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Richland First Steps Urges Community to Help Protect the Quality of Head Start and Early Head Start

Public comments are needed by October 6 on proposed federal changes.

COLUMBIA, S.C. —September 2, 2026 — Richland First Steps (RFS) is asking parents, teachers, early childhood professionals and community members to speak up now to help protect the quality of Head Start and Early Head Start services.

Established in 1965 as part of the War on Poverty, Head Start is a federal program that helps children from low-income families prepare for school through early learning, health, nutrition and family support services. Early Head Start extends these services to pregnant women, infants and toddlers.

The U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) released proposed changes on August 7 that could affect classroom staffing, teacher qualifications, services for children with disabilities, home visiting, family support and the resources programs need to responsibly manage public funds.

The changes are not final. HHS is accepting public comments through **October 6, 2026**, and RFS is encouraging the community to submit comments opposing changes that could weaken the quality of services children and families receive.

“Serving more families should not mean giving every family less,” said Elizabeth Kabalka, Executive Director of Richland First Steps. “We need parents, teachers, community partners and anyone who cares about young children to comment now. Federal leaders need to understand what these changes could mean for the children and families Head Start was created to serve.”



RFS is concerned that many of the proposed changes would not simply reduce paperwork. They could reduce the staffing, qualifications, time and support available to children and families.

“Reducing a requirement does not reduce a child’s needs,” Kabalka said. “Reducing resources also does not eliminate the work required to operate a responsible, high-quality program.”

As a local Early Head Start provider, RFS is especially concerned about the following proposals:

- **Children with disabilities:** HHS proposes removing the requirement that at least 10% of enrollment opportunities be available to children with disabilities. Currently, **20% of children served by RFS have an Individualized Family Service Plan**, and eight more are waiting for approval. RFS believes this protection should remain.
- **Classroom quality:** HHS proposes removing federal teacher-child ratios, reducing staff qualification requirements and eliminating positions that support teachers. RFS believes children need qualified teachers with enough time and support to meet each child’s needs.
- **Home visiting:** HHS proposes allowing shorter or fewer home visits and reducing qualifications for home-visiting staff. RFS families currently receive a 90-minute visit each week. RFS believes expanding access should not come at the cost of consistent, meaningful family support.
- **Administrative costs:** HHS proposes reducing allowable administrative costs from 15% to 5%. RFS currently spends approximately 9% on administration and would still be responsible for managing public funds, staff, data, grants and federal requirements. RFS believes the current limit should remain.

Why This Matters in Richland County

Many young children and families in Richland County already face challenges that can affect healthy development and school readiness.

Last year, only 43% of five-year-olds in Richland County were considered ready for kindergarten, based on their Kindergarten Readiness Assessment. In addition, 20% of Richland children live in poverty, 22% face food insecurity, and 10% of babies are born at a low birth weight. These are the children Head Start programs are designed to serve, and yet current Head Start funding availability meets less than 5% of eligible children in Richland County.



“These are the children Head Start and Early Head Start were designed to serve,” Kabalka said. “Families often come to us because they need more than a classroom. They need skilled teachers, developmental support, family resources and people who have time to build relationships with them. Those services are not extras. They are part of what makes Head Start work.”

Community Members Encouraged to Comment

The proposed changes are not final. The federal government is accepting public comments through October 6, 2026. RFS encourages everyone to comment. HHS needs to hear from current and former Head Start and Early Head Start families, teachers, early childhood professionals, health professionals, education professionals, community partners and others who care about young children.

You do not need to be a policy expert to comment. You can share why Head Start and Early Head Start matter to children, families and the community. You can also ask HHS to protect the staffing, standards and support needed to provide high-quality services during a critical time in a child’s development.

“We support thoughtful changes that help programs work more efficiently,” Kabalka said. “But efficiency should not come at the expense of quality. We are asking federal leaders to protect the services that help young children and families succeed, and we are asking our community to make its voice heard before it is too late.”

For more information, visit www.richlandfirststeps.org, or [click this link or below](#) to submit a public comment now. Comments must be submitted by October 6, 2026.

[Link to Make a Public Comment](#)

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Richland First Steps is a 501(c)(3) nonprofit organization with a mission to ensure all children are ready to thrive by age five, in school and in life. The organization connects families across Richland County with resources and programs that support early learning, healthy development and strong families. Working alongside parents, educators and community partners, Richland First Steps helps children build a strong foundation for lifelong success. Learn more at richlandfirststeps.org.

