

# US Head Start preschool program hit with sequester cuts

Danielle DeSaxe  
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As a result of budget cuts imposed through sequestration, the Obama administration has announced that Head Start, a federally funded program that provides preschool and early preschool programs for low-income families, will be subjected to cuts, the consequences of which will be devastating for millions.

According to the National Head Start Association, the program's funding for the 2013 budget, approximately \$7 billion, will see a reduction of approximately 5 percent by September. This amounts to roughly \$400 million, or \$150,000 in cuts per local program.

In a recent newsletter, the National Head Start Association (NHSA) informed programs how cuts should be implemented. It was stated, "The first priority for all programs is to maintain a high quality of service provided to children and families and to ensure their health and safety."

The NHSA expects to compensate for the cuts with a decrease in the days in the school calendar, cuts to enrollment slots, as well as advising programs to lay off employees, and cutting bus services for thousands of children. Many teachers and program managers who have not been laid-off will experience financial hardship in jobs that already pay very little, by being forced to add furlough days to their calendars. In 2009, the typical salary for a Head Start teacher was only \$26,000 per year.

The sequester will also impose \$740 million in cuts to Title I, the federally funded program that provides financial assistance to low-income school districts, and \$644 million in cuts to Special Education, which is included in Part B of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act.

Overall, the National Education Association anticipates that 7.4 million students and nearly 50,000 school personnel nationwide will be affected by the 5.1 percent across-the-board cuts to education.

The reduced funding will have a shattering impact on poor families unable to afford child care. Speaking to the *Huffington Post*, Brenda Zedlitz, the director of the Washington County Head Start program, said, "We serve the working poor. Where are their children going to go when

they are at work? Does this mean that they will leave their children with caregivers who might not be appropriate?"

Along with early program closures, the NHSA estimates that at least 70,000 enrollment slots will no longer be available. Programs are already being forced to randomly remove students from their rosters, often using a lottery system in order to determine which students will be allowed to stay.

The additional cuts to busing will mean that many children, who may not have otherwise been removed from the program due to cuts in enrollment, will not be able to attend their programs due to an unmet need for transportation.

In *The President's Plan for a Strong Middle Class and a Strong America*, published in February, President Barack Obama proposed the concept of "Universal Preschool," declaring, "For this country to succeed in the 21st century, America must have the most dynamic, educated workforce in the world, and that education has to start early in life."

He asserts: "Every dollar invested in early learning and development programs saves about \$7 down the road in higher earnings and yield more revenue, and lower government spending on social services and crime prevention. But today, most four-year-olds aren't in a high-quality public preschool program, and only ten states and the District of Columbia requires school districts to provide free, full-day kindergarten."

However, the proposed cuts to Head Start are already devastating families across the nation, whose children are currently being turned away from programs in the middle of the school year. This will have a damaging impact on children's developmental growth, both in terms of cultural formation and psychologically, being removed from the social environment of friends and caregivers they have already become accustomed to.

According to Janet Gonzalez-Mena, a child development professional who has served on the Consulting Editors Panel for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC), "Attachment is vital not only to life

itself, but also to the quality of that life. Healthy development in all its aspects—physical, social, emotional, and intellectual—depends on attachment.” When social attachment is insecure or compromised, development is consequently compromised or delayed.

Research in the field of Early Childhood Education has consistently proven that early learning experiences are vital for healthy development, and high quality programs such as Head Start can provide those experiences for nearly 1 million children whose families would otherwise lack the means to provide them.

The cuts to Head Start will no doubt lead to a reduction in quality, no matter which measures the NHTSA advises its programs to take to reduce their budgets. Some programs are already completely cutting their infant-toddlers service, leaving many working class families without adequate or quality care for their children, the cost of which can be very high.

The NAEYC recommends that a quality infant program have an adult-child ratio of 1-to-3; unfortunately most licensed infant-toddler care centers do not meet the criteria conducive to quality. With no plan to implement “universal preschool” in the works, such overtures are meaningless and cynical in the face of sequestration. Obama’s mention of the lack of quality education available to four-year-olds is particularly hypocritical in light of his administration’s attack on public education programs such as Head Start.

In 1964, within the context of his “Great Society” policies, President Lyndon B. Johnson proposed the development of an early childhood education program that would provide children from low-income families with the skills necessary to do well in school. The policy funded a summer program that prepared children of the working poor for kindergarten, boosting educational outcomes and raising the chances of “breaking the cycle” of generational poverty.

The program’s curriculum focused on children’s social-emotional, and health and nutritional needs by providing children with early learning experiences and the nutrition necessary for proper brain development. Child development professionals today contend that social-emotional development is one of the biggest predictors in children’s later success in school.

Since its inception, the Head Start program has adjusted to living costs, with an initial budget of \$96.4 million in 1965 gradually increased to over \$6.5 billion by 2003. Under the Bush administration, Head Start received its first-ever decrease in funding when the House passed a reauthorization bill by only one vote in 2004, and enrollment dropped for the first time when nearly 10,000 slots were cut.

Now, under the Obama administration, deeper cuts continue to be imposed as part of the bipartisan attack on

social services.

As the current financial crisis worsens, the financial elite must repeal the hard won concessions of past workers’ struggles.

For this reason, any “universal preschool” program will be used for the opposite of what it appears to be. Obama’s early education policies are of a piece with standardized testing in kindergarten programs and the Race To The Top program (RTTT). Children may be expected to meet goals that are not developmentally appropriate or realistically attainable, which will no doubt prompt further cuts to education under the guise of “accountability”.

The cuts to Head Start and other social services, such as Medicare, unemployment benefits and Social Security, are part of an ongoing redistribution of wealth to the top. The process is throwing millions more working families into dire poverty. Even for those who are employed, wages have stagnated amidst the rising cost of living, making the cost of child care and preschool increasingly unaffordable for working class families.

The Obama administration has engaged in an all-out assault on public education in its push toward privatization, at the cost of hundreds of thousands of teaching jobs nationwide, cuts to teachers’ wages and school budgets, as well as the slashing of pensions and an attack on teachers’ tenures.

Schools have been forced to close and teacher-student ratios have climbed, which inevitably leads to a poorer learning environment. Obama’s RTTT policies seek to further penalize teachers, who routinely cannot compensate for the loss in quality in the classroom, by firing educators whose students do not do well on standardized tests.

Students from working class families are then expected to learn and do well on tests in the face of a decline in living standards, as their parents can no longer afford to provide the care and proper nutrition necessary for learning. The policies of the White House place the onus of responsibility on individual parents, children and teachers, rather than dealing with the social issues that lead to poverty, and thus lower test scores, in the first place.



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