

Media Contact: Alana Jordan
Outreach@RichlandFirstSteps.org

Proposed Head Start Changes: What They Mean for Richland County

Policy Brief and Public Comment Guide

Head Start and Early Head Start cannot provide high-quality services without qualified staff, adequate resources and strong standards. Richland First Steps (RFS) urges federal leaders not to weaken these essential protections.

HHS has stated that the proposed changes are intended to reduce federal requirements, give programs more flexibility and lower costs. RFS supports thoughtful improvements that help programs work more efficiently. However, reducing requirements and resources does not reduce the needs of children and families or eliminate the work required to serve them well.

RFS takes its responsibility to carefully manage public funds seriously. However, the proposed changes could significantly reduce the time, staffing and support available to children and families. Serving more families should not mean giving every family less.

Head Start and Early Head Start were created to serve children and families who may need additional support to succeed. Success should not be measured only by how many families a program serves or how little it costs. It must also be measured by the quality, consistency and impact of the services children and families receive.

Reducing standards and resources may lower costs, but it could also weaken the services that make Head Start and Early Head Start effective. RFS is especially concerned about how the proposed changes could affect the following areas:

- Children With Disabilities and Developmental Delays
- Classroom Quality and Teacher Support
- Home Visiting and Family Support
- Family Support and Connection
- Administrative Costs



1. Children With Disabilities and Developmental Delays

What could change: Some federal requirements that guide how Head Start programs support children with disabilities and developmental needs could be removed or reduced.

Why it matters in Richland County: Currently, **20% of children served by RFS have an Individualized Family Service Plan (IFSP)**, and eight more children are waiting for approval.

Children with developmental needs may need more one-on-one attention, teachers with specialized knowledge, early intervention and coordination between families, teachers and other providers.

RFS believes: Children with disabilities and developmental delays must continue to have access to high-quality early learning. Giving programs more flexibility does not change what these children need to succeed.

2. Classroom Quality and Teacher Support

What could change: The proposal would give programs more flexibility in areas such as classroom size, staff requirements, teacher qualifications, training and professional development.

Why it matters: Early Head Start is more than childcare. Teachers provide play-based learning that helps children build the skills they need to succeed in school.

Classroom size is not only about how many children an adult can safely supervise. It is also about whether teachers have enough time to understand each child's needs, build relationships and help each child learn and grow. Teachers also need training, coaching and professional support to do this work well.

RFS believes: Lowering qualifications or reducing professional support does not make the work less complex or reduce the needs of the children teachers are expected to serve.



3. Home Visiting and Family Support

What could change: Programs could have more flexibility in how often home visits happen, how long they last and how many families each staff member serves.

What RFS provides today: Families in the RFS Early Head Start home-based program currently receive a **90-minute home visit each week**.

These visits give staff time to build relationships with families, support children's development, help parents build skills and connect families with resources.

Why it matters: The proposed changes could allow programs to serve more families with shorter or fewer visits.

RFS believes: Expanding access is important, but it should not come at the cost of the consistent, meaningful support families need to help their children thrive.

4. Family Support and Connection

What could change: Some requirements for family support, family engagement and group activities could be reduced or removed.

Why it matters: What happens at home affects how a child learns and grows.

Families may be dealing with challenges related to food, housing, transportation, health care, employment, child development or social isolation. Family support helps parents work through these challenges while supporting their child's development.

Group activities also give parents and children opportunities to connect with other families and build relationships.

RFS believes: Supporting a child often means supporting the family, too. Family support and connection are not extras. They are part of helping children succeed.



5. Administrative Costs

What could change: The proposal would lower the limit on administrative costs from **15% to 5%** of approved program costs.

What this means for RFS: RFS is already operating below the current 15% administrative-cost limit.

Programs will continue to need staff and systems to:

- Manage public funds and finances
- Hire and support employees
- Collect and report program data
- Manage grants
- Support program quality
- Provide oversight and governance
- Meet remaining federal responsibilities

Some requirements may change under the proposal, but the core work of responsibly operating a high-quality Head Start or Early Head Start program will remain.

RFS believes: Programs receiving public funds should be held accountable for managing those funds responsibly. RFS takes that responsibility seriously. The proposed 5% limit would require a major shift in how RFS and many other Head Start programs operate. Reducing administrative costs does not eliminate the work required to operate a responsible, high-quality program.



What RFS Is Asking HHS to Protect

Head Start and Early Head Start were created to help children and families who may need additional support to succeed. RFS believes changes to these programs should strengthen their ability to help children and families and protect the services that make a meaningful difference in their lives.

RFS is asking federal leaders to revise the proposal and protect the following priorities:

- Protect high-quality early learning for children.
- Ensure children with disabilities and developmental delays can be successfully served.
- Give teachers the training, support and time they need to help children learn.
- Preserve meaningful home visiting and family support.
- Make sure programs have the resources needed to responsibly manage public funds and operate high-quality programs.
- Consider the quality and impact of services, not only the number of families served.

Serving more families should not mean giving every family less.

Suggested Public Comment - [Link to Make a Public Comment](#)

I am writing to ask the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) not to move forward with proposed changes to Head Start and Early Head Start that would reduce important supports and standards for children, families and the programs that serve them.

Head Start and Early Head Start serve children and families who often need more support, not less. These programs provide more than child care. They provide high-quality early learning, skilled teachers, developmental support, home visiting, family services and support for children with disabilities and developmental delays.

I ask HHS to:

- **Keep the current administrative cost limit and do not reduce it to 5%.** Programs need enough administrative capacity to responsibly manage public funds, staff, data, grants, oversight and other required work.
- **Protect meaningful home visiting.** Do not reduce the frequency or length of home visits in ways that could leave families with less consistent support.



- **Maintain strong family support and engagement services.** Supporting young children also means helping families address the challenges that can affect a child's development and success.
- **Protect services and supports for children with disabilities and developmental delays.** These children may need additional time, expertise and individualized support to succeed in early learning settings.
- **Maintain standards that support classroom quality and strong teachers.** Children need teachers who have the training, professional support and time to meet their individual needs.

[Add 2–3 sentences about your own experience with Head Start or Early Head Start and why one or more of these services matter to you.]

Programs should be accountable for using public funds responsibly. But reducing requirements does not reduce the needs of children and families, and reducing resources does not eliminate the work required to serve them well.

Serving more families should not mean giving every family less. I ask HHS to revise the proposed rule and protect the meaningful, high-quality services that help Head Start and Early Head Start children and families succeed.

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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.

