



**MASSACHUSETTS
HEAD START ASSOCIATION**

October 17, 2023

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education in support of H.489 and S.301: An Act providing affordable and accessible high quality early education and care to promote child development and well-being and support the economy in the Commonwealth

Chair Garlick, Chair Lewis, and members of the Joint Committee on Education,

Thank you for the opportunity to provide testimony in support of H.489 and S.301: An Act providing affordable and accessible high quality early education and care to promote child development and well-being and support the economy in the Commonwealth. I thank you for consistently supporting the needs of our Commonwealth's most vulnerable young children, their families, and our early education workforce.

I write on behalf of the Massachusetts Head Start Association, a membership organization that represents the 28 Head Start and Early Head Start Programs in the state. Collectively, these programs serve more than 10,000 children from birth to age five as well as pregnant women and employ more than 4,000 staff. Head Start eligible children are among the most vulnerable in our Commonwealth; Head Start serves children from families earning under the Federal Poverty Level at no cost to the family. Current Federal Poverty Guidelines are just \$30,000 annually for a family of four. Head Start also serves children from families experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and children from families receiving certain social services including TANF and SNAP. In the 2021-2022 program year, Head Start served over 1,000 children from families experiencing homelessness and many Head Start programs are currently serving children from incoming migrant families in the Emergency Assistance shelter system in existing Head Start slots and innovative program models.

The Common Start bill will increase access to high-quality care for more families and provide providers with stability and consistency in their funding. As you consider the package, we offer the following comments and recommendations:

Comprehensive Services

Head Start's success in preparing children for school and life success is rooted in its commitment to high-quality comprehensive services, including health, mental health, nutrition, and family engagement and services. Low-income and vulnerable families succeed when programs are able to meet their needs and ensure that children are receiving all of the services to which they are entitled.

Section 17 of the legislation requires the Department of Early Education and Care (EEC) to develop a methodology for assessing the true cost of quality care, including comprehensive services for children and families with high needs. MHSA supports this language and recommends that it be aligned with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. These regulatory requirements provide for standard practices for wraparound services and family



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engagement. Performance Standards serve as a gold standard for tracking quality in health, mental health, nutrition, disability services, family engagement, etc. and will provide consistency across program settings in Massachusetts. MHSA also recommends that operational grants provide additional funding for programs providing high-quality comprehensive services aligned with Head Start Program Performance Standards to promote quality and wraparound supports for vulnerable children and families.

Mixed Delivery System

Early education and care is delivered through a mixed delivery system of providers, including Head Start and Early Head Start programs, center based care, family child care, out of school time care, etc. This mixed delivery system is critical to parent choice, family access, and sustainability of the field. The bill supports the existing mixed delivery system and ensures that operational grants are accessible to all existing program times, including Head Start and Early Head Start programs. MHSA supports the promotion of the existing mixed delivery system and recommends that the emerging system continue to allow programs current flexibility to braid federal and state funding streams to best meet the needs of their children and families.

Prioritization for vulnerable families

Head Start serves the most vulnerable young children and families in the Commonwealth, supporting those with very low-incomes, children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and other vulnerable children. Until funding exists to fully fund this bill, MHSA supports the prioritization of funding and access for vulnerable families. This includes families receiving subsidies as well as those receiving Head Start and Early Head Start services. In order to allow programs to expand access and support early educators, MHSA supports the prioritization of child care subsidies for early education staff and for those funds to be flexible and promote the growth of early educator salaries.

Annual grants

At the start of the Covid pandemic in 2020, Head Start programs maintained payroll and kept all staff employed due to their federal annual grants. Head Start programs receive annual grants for a full year of services based on their total funded enrollment, and then are closely monitored on their enrollment monthly to ensure fiscal fidelity. This provides for stability in payroll and program operations and allows programs to plan and hire based on community needs rather than day to day shifting enrollment and attendance. MHSA supports the bill language that requires programs to be paid based on quarterly enrollment rather than daily attendance and recommends that payments be made proactively rather than retroactively. MHSA supports the exploration of annual rather than quarterly payments to allow programs to plan into the future and make strong hiring decisions.

Subsidy rates

Head Start programs are also large providers of state childcare through the voucher and contract systems to provide longer service days and years for children with working parents as well as homeless and DCF families. 35% of all Head Start children also receive a child care subsidy. MHSA supports the bill as well as the findings from the Special Legislative Early Education and



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Care Economic Review Commission to raise subsidy rates to the 75th percentile of market rate and to develop cost modeling to determine the true cost of care and level of funding necessary for programs to achieve stability and for the workforce have equitable compensation, as EEC has already started. Programs must be adequately compensated to provide high quality care and prioritize services for vulnerable children. Additionally, MHSA supports stabilizing regional disparities in reimbursement rates.

Early education workforce

In order for any of the work in the legislation to take effect, we must first stabilize and support the early education workforce. MHSA supports the bill and the workforce recommendation in the Special Legislative Early Education and Care Economic Review Commission. In addition to increased wages, early educators need mental health supports including additional professional development and coaching. MHSA supports efforts to provide wage and benefit parity with elementary educators as well as professional parity, providing educators with adequate planning time out of the classroom.

Thank you for your consideration and for your work to support vulnerable young children and the programs that serve them. If you have any questions, you can reach me at mhaimowitz@massheadstart.org or 413-270-0809.

Sincerely,

Michelle Haimowitz
Executive Director
Massachusetts Head Start Association