



**MASSACHUSETTS
HEAD START ASSOCIATION**

September 14, 2023

Testimony to the Joint Committee on Education Informational Hearing on Early Education and Care

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

Thank you for the opportunity to testify today on behalf of the Massachusetts Head Start community. I thank you all for holding this hearing and for consistently supporting the needs of our Commonwealth's most vulnerable young children, their families, and our early education workforce.

My name is Michelle Haimowitz and I am the Executive Director of the Massachusetts Head Start Association, or MHSA. MHSA is 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 \$27,750 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.

Head Start was created to provide wraparound supports for vulnerable children and families to support their success in school and life. This means that in addition to high quality early education and care, Head Start provides health, mental health, and nutritional services, and comprehensive family services and parent education. Head Start is a federal grant program and the 28 Head Start grant recipients in Massachusetts receive roughly \$180 million annually in federal funds to operate their programs. Head Start is also critically supplemented by the state through the Head Start State Supplemental Grant, which provides necessary wage dollars to all 28 Head Start programs. We thank this committee for your continued support for those funds. Head Start programs are also large providers of state childcare through the voucher and contract systems in order 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 is a member of the Common Start Coalition and we are proud to work collaboratively with our early education partners and colleagues in addressing the needs of our field.

Head Start programs, along with our early education colleagues, still face a nearly insurmountable workforce crisis. Educators are leaving Head Start classrooms due to



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uncompetitive wages and benefits and programs are struggling to recruit new staff with the salaries they can offer. In fact, 19% of all Head Start staff left their positions during the 2021-2022 program year, but only 40% of all staff who left were replaced. 63% of staff vacancies remained unfilled for 3 months or longer. Head Start educators are highly qualified and degreed, and yet classroom teachers earn just \$39,520 annually on average. In fact, 63% of Head Start classroom teachers hold a bachelor's degree or higher. Programs need increased consistent funding to support raising employees' wages and benefits to retain and attract qualified educators. Funds that are one time will not go to the ongoing salary expenses in which programs need to invest. Head Start State Supplemental Grants provide this stable source of funding for salaries, as do subsidy rates for center-based providers. While C3 grants have provided needed support to Head Start programs for the past several years, for it to make the most impact, we need funds that are consistent and annualized, and importantly, growing. Additionally, in the coming years we expect potential diminishing funds from the federal government as a result of the deal made to raise the debt ceiling this past spring, causing funding uncertainty for Head Start programs.

When we ask Head Start programs to identify the primary trends in their exit survey data of education staff, we hear just two responses: wages and mental health. Our educators are facing a mental health crisis, in part in response to the mental health crisis among the children they serve. Following the isolation of the pandemic and delayed healthcare and mental healthcare, Head Start programs are reporting skyrocketing levels of diagnosed disabilities and mental health needs in classrooms. Head Start children are among the most low income and vulnerable in the Commonwealth and many have already experienced significant trauma and instability in their young lives. Head Start accepts all eligible children, and prioritizes those with the greatest need, including children experiencing homelessness, children in foster care, and children in extreme poverty. According to Head Start programs in an April 2023 survey, 53% of programs identified significant increases this past year in diagnoses and referrals for developmental delays and social/emotional needs. Among children with disabilities, only 58% of children were receiving all services for which they were eligible, on average. Programs simply do not have the available resources to meet these significant needs. They are not able to hire enough behavioral specialists or additional teachers to support high needs classrooms and are losing good teachers they have due to increased classroom needs and lack of additional support. In fact, 94% of programs surveyed reported that the resources in their programs and communities are insufficient to support children and families with high needs.

Simply put, serving very poor and very vulnerable children requires added investment in their developmental and mental health needs, which comes at an additional cost. Prioritizing the children who need support most also means prioritizing investment in comprehensive services to meet the needs of these children, including investing in mental health providers, trauma informed approaches, and lower adult to child ratios. The most vulnerable children in Massachusetts not only need access to high quality early education, but the programs that serve them need more to provide that high quality. Higher wages, lower adult-child ratios, wraparound comprehensive services, and mental healthcare are all important for vulnerable children and are important for the programs that serve them, including Head Start.



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The Massachusetts Head Start Association and the Head Start community is grateful for the partnership and support of the Joint Committee on Education and the House and the Senate. As a member of the Special Legislative Early Education and Care Economic Review Commission, we know that this Committee is committed to investing in and supporting our earliest learners and the educators who serve them, and in paying particular attention to our most vulnerable families. We thank the legislature and the members of this Committee for your historic investments in the early education and care system and in Head Start programs, including Head Start State Supplemental Grants. We have a veto override before the legislature on the Governor's reduction of the FY24 Head Start State Supplemental Grant and we look forward to working together to ensuring that the intended FY24 funds make their way to Head Start programs and ultimately to Head Start educators. Thank you again for holding this hearing and we look forward to continuing to work together in support of vulnerable children and families and the dedicated educators and programs who serve them. We would be happy to host any member of this Committee at a Head Start program in your district and I look forward to seeing you in a Head Start classroom soon. Thank you.