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Restoring Flexibility to Support Head Start Program Access

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I write as a professor at a large public research university with over two decades of scholarship focused on early childhood teacher well-being, including stress, depression, and the implications of educator mental health for young children's social and emotional development. My work has consistently shown that the conditions under which early educators work are not peripheral policy concerns—they are core determinants of both teacher functioning and children's developmental outcomes.

The proposed rollback of wage and benefit requirements in Head Start represents a step backward from what decades of research—and more recently, field-based program evaluations—have demonstrated is necessary to sustain a stable, effective early childhood workforce.

The early childhood workforce is already characterized by chronically low wages, limited access to benefits, and persistent instability. These conditions are not benign. They create material hardship and psychological strain that undermine teachers' capacity to provide the kinds of emotionally supportive, responsive, and cognitively stimulating environments that young children require. Research has consistently linked financial insecurity and inadequate working conditions to elevated stress and depression among early educators—factors that, in turn, are associated with reduced classroom quality and less optimal child social-emotional outcomes. The proposed policy change risks exacerbating precisely these conditions.

My colleagues and I have recently examined these issues directly through a longitudinal evaluation of a residency-based Alternative Licensure Program for incumbent early childhood educators. This work provides concrete evidence that improvements in compensation and benefits are not merely workforce perks; they are essential levers for stability, retention, and sustained instructional quality.

Across four cohorts of participating teachers, we observed substantial increases in salary following licensure, including a large increase within six months and continued growth over time. These gains were accompanied by significant improvements in access to workplace benefits such as health insurance, paid time off, and retirement supports. Critically, these material improvements were linked to high levels of retention: over 90% of program participants remained in the early childhood field for up to 42 months after completion.

These findings are directly relevant to the proposed rule. They demonstrate that when compensation and benefits improve, the field does not experience destabilization or loss—it experiences the opposite: continuity, commitment, and sustained participation.

Equally important, improvements in workforce conditions did not come at the expense of children. Classroom-level assessment data indicated that children taught by these educators demonstrated social-emotional, physical, and cognitive learning gains comparable to citywide averages. This is a crucial point for policymakers:

strengthening workforce compensation supports, rather than undermines, program quality.

The mechanism underlying these patterns is straightforward and well-supported by theory and empirical evidence. Financial security and access to benefits reduce chronic stress, enable teachers to meet their basic needs, and provide the conditions necessary for emotional presence in the classroom. As our study notes, stable health care and paid leave allow teachers to rest and recover, supporting both their well-being and their ability to “give their all” to students. Rolling back wage and benefit requirements would predictably erode these conditions, increasing stress and turnover at precisely the time the field is attempting to rebuild.

Moreover, these workforce issues are deeply tied to equity. The early childhood workforce is disproportionately composed of women, particularly women of color, who have historically been concentrated in the lowest-paid roles. Policies that weaken compensation standards risk reinforcing longstanding structural inequities while simultaneously undermining program quality for children in communities already facing disadvantage.

Evidence from national policy analysis, including work by the National Institute for Early Education Research, further underscores that reducing compensation standards does not produce sustainable cost savings. Rather, it shifts costs onto educators themselves—through reliance on public assistance, forgone health care, and workforce exit—and onto programs that must absorb the consequences of high turnover and instability. This is both economically inefficient and developmentally shortsighted.

Head Start has long been a cornerstone of high-quality early childhood education because it recognizes that children’s outcomes are inseparable from the adults who care for and teach them. Wage and benefit requirements are not ancillary features of the program; they are foundational to its ability to recruit, support, and retain a qualified workforce.

In closing, I strongly urge you to maintain, and ideally strengthen, existing wage and benefit requirements within Head Start. The weight of the evidence is clear: improving compensation and benefits supports teacher well-being, reduces turnover, and sustains high-quality learning environments for young children. Rolling back these protections would move us in the opposite direction—undermining the very conditions that make Head Start effective.

Thank you for the opportunity to comment.