

Trump bans undocumented children from Head Start

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On Thursday, July 10, the Trump administration announced a new Health and Human Services (HHS) rule banning the enrollment of undocumented children in Head Start, the federally funded early childhood program. The attack on three- and four-year-old children and their right to free public education is part of a multi-agency effort to strip immigrants of all federally funded social services.

While Head Start does not collect information on citizenship and the exact number of children affected is not known, there are at least 600,000 K-12 undocumented students in the US. A significant subset of these is likely to be of preschool age and eligible for Head Start.

The Trump administration's new rules will also make undocumented young people ineligible for certain high school, community college dual enrollment opportunities, and Career and Technical Education (CTE) courses. Recent figures suggest there are around 408,000 undocumented students in higher education, many participating in dual enrollment or CTE.

The rule changes were announced through coordinated statements from the Departments of Health and Human Services, Education, Agriculture, Labor, and Justice. Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy, Jr., using the vicious and xenophobic language that typically characterizes the administration's fascist agenda, said, "For too long, the government has diverted hardworking Americans' tax dollars to incentivize illegal immigration." Similarly, billionaire Education Secretary Linda McMahon insisted that taxpayer funds "should benefit American citizens, not illegal aliens."

The National Head Start Association issued a statement of "alarm" in response. "This decision undermines the fundamental commitment that the country has made to children and disregards decades of evidence that Head Start is essential to our collective future," said Yasmina Vinci, executive director of the National Head Start Association. "Head Start programs strive to make

every child feel welcome, safe, and supported, and reject the characterization of any child as 'illegal.'"

To legally justify the ban on undocumented children, the Trump administration issued a reinterpretation of the 1996 Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA), enacted by Democrat Bill Clinton. The new ruling redefines federally funded education programs as "federal public benefits," treating them as if they were public assistance.

Clinton's notorious PRWORA ended all federal cash assistance and imposed work requirements and time limits on aid to the poor. Clinton's measure to "end welfare as we know it" was a key part of the destruction of the limited social safety net associated with the New Deal and Great Society programs.

The *Washington Post* points out that the new rules for HHS reclassify a slew of grant programs as public benefits. That includes billions of dollars meant to bolster behavioral health clinics, assist the homeless and treat substance abuse and mental health disorders.

Katie Hamm, former acting deputy assistant secretary for early childhood development at HHS, explained in *EdWeek*, "To characterize this as a public benefit and a welfare program is a change, because Head Start has long been considered a school readiness program, an education program that is really focused on... preparing the child comprehensively for school."

The 1982 landmark Supreme Court ruling *Plyler v. Doe* established the right of all children to free public education regardless of immigration status based on the "equal protection clause" of the Fourteenth Amendment. Trump is now explicitly narrowing the established interpretation of *Plyler*, coupled with other vicious attacks on immigrant children, including authorizing ICE arrests at schools and withholding billions of dollars earmarked for English Language Learning and migrant education services.

There is little doubt that the administration sees the current ban as a stepping stone to a Supreme Court challenge of *Plyler* itself, with the aim of ending access to public school for all undocumented children.

Normally, rule changes based on a new interpretation of the law are published in the Federal Registry, allowing 30 days for public comment. The Trump administration, instead, arbitrarily announced the rule change via a news release.

The attack on Head Start is a serious issue. As part of the Johnson administration's War on Poverty, the program has served a total of 40 million low-income children across the United States.

"It overturns a 60-year approach in Head Start, which was to serve all children and to welcome all children, to provide them with a safe place to learn and grow and get ready for school," Katie Hamm told the *Chicago Sun-Times*. "It's not just a change in who gets served, it feels like a change in the mission of Head Start, because it really has always been bipartisan."

The hugely popular program provides comprehensive early childhood education, health, nutrition, and family support services to children from low-income families. It offers preschool education to promote cognitive and social-emotional development, as well as health screenings, immunizations, meals, and referrals to community resources. Its holistic approach is designed to ensure children enter kindergarten ready to learn while supporting family stability and wellbeing.

Despite the "cost-cutting" pretext cited by the administration, implementing the new screening requirements to establish citizenship is expected to impose additional costs. Federal officials estimate that the process of assembling documents and verifying immigration status would add at least \$21 million annually in administrative expenses.

As Julie Sugarman of the Migration Policy Institute explained:

The main implication that they're looking for—and that is very likely what we've seen from other kinds of actions like this—is that it does have a chilling effect. It does affect people's thoughts about whether the United States would be a welcoming place to come.

In practical terms, the ban creates a maze of

administrative obstacles for Head Start providers. Nonprofit organizations, which operate around 70 percent of Head Start centers, are not legally required to verify immigration status under current federal law. The resulting paperwork burdens and compliance costs threaten to disrupt services for all families, even those unaffected by the ban, while sowing fear and uncertainty among immigrant communities.

The Trump administration's sweeping attack on immigrant children and public education has been met with deafening silence from the Democratic Party and the major education unions. Far from mounting any serious opposition, Democratic leaders have confined their response to lawsuits, token statements, and electoral posturing.

This unwillingness to fight reflects their complicity in the escalating war on immigrants, public education, and social programs as a whole. Even as Trump moves to strip millions of basic rights and services, the Democrats refuse to mobilize working people against these policies, exposing their fundamental agreement with austerity, privatization, and the scapegoating of immigrants for the crises of capitalism.

To oppose these attacks, it is necessary to build a mass movement independent of both big business parties and the pro-capitalist unions that have abandoned any defense of immigrant rights and public education.

Workers, educators, and students must form rank-and-file committees in every school and community to unite the struggles of teachers, parents, and immigrant families against these policies. Only through the independent organization of the working class, fighting for socialism and the right to education for all, can the growing assault on immigrants and the dismantling of public education be halted and reversed.



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