Trump administration moves to gut Head Start, including mandating English-only classrooms

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The Trump administration is moving to gut Head Start, the nation's largest federally funded early childhood program. A Notice of Proposed Rulemaking (NPRM) published by the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) on August 7 would rescind more than 1,400 provisions of the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Buried in it is a mandate that all instruction be conducted in English, in a flagrant attack on immigrants.

Head Start was created in 1965 under the Lyndon Johnson administration's so-called War on Poverty. For six decades it has paired preschool with health screenings, dental care coordination, nutrition assistance, disability services and family support. Its rationale was that poverty, through hunger, illness and untreated disability, holds children back before they reach a classroom. Those services are what the rule strips out.

The program was a concession meant to contain the urban uprisings and civil rights struggles of the mid-1960s, starved almost at once by the cost of the Vietnam War. Today it reaches fewer than a third of eligible preschoolers.

The proposal does not abolish Head Start outright. That was attempted in 2025, when a leaked White House budget draft listed it for elimination and HHS closed half of its regional Head Start offices. Having failed to kill it from outside, the administration is now hollowing it out from within.

The workforce is a prime target, and it has been squeezed for decades. In 2022 the average Head Start teacher earned about $35,000, against $60,000 for a public kindergarten teacher. In Mississippi the average was under $27,000. A 2024 rule requiring programs to move toward public school pay by 2031 came with no new money. A separate NPRM, issued May 12 and not yet finalized, would rescind it.

The new proposal would delete the regulatory staff qualification standards and bar programs from requiring or even incentivizing college credentials, unless a position demonstrably demands them.

The administration claims it wants to "give authority to the States to govern group size and ratios, background checks, and transportation practices." HHS Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. presented the rule on August 6 as "trusting parents and local communities."

In fact, authority passes to state licensing agencies and grantee management. Parent committees, where parents at each center have a voice in running the program, would become optional and lose their role in hiring staff. Janell, a Policy Council parent in Peebles, Ohio, urged HHS in a public comment to keep parents involved. "This is how we as parents get involved, stay involved, and advocate for our children," she wrote.

The NPRM's Regulatory Impact Analysis projects $1.48 billion to $2.96 billion a year in cost savings due to "reductions in program expenditures associated with changes in staffing, service delivery, and administrative requirements."

HHS claims the savings could support about 116,500 more Head Start preschool slots and 45,600 more Early Head Start slots by 2031. But the NPRM says only that reductions "may translate into increases in funded slots," and programs are not required to use savings for enrollment. The rule would also cap administrative spending at 5 percent of program costs, down from 15 percent, which New York directors warn will force cuts to payroll, accounting and oversight staff.

HHS concedes Head Start's staffing ratios are stricter than every state's in three of four age categories. Jan, a former public school nurse, recalled that school physicians examined Los Angeles children monthly, a service unavailable to children in Ohio or Indiana. Federal Head Start regulations, she wrote, guarantee that children in all three states "receive the same level of quality early intervention."

The most openly reactionary provision is proposed section 1301.04(a): programs must "conduct all education to children in English," exempting only tribal programs. About 36 percent of Head Start children are dual language learners, and HHS says a third of non-tribal classrooms would be affected. The rule cites Trump's executive order declaring English the official language and states its aim as being to "minimize non-essential multilingual services and redirect resources toward English-language education and assimilation."

At a Head Start in Vista, north of San Diego, handwashing steps are posted in English and Spanish. Sixty percent of the

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families served by MAAC (Meropolitan Area Advisory Committee on Anti-Poverty), the nonprofit that runs it, speak Spanish at home. Without Spanish, lead teacher Jennifer Cabrera told KPBS, “I would have kids who are not engaged.”

In Idaho, a Migrant and Seasonal Head Start program for farmworker families has taught children bilingually for 18 years. Tatyana, who described herself in a public comment as “one of the only English-only speakers” at her children’s center in a “predominantly migrant and agricultural worker community,” warned that the rule “would alienate families in the community they serve.”

In July 2025, HHS used Bill Clinton’s 1996 welfare law to classify Head Start as a “federal public benefit,” barring undocumented children for the first time. A Seattle judge blocked it nationwide, and the administration dropped its appeal in December. A draft of this year’s rule, leaked to the *Bulwark* in July, would have barred any child without at least one parent who is a citizen or a “qualified” immigrant, even US citizen children.

That clause is absent from the published text, but the rule requires programs to hand eligibility records to HHS on request, noting privacy law exceptions for law enforcement.

The target is *Plyler v. Doe*, the 1982 ruling guaranteeing free K-12 schooling regardless of immigration status. *Plyler* does not apply to preschool, making Head Start the testing ground for the principle that a child’s education is a “benefit” contingent on the parents’ papers.

The cuts to SNAP, or food stamps, in Trump’s “One Big Beautiful Bill Act” also hit Head Start directly. In 2023–2024, 37 percent of children and pregnant women in Head Start and Early Head Start qualified through their family’s SNAP benefits. Between July 2025 and February 2026, 3.5 million people lost SNAP benefits.

Head Start is among the most popular programs in the country. In December 2025 polling for the advocacy group First Five Years Fund, 87 percent of voters, including 84 percent of Republicans, supported it. That support is visible in the response to the rule itself. Since August 7, more than 16,000 comments have been filed on the federal rulemaking docket.

A WSWS review of the roughly 8,600 submitted as text found that more than 95 percent oppose the rule, many of them from parents and Head Start staff. One family service worker reported earning $15.30 an hour, or $25,704 a year. Yvonette, whose child is in Early Head Start, described a biweekly paycheck that leaves “about $200-300 to figure out food and things kids need” after rent and utilities.

Naomi, a single working mother, called the program “the difference between life and death, housing and homelessness for my family.” A grandmother wrote that Head Start let her return to school and work and leave welfare, and that her daughter and granddaughter attended too: “All three of us are a product of Head Start.”

Patty, a Head Start teacher for nearly 20 years, wrote that for some of her children, the classroom is the most stable place in their lives, where they are “safe, loved, and given healthy meals to eat.” But advocacy groups such as NAEYC (National Association for the Education of Young Children) and the National Head Start Association are funneling this opposition into template letters appealing to the program’s “bipartisan” record, petitioning the very administration carrying out the attack.

The same administration says it cannot afford standards for poor children while requesting a $1.5 trillion military budget for 2027, enough to fund Head Start at its current standards more than 120 times over.

The program has been under bipartisan attack for many years. The Obama administration presided over the largest cut in Head Start’s history in dollar terms, in 2013: more than $400 million through the sequester he negotiated with congressional Republicans. The Biden administration let the expanded child tax credit, the most significant anti-poverty measure in a generation, expire.

The party’s response to the NPRM has been press conferences and appeals to vote Democratic in November. On September 14, the AFT, AFSCME, SEIU and the National Education Association jointly asked the administration to withdraw the rule. But AFT President Randi Weingarten pledged to fight “in Congress, in the courts and the court of public opinion.” Their statements propose no action by the workers themselves.

The defense of Head Start requires the independent action of the families the program serves and employs: rank-and-file committees of teachers, aides, family service workers and parents, linked with K-12 educators and the workers hit by the SNAP and Medicaid cuts, organized outside the unions and the Democratic Party.

Their demands should not be merely to preserve inadequate existing standards but to guarantee every child a place regardless of immigration status or home language, to expand funding for early childhood education massively, paid for by cutting the Pentagon budget and expropriating the ill-gotten gains of the oligarchy.

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