Federal block grant to states to provide child care subsidies that support families with low income in accessing child care so they can work or attend job training or education. There are federal regulations, but states have considerable discretion in how they implement the program.	Birth to 12

Source: Adapted from Harding and Paulsell 2018.

Note: ECE = Early Care and Education

Programs and funding streams listed in this table directly fund the early care or education for children and are not the full list of funding sources programs can list in FACES.

Exhibit 2. The majority of programs report that all their centers must have a license to operate



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
Data are drawn from Table A.3 in the accompanying appendix.
^aCenters can be licensed or license-exempt.

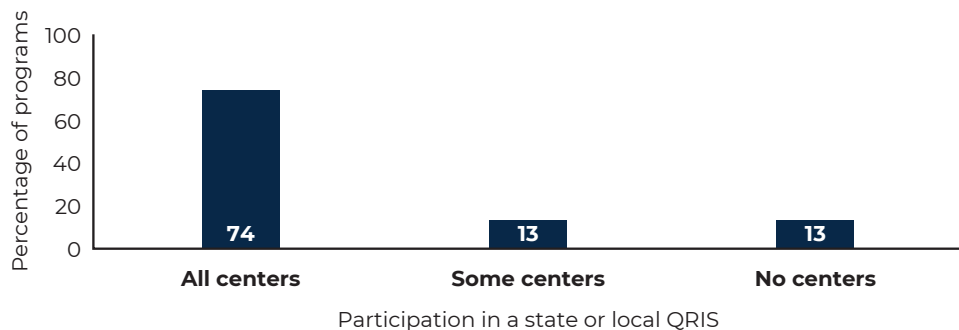
Just over three-quarters (76 percent) of Head Start programs are in states where all their centers are required to have a license to operate (Exhibit 2). Within about one-quarter of programs (24 percent), at least one center does not require a license because it is exempt from licensing requirements.⁴ The most common reasons why a center is exempt from licensing requirements are (1) they are part of a school system (43 percent of those exempt), (2) they have limited hours of operation (25 percent of those exempt), and (3) the state does not require Head Start centers to be licensed (24 percent of those exempt).

More than one-third (38 percent) of programs with at least one license-exempt center have centers that choose to be licensed even though it is not required.

Head Start Centers Fact

Of the 86 percent of centers that have a state license to operate, 47 percent reported receiving technical assistance from the licensing agency to improve facilities or meet licensing requirements (Appendix Table A.9). ▲

Exhibit 3. The majority of programs report that their centers participate in a QRIS



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
QRIS = Quality Rating and Improvement System.
Data are drawn from Table A.2 in the accompanying appendix.

In just under three-quarters of Head Start programs (74 percent), all the centers participate in the state or local QRIS (Exhibit 3).⁵ Another 13 percent of programs say that some of their centers participate.

Head Start Centers Fact

Most centers (72 percent) participate in a QRIS (Appendix Table A.10). Of those, 26 percent joined at the highest rating level, and another 45 percent have moved to a higher QRIS rating since joining.

Centers receive many types of supports through the QRIS. The most common are coaching or technical assistance for teachers (57 percent of centers) and trainings or workshops (54 percent of centers). Nearly half of centers receive information or scores from the QRIS review process (including scores on observation assessments) and coaching or technical assistance for administrative staff (49 percent and 48 percent, respectively). ▲

Among the programs that have at least some centers participating in a QRIS, most (72 percent) say that their centers went through the full review process to receive a rating, 15 percent of programs say their centers received an automatic rating, and 9 percent say their centers followed an alternative pathway (Appendix Table A.2).⁶ Automatic ratings and those received through an alternative pathway are ways for centers that must already meet certain requirements, such as accreditation or HSPPS, to apply those requirements to their pathway to a QRIS rating.

Licensure is typically a prerequisite for participating in a QRIS (National Center on Early Childhood Quality Assurance 2018), so we would expect programs whose centers are required to be licensed to have higher rates of QRIS participation. Ninety percent of programs where all centers require a state license to operate have at least some of their centers participate in a QRIS (Appendix Table A.4).

Head Start centers' experiences with monitoring for state licensing or QRIS participation

Separate entities often monitor program standards and this monitoring might or might not be coordinated (Trivedi 2015). An uncoordinated approach can leave providers feeling overburdened by multiple inspections and paperwork requirements (Lehoullier 2012). Standards may differ across funding streams and localities, but there have been efforts in some states and territories to create alternative or streamlined pathways to minimize the burden placed on providers (Maxwell et al. 2016; Maxwell et al. 2019).

Centers report an average of 2.2 inspections in the past 12 months (Appendix Table A.1), and 88 percent of centers have been inspected at least once in the past 12 months. For those centers that have been inspected, the inspections were most commonly done by the licensing agency (73 percent of centers), with 48 percent of the centers inspected by Head Start and 48 percent by the health department. Only 18 percent of centers that had been inspected received an inspection because of their participation in the QRIS. ▲

How many Head Start programs receive funding from other federal, state, and local government sources or from private sources (such as foundations and parent tuition payments)?

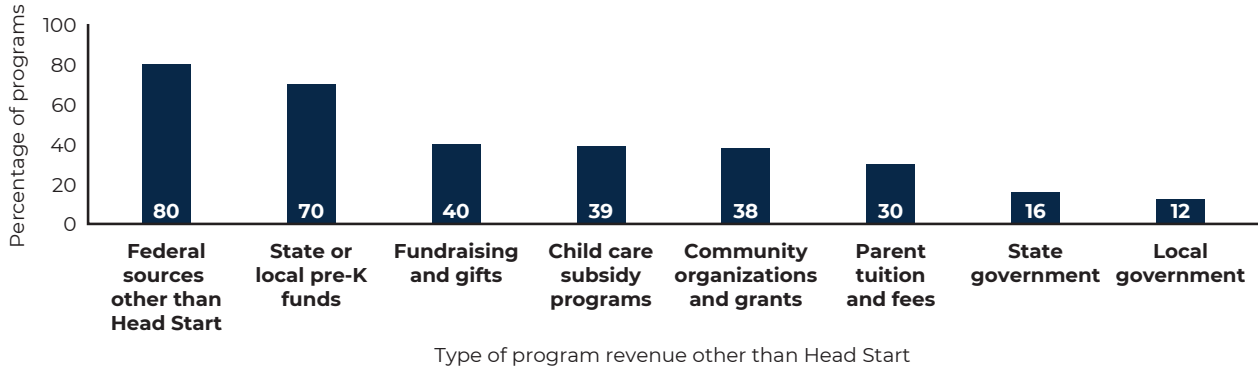
Funding from outside of Head Start can be used to support additional services for children and families and support higher quality. Most programs receive some funding other than Head Start (Exhibit 4), and for just about half of programs with non-Head Start funding, the largest alternative source is state or local pre-K (Exhibit 5). Programs use other funds for a wide variety of purposes, most commonly for materials, staff professional development, and improving current services (Exhibit 6). Although other funding supports a variety of activities, it can come with its own set of rules: just over half (52 percent) of programs receive non-Head Start funding that requires them to meet other standards or guidelines separate from the HSPPS, such as

guidelines for group sizes, staff-to-child ratios, teacher qualifications, or curriculum use (Exhibit 7).

As seen in Exhibit 4, the highest percentage of programs report receiving federal funding other

than Head Start. However, in terms of dollars, more programs report that state or local pre-K funding is the largest source of non-Head Start funding they receive (Exhibit 5).

Exhibit 4. Head Start programs often receive funding from federal sources other than Head Start and from state or local pre-K funds



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.

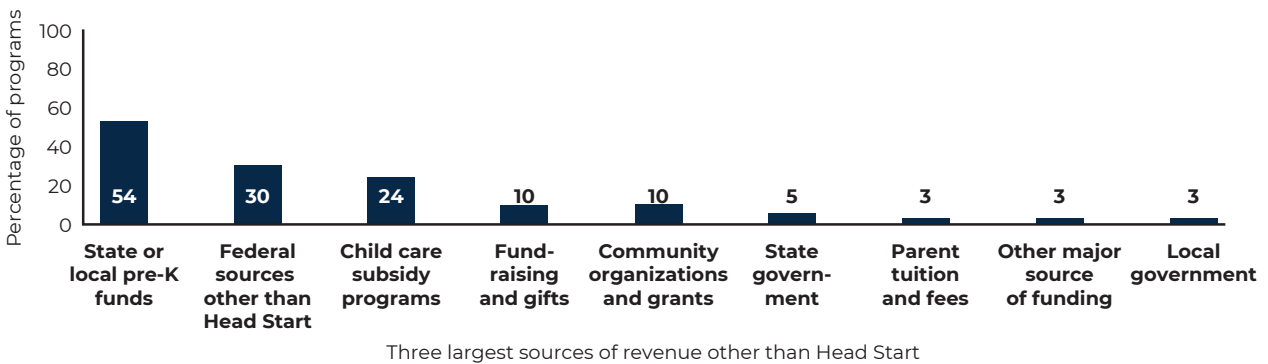
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.

Data are drawn from Table A.5 in the accompanying appendix.

Examples of federal sources other than Head Start could include sources such as Title I and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Examples of state and local government funding could include transportation and grants from state or local agencies.

Many Head Start programs serve non-Head Start children through other funding sources (including tuition). In addition, because many programs also serve Head Start families for longer than the Head Start day, they may require additional funds.

Exhibit 5. The largest sources of program funding outside of Head Start are state or local pre-K funds



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.

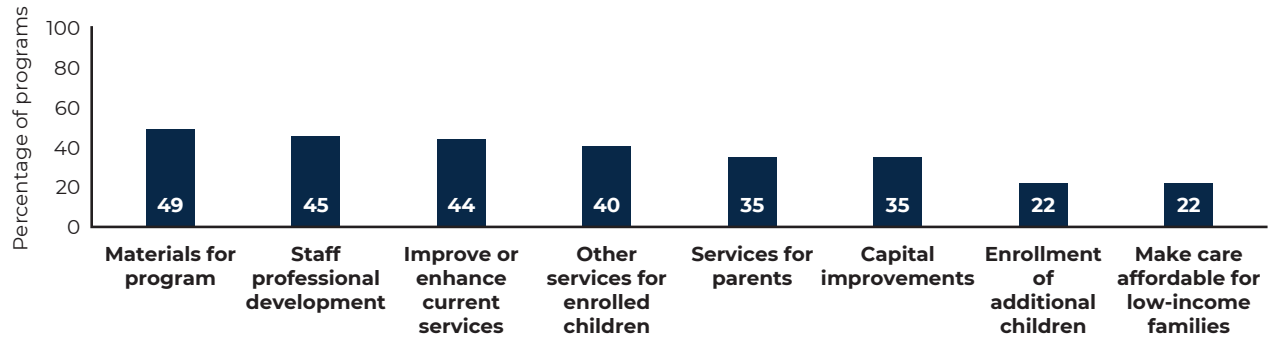
Data are drawn from Table A.6 in the accompanying appendix.

Percentages do not add to 100 because directors could identify up to three sources of revenue.

Examples of federal sources other than Head Start could include sources such as Title I and the Child and Adult Care Food Program. Examples of state and local government funding could include transportation and grants from state or local agencies.

Many Head Start programs serve non-Head Start children through other funding sources (including tuition). In addition, because many programs also serve Head Start families for longer than the Head Start day, they may require additional funds.

Exhibit 6. Programs' non-Head Start funding most often pays for materials, professional development, and program services



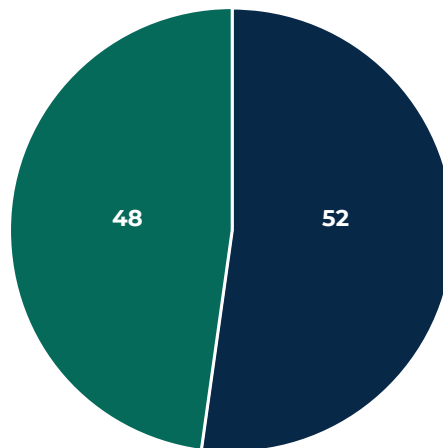
Services that non-Head Start revenue pays for

Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
Data are drawn from Table A.5 in the accompanying appendix.

Non-Head Start funding most often pays for materials (in 49 percent of programs), professional development (45 percent), improving or enhancing current services (44 percent), and providing other services for children (40 percent; Exhibit 6).

Forty-eight percent of programs do not receive funding from sources other than Head Start that requires them to meet standards or guidelines separate from the HSPPS (Exhibit 7).

Exhibit 7. Just over half of programs receive non-Head Start funding that requires meeting other standards or guidelines



- Receive funding that requires meeting other standards or guidelines
- Do not receive funding that requires meeting other standards or guidelines

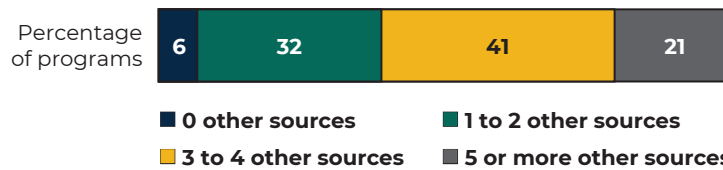
Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
Data are drawn from Table A.5 in the accompanying appendix.

How much do Head Start programs use different funding streams to serve children and families?

Understanding whether programs combine funding to serve children and families gives insight into how much programs must manage different requirements for teacher qualifications, group size, staff-to-child ratios, or classroom practices. Most programs receive funding from sources other than

Head Start (Exhibit 8). Many programs report some combination of funds to support individual children enrolled in Head Start, most commonly Head Start and state or local pre-K (Exhibit 9). In most programs, the same classroom can have children whose participation is funded by different funding streams (Exhibits 10 and 11). To manage these funding sources, all programs have dedicated financial staff, and most involve other staff in financial and accounting activities as well (Exhibit 12).

Exhibit 8. Almost all programs receive funding from sources other than Head Start



The number of revenue sources other than Head Start that programs receive

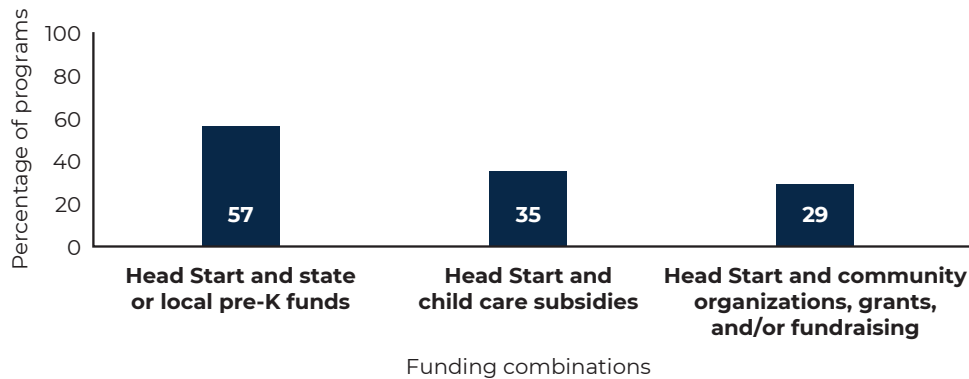
Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
 Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
 Data are drawn from Table A.6 in the accompanying appendix.

Almost all (94 percent) of programs receive funding from at least one source other than Head Start, and a majority (62 percent) receive funding from three or more sources other than Head Start (Exhibit 8).

More than half of programs (57 percent) enroll Head Start children who are supported by Head

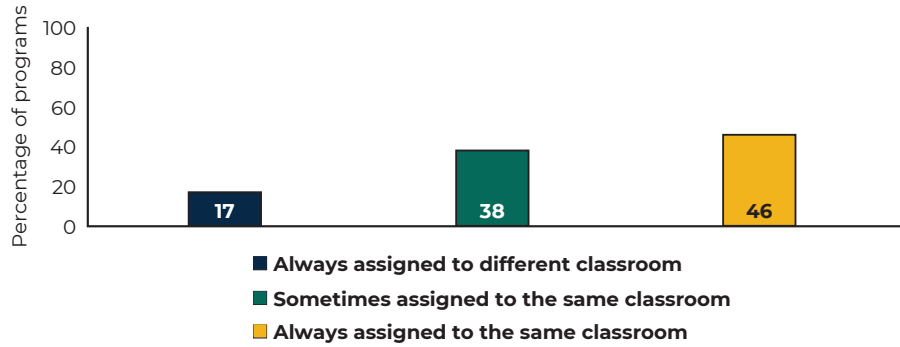
Start and state or local pre-K (Exhibit 9). Slightly more than one-third of programs enroll Head Start children who are supported by Head Start and child care subsidies. Slightly less than one-third of programs enroll children who are supported by Head Start and community organizations, grants, and/or fundraising.

Exhibit 9. Over half of programs enroll Head Start children who are also supported by state or local pre-K funds



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
 Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
 Data are drawn from Table A.8 in the accompanying appendix.

Exhibit 10. Almost half of programs that have children supported by Head Start and children supported by state or local pre-K funds report that those two groups of children are always assigned to the same classrooms together



Classroom assignment strategy for Head Start children and children supported by state or local pre-K funds

Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
Data are drawn from Table A.8 in the accompanying appendix.
Percentages may not sum to 100 due to rounding.

Most programs report that children supported with different funding sources are in classrooms together at least some of the time (Exhibit 10). For example, 84 percent of programs that serve children supported by state pre-K always or at least some of the time assign them to classrooms with children supported by Head Start funds.

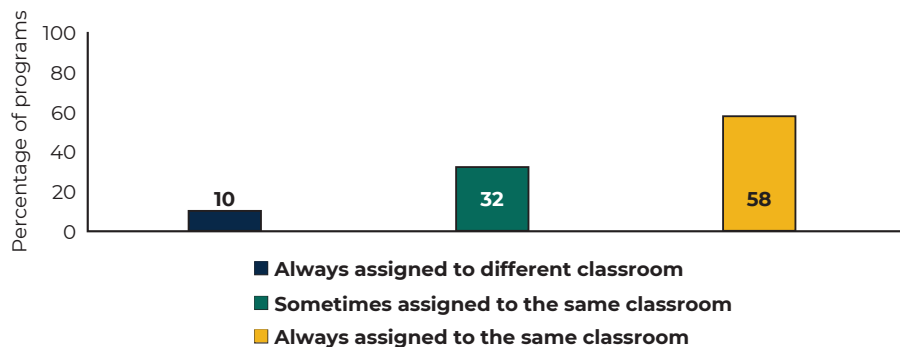
Just 10 percent of programs have children funded by Head Start and children funded by child care

Head Start Classroom Fact

FACES defines a Head Start classroom as any classroom in which at least one child has Head Start funding. On average, 92 percent of children within a single Head Start classroom are funded by Head Start. ▲

subsidies in distinct classrooms all of the time (Exhibit 11). Nine in 10 programs that serve children

Exhibit 11. More than half of programs that have children supported by Head Start and children supported by child care subsidy funds report that those two groups of children are always put together in the same classrooms



Classroom assignment strategy for Head Start children and children supported by child care subsidies

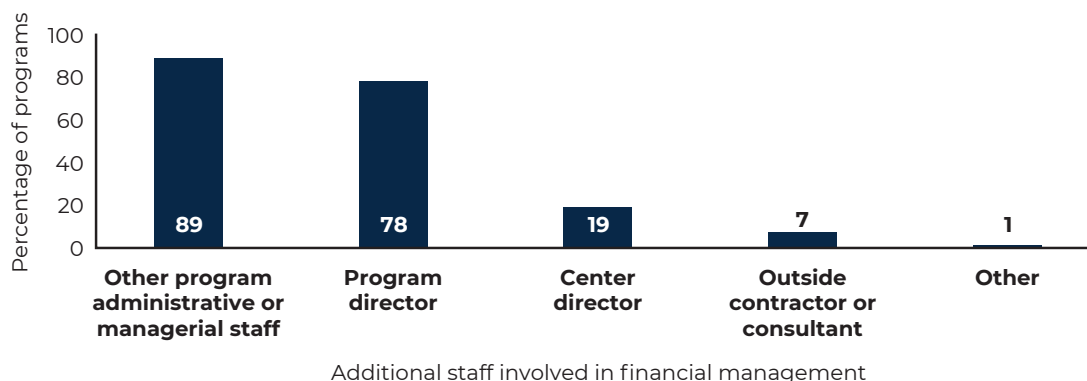
Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.
Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.
Data are drawn from Table A.8 in the accompanying appendix.

supported by child care subsidies assign them to classrooms with children supported by Head Start funds at least some of the time.

All programs have dedicated financial or accounting staff, and report that they use accounting software

to track expenditures and manage finances. Other types of staff are also involved in these activities (Exhibit 12). Program directors in most programs (78 percent) are involved in financial management, but a smaller percentage (69 percent) have training in financial management.

Exhibit 12. In most Head Start programs, other administrative staff and the program director are involved in financial management along with the dedicated financial staff



Source: Spring 2020 FACES Program Director Survey.

Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all Head Start programs.

Data are drawn from Table A.7 in the accompanying appendix.

Percentages do not add to 100 because directors could say more than one staff member was involved.

Examples of “other” staff include the school district treasurer and staff within the business office.

Conclusions and implications

Head Start programs, like most ECE programs, must navigate through the complex landscape of ECE to meet a variety of requirements and make use of different funding streams in an effort to provide high quality services that meet the individual needs of children and families.

Head Start programs are often held accountable to licensing regulations and participate in QRISs that establish standards for quality that may or may not fully align with HSPPS. There can be multiple reasons for Head Start centers to participate in QRIS. The HSPPS require participation in QRIS, if certain conditions are met. Further, in some states providers are required to participate in QRIS if they serve children whose care is supported by child care subsidies. In addition to any QRIS participation, Head Start programs receive a variety of funding streams in an effort to sustain and expand services

to children and families and tailor services to different community and family needs. These funding streams vary in purposes and often come with their own set of standards and guidelines.

Participation in these systems can offer opportunities for alignment, coordinated professional development, and additional technical assistance to programs, in addition to possible expansion of services or number of children served. However, there is a general lack of coordination across licensing, QRISs, and various funding streams that puts pressure on Head Start and other local ECE programs to manage many funding streams and a variety of associated requirements. To support use of these various funding streams, all Head Start programs have dedicated financial management staff, and a majority of program directors are involved in the program’s financial management. More information is needed on the

supports available to these staff, given each funding stream comes with its own requirements for its use and related reporting.

A key policy challenge is to coordinate the many and varied requirements that exist for programs so that they can provide cohesive services without adding substantial burden or limiting the ability of Head Start programs to tailor services to specific community and family needs. This brief highlights some successes—for example, despite challenges, many Head Start programs use varied funding sources to enroll children and families, potentially enabling them to provide responsive and less fragmented program services. In some states, QRISs already attempt to reduce burden on programs by accepting Head Start monitoring results or other data as evidence for receiving a QRIS rating. This brief also underscores the need for policymakers to reexamine opportunities to coordinate between programs and systems, and for training and technical assistance to help Head Start programs navigate the challenges that come with connecting to other programs and supports for ECE.

Endnotes

¹ Programs must comply with this requirement effective September 2021.

<https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-53-community-partnerships-coordination-other-early-childhood-education-programs>.

² FACES data does not directly address the different standards and how they are met, but does provide information about different sources funding children within a single classroom, as well as different sources funding individual children (for example, Head Start and state pre-K funds used to support a single child).

³ This finding should be considered exploratory as some groups have few cases (less than 30). Because of the small sample sizes in some groups, we did not conduct formal statistical significance tests of differences between groups.

⁴ Even if they are license exempt, Head Start centers are required to meet licensing requirements if they are more stringent than the HSPPS.

⁵ We do not report the reasons that programs' centers choose not to participate in a QRIS because so few programs have no centers participating.

⁶ Others had not yet received a rating, or gave an "other" response.

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Head Start FACES

This research brief draws on spring 2020 data from the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2019. FACES provides information at the national level about Head Start programs, centers, and classrooms, as well as the children and families that Head Start serves.

Head Start is a national program that helps young children from low-income families get ready to succeed in school. It does this by working to promote early learning, health, and family well-being. Head Start connects families with medical, dental, and mental health services to ensure that their children are receiving the services they need to develop well. Head Start not only involves parents in their children's learning and development; it also supports parents' own goals, such as stable housing, continuing education, and financial security (Administration for Children and Families 2020). Head Start operates by providing grants to local public and private, non-profit and for-profit agencies that deliver comprehensive child development services to economically disadvantaged children and their families.

Head Start structure

Head Start programs receive Head Start grants to provide direct services to children and families. A program can operate more than one Head Start center. We mostly talk about programs in this brief because program directors could answer most survey questions that are the focus of this brief; center directors were less likely to know the answers to some questions. Further, in data available at the center level, there is little variation in how center directors respond within programs. We highlight relevant center experiences in text boxes throughout the brief.

Sample

For FACES 2019, we selected a sample of Head Start programs from the 2017–2018 Head Start Program Information Report, with two centers per program. In spring 2020, 165 programs and 318 centers participated, with 126 program directors and 191 center directors completing surveys. More information on the study methodology and the measurement in FACES 2019 is available in "A Portrait of Head Start Classrooms and Programs in Spring 2020: FACES 2019 Descriptive Data Tables and Study Design" (Doran et al. 2022). Relevant findings from Doran et al. 2022 can be found in the appendix to this brief.

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