

Arkansas Head Start and Early Head Start Landscape Analysis

Report Brief

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The National Head Start Program

Initially started in 1965 as an eight-week summer program, Project Head Start was funded as part of the Economic Opportunity Act of 1964's War on Poverty. Today Early Head Start (EHS) and Head Start (HS) support the school readiness of low-income children through environments and practices that promote early learning and development, positive health outcomes, and family engagement and well-being.

Head Start and Early Head Start in Arkansas

In 2023-2024 (Federal Fiscal Year 2024), 19 Arkansas Head Start grantee agencies were awarded approximately \$50.9M in Federal funding to serve 5,595 HS children ages three-to-five years old and \$66M to serve 3,472 EHS children from birth to age two and pregnant women. A total of 159 funded enrollment opportunities were available for Migrant and Seasonal Head Start families state-wide.

Arkansas Head Start and Early Head Start Landscape Analysis

Data collection took place in 2024, using publicly accessible sources including the Head Start Program Fact Sheets, Program Information Report (PIR), Federal monitoring reports, and interviews with key stakeholders including six (6) grantee agencies, the Head Start State Collaboration Office Director, and the Office of Early Childhood Assistant Commissioner. Key Findings include:

1. Grantees are funded to serve an estimated 23% of low-income children under five years old. Funded enrollment has declined post-pandemic.
2. Grantees are struggling to hire qualified EHS teachers. Approximately 22% of all EHS teachers do not meet the minimum qualification required for the position.
3. When compared to nationwide data, HS and EHS children have similar rates of health insurance and medical homes, but the rate of children who are up-to-date on all possible immunizations is higher than HS and EHS children nationally.
4. The percentage of enrolled children with a diagnosed disability exceeds the national target of 10%; nearly 17% of HS children and 11% of EHS children had a diagnosed disability. The percentage is likely under-reported; amongst HS children referred to the local education agency for further evaluation, 22% did not receive an evaluation.
5. Most grantees utilize *Creative Curriculum* in HS and EHS classrooms and the corresponding *Teaching Strategies GOLD* to support ongoing assessment of school readiness. A range of developmental screening tools are utilized; Ages and Stages and Brigance are used most frequently.
6. At the time the Landscape Analysis was completed, *Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS®)* reports were publicly accessible for just 3 of 19 grantees. *CLASS®* is an observation instrument that assesses the quality of teacher-child interactions in center-based preschool classrooms.
7. The two areas of noncompliance and/or deficiency cited most frequently in publicly accessible Federal monitoring review reports were (1) child health and safety; and (2) financial management.

Landscape Analysis Supporting Data

Enrollment Data

In 2023-2024, Arkansas was funded to serve 23.3% of the income-eligible children under five years old through Head Start and Early Head Start. The enrollment landscape is rapidly changing; of the six (6) grantees interviewed, four (4) implemented significant reductions in their enrollment effective with school year 2024-2025.

Table 1: Arkansas HS and EHS Enrollment, 2023-2024	
Indicator ¹	# / %
Estimated number of children < 5-years in Arkansas	173,977 ²
Estimated number of children < 5-years with family income at or below 100% FPL	39,571 ³
HS/EHS funded enrollment ⁴	9,226
Percentage of children <5 years living at 100% FPL for whom HS/EHS is available	23.3%

Nearly all enrollment opportunities (97%) were for center-based care in Arkansas. Very few enrollment opportunities were for family child care or home-based services.

Nearly 58% of HS enrollees were three-year-olds; expansion of state funded preschool has resulted in fewer four-year-olds enrolled in HS.

Teaching Staff Qualification Data

Head Start teachers must hold a minimum of an associate's degree (AA) although grantees may request a waiver for teachers enrolled in a degree program. In 2023-2024, 90% of Arkansas HS teachers held AA or higher compared to 92% nationally.

Head Start assistant teachers must hold a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or be enrolled in a program and complete a credential or degree. In 2023-2024, 70.5% of Arkansas HS assistant teachers held at least a CDA. Of the 84 that did not meet the minimum qualification, 74 (88%) were enrolled in a program. As a result, there were 10 reported HS assistant teachers who did not meet credentialing requirements. Nationwide, 69% of teacher assistants met the minimum qualification requirement.

Early Head Start teachers must hold a minimum of a CDA. In 2023-2024, approximately 78% of Arkansas EHS teachers held at least a CDA; 22% (145 EHS teachers) did not meet the minimum qualification requirement. Nationwide, 83% of EHS teachers met the minimum qualification.

¹ US Census Bureau, American Community Survey 1-Year Estimates (2023), "Table S1701: Poverty Status in the Past 12 Months", <https://data.census.gov/table/ACSS1Y2023.S1701?q=arkansas%20poverty>. ACS data represent a statistic, not an actual count, reported at the 90 percent confidence level; this means that 90 percent of the time, the estimate contains the true population value within the margin of error.

² The margin of error is +/- 2,611.

³ The margin of error is +/- 4,917.

⁴ 2023-2024 Program Information Report.

Table 2: Arkansas Teacher Qualifications, 2023-2024 Program Information Report			
	Minimum position requirement	% AR met the minimum	% Nationwide met the minimum
Head Start teachers	Associate's degree (AA); waiver may be requested for teachers enrolled in a degree program	90%	92%
Head Start assistant teachers	Child Development Associate (CDA) credential; may be enrolled in a degree or credential or be enrolled in and completed a credential or degree	70.5%	69%
Early Head Start teachers	CDA	78%	83%

Health and Oral Health Child Data

The rate of HS children with health insurance (96.2%) and a medical home (96.2%) is similar to national data (96% and 95%, respectively), but the rate of children who are up-to-date with all possible immunizations (95%) is higher than the national rate (91%). EHS rates were slightly lower than HS, which is expected given the increased number of well-baby and well-child appointments children have in their first two years.

When compared to national data, Arkansas grantees reported substantially higher rates of children receiving preventive care (98.7% vs. 86.8%) and substantially lower rates of children needing treatment (5.8% vs. 12.1%).

Services to Children with Disabilities Data

Approximately 16.6% of HS and 10.7% of EHS children had a diagnosed disability. The percentage is likely under-reported; amongst HS children referred to the local education agency for further evaluation, 22% did not receive an evaluation. The reason stated most frequently was parent refusal.

Signed agreements are in place with 81% of the local education agencies and 77% of the early intervention agencies, which may impact accessibility of assessment and ultimately service delivery.

Curriculum, Screening, and Assessment Tools

Across the state, the dominant classroom curriculum is *Creative Curriculum*.

Table 3: Primary Curriculum by Service Delivery Model, 2023-2024 Program Information Report*			
Curriculum	Center-based	Home-based	Family Child Care
Creative Curriculum (all editions)	43	5	2
Frog Street	2		
Adventures in Learning	2		
Ready to SHINE	1		
Born to Learn		1	

Partners for a Healthy Baby		1	
Total programs reporting	48	7	2

A range of developmental screening tools are utilized by Arkansas grantees.

Table 4: Developmental Screening Tools, 2023-2024 Program Information Report*	
Screening tool	# programs responding "primary"
Ages and Stages (ASQ/ASQ-3, ASQ-SE)	23
Brigance (all editions)	19
Developmental Indicators for the Assessment of Learning (DIAL) (all editions)	5
Learning Accomplishment Profile – Diagnostic Screener (LAP-D)	1
Total programs reporting	48

Grantees must engage in ongoing assessment of children to evaluate progress towards school readiness. *Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG)* is the most used assessment tool in Arkansas.

Table 5: Assessment Tools, 2023-2024 Program Information Report*	
Assessment tool	# programs responding "primary"
Teaching Strategies GOLD (TSG)	37
Desired Results Developmental Profile (DRDP)	10
Child Outcome Measures	1
Total programs reporting	48

*The Program Information Report (PIR) is self-reported data submitted to the Office of Head Start by August 31st annually. The PIR is reported by grant award number and program type (HS, EHS, and/or EHS-CCP). Grantees may have multiple awards and program types (e.g., HS and EHS on award #1; HS only on award #2; EHS-CCP on award #3). As a result, while there are 19 grantees in Arkansas, there are 48 programs reported on the Arkansas PIR.

Research and report findings prepared by Kristen Hayes, Principal Consultant

Kristen Hayes Consulting

Kristen Hayes, MPM is an independent management consultant whose clients include over 140 school districts, municipalities, counties, membership associations, and philanthropic organizations. For over 20 years, Kristen has advised the Head Start community on strategic planning, proposal writing, community and organizational needs assessments, change management, regulatory compliance, and ongoing quality improvement. She is the principal author for State and Federal competitive grants totaling over \$500 million. Kristen previously served as Senior Program Specialist at the Office of Head Start – Region 9 and as a Presidential Management Fellow and Policy Analyst at the US Department of Education. She lives outside Boston, MA.