



Head Start Eligibility Criteria

Increasing Economic Diversity Among Head Start Children

Overview

Although Head Start primarily targets poor children, the program does allow limited participation of near-poor and middle income children, recognizing (1) the struggles of near-poor families to afford quality early childhood education, and (2) the benefits of children's exposure to diverse socioeconomic backgrounds. This inclusive approach has the potential to benefit a much larger number of children, but due to capacity constraints the enrollment rate of children above the poverty line is very low.

Head Start's basic eligibility criteria target children from families with incomes below the federal poverty line, children from families receiving public assistance, homeless children, foster children, and children with disabilities. These criteria are standardized nationwide, allowing for very little variation. However, the program does incorporate some flexibility into the eligibility guidelines for two main reasons. The first is to increase economic diversity in the program, which is beneficial for early learning.¹ For this reason Head Start has always allowed a small percentage of higher income (also known as "over income") children to participate. New research supports this reasoning, showing that a classroom composition with higher representation of children from families with higher socioeconomic status is positively associated with academic outcomes, regardless of a child's own income level, classroom quality or classroom racial/ethnic composition.² The second reason for flexible eligibility guidelines is that "children from low-income families just above the federal poverty line would benefit from participation" as these families often struggle to afford child care.³ Likewise, children in remote communities may also lack access to child care, despite being in families with higher incomes. For these reasons, Head Start incorporates the following guidelines into its eligibility criteria:

- **Over-income children:** Up to 10% of children participating in a Head Start program may be from families with income above the federal poverty line, so long as it has been determined that the children would benefit from the program. There is no maximum income limitation for over-income families.⁴ Enrollment of over-income children is not subordinate to the enrollment of income-eligible children, as long as over-income children constitute no more than 10% of program enrollment.⁵
- **Near-poor children:** Up to 35% of children participating in a Head Start program may be from families with income between 100% and 130% of the poverty line, as long as the program prioritizes children meeting the poverty level income eligibility requirements. Programs serving children under this category must report how they demonstrated that all income-eligible children in their service area are being served.⁶
- **Remote communities:** Head Start programs in very small low-income communities with no access to child care or medical services may enroll participants who do not meet the low-income criteria, as long as these participants comprise less than half of total enrollment. This flexibility also applies to American Indian/Alaska Native programs as long as all income-eligible children within the service area are prioritized.⁷

These exceptions attempt to improve the experience of participating children and expand access to children who

diversitydatakids.org

data for a diverse and equitable future



are not income-eligible but are still vulnerable and would benefit from early childhood education and care. Although this flexibility has the potential to greatly benefit poor, near-poor, and over-income children, in practice few near-poor and over-income children are enrolled nationwide due to the low availability of slots. Head Start's limited capacity to serve income-eligible children indicates that to the detriment of all children, the program is currently unable to expand its services to a more socioeconomically diverse population.

Sources & notes:

The Improving Head Start for School Readiness Act of 2007, 42 U.S.C. §9801 *et. seq.* (2007), Section 645.

¹ Zigler, E. & Styfco, S.J. (2010). *The hidden history of Head Start*. New York, NY: Oxford University Press, (pp. 126-127).

² Reid, J.L. (2012). "Socioeconomic Diversity and Early Learning: The Missing Link in Policy for High-Quality Preschools." In R.D. Kahlenberg, (Ed.). *The future of school integration: Socioeconomic diversity as education reform strategy*. (pp 67-126). New York: The Century Foundation.

³ Conference report on H.R. 1429, Improving Head Start For School Readiness Act of 2007 (153 Cong Rec H 13876). (Nov 14, 2007). *Congressional Record Daily Edition*, 153(176), pp. H13876. Retrieved from <http://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t17.d18.c1dfdd5561000c35?accountid=9703>; Conference report on H.R. 1429, Improving Head Start For School Readiness Act of 2007 (153 Cong Rec H 13462). (Nov 9, 2007). *Congressional Record Daily Edition*, 153(174), pp H13462. Retrieved from <http://congressional.proquest.com/congressional/docview/t17.d18.c1dfdd55610007d2?accountid=9703>.

⁴ Head Start policy clarifications: Eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment and attendance (OHS – PC – I – 040). Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC). Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Policy%20Clarifications%20and%20FAQs/i_pc_actual.htm#I040

⁵ Head Start policy clarifications: Eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment and attendance (OHS – PC – I – 083). Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning & Knowledge Center (ECLKC). Retrieved from http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Policy%20Clarifications%20and%20FAQs/i_pc_actual.htm#I083

⁶ 2011-2012 Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) Survey Form. (Advance Copy, Version 1.1). (December 1, 2011). Office of Head Start, Administration for Children & Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

⁷ Age of children and family income eligibility, 45 CFR 1305.4. *Head Start Program Performance Standards*. Retrieved from <http://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/hslc/standards/Head%20Start%20Requirements/1305/1305.4%20Age%20of%20children%20and%20family%20income.htm>.