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Ohio Head Start Association Outlines What Proposed Federal Changes Could Mean for Ohio Children and Families

The Ohio Head Start Association (OHSAI) is sharing its analysis of a proposed federal rule affecting Head Start and Early Head Start, and what it could mean for the more than 26,000 children and families these programs serve across all 88 Ohio counties. The rule, "Reducing Federal Burden for Head Start Programs," was published by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services on August 7, 2026, and would substantially reorganize the standards that guide how Head Start programs operate.

For more than 60 years, Head Start has paired early learning with health screenings, disability services, nutrition, and family support, built on the understanding that young children thrive when their developmental, health, and family needs are addressed together rather than separately. That comprehensive model has also made Head Start an economic anchor in Ohio communities. It allows parents to go to work, attend school, or complete job training with confidence in their child's care, and in many rural and underserved counties, it remains the only source of comprehensive early childhood services families can access.

OHSAI supports the Department's stated goal of reducing genuinely duplicative paperwork, and believes there is real room to streamline requirements without weakening the outcomes families depend on. Several provisions in the current proposal, however, go beyond paperwork reduction and would change standards that shape what Ohio families and communities can count on from Head Start.

What Would Change, and What It Could Mean

Classroom ratios and group size. The proposal would replace federal staff-to-child ratio and group-size requirements with Ohio's child care licensing standards, which allow more children per adult at every age. Ohio's licensing ratio for infants and toddlers ranges from 1:5 to 1:8, compared with Head Start's current 1:4, with maximum group sizes nearly double what Head Start permits today. Smaller ratios are part of what parents count on from Head Start, and research using random assignment has found that reducing group size from 20 children to 15 produced measurably larger literacy gains for children.

Health, developmental, and disability services. Research-backed timelines for health, developmental, vision, and hearing screenings, along with the individualized services that currently support children with disabilities, would no longer be required. These are often how a developmental concern gets identified early enough to make a real difference for a child, and Ohio's implementation of the Individuals with Disabilities Education Act was not built to carry that coordination on its own.

Discipline policies. The current prohibition on expulsion and strict limits on suspension would be removed, leaving discipline decisions to each provider's own policy rather than a shared statewide or federal standard.

Transportation safety. Federal requirements for bus monitors and age-, height-, and weight-matched child restraint systems would give way to Ohio's lighter standard, which requires a staff member trained in CPR and first aid and seat belt use where a vehicle happens to be equipped with one.

Family and parent voice. Parent committees would move from required to optional, and the process that protects parent input when a Policy Council and Governing Board disagree would be removed. Family voice in program decisions has long been part of what makes Head Start responsive to the communities it serves.

Eligibility and documentation. Family self-attestation would no longer establish eligibility for homelessness, income, or a child's age. ACF's own estimate suggests roughly 8 percent of currently enrolled children could lose eligibility without further documentation, even where a family's circumstances have not changed.

Administrative capacity. The administrative cost cap would fall from 15 percent, the figure set in the Head Start Act itself, to 5 percent, a level only 3.7 percent of grantees nationally currently meet. That funding supports the fiscal management, compliance, and organizational leadership functions that keep programs accountable for public dollars.

"Head Start has spent 60 years earning the trust of Ohio families, and that trust rests on specific, dependable standards," said Julie Stone, Executive Director of OHSAI. "As this proposal moves forward, we want Ohioans and their elected officials to understand exactly what is being proposed and what it could mean for their own communities. We support cutting genuine red tape. We also believe the quality, safety, and accountability that have made Head Start work for Ohio families are worth protecting as this process continues."

Nothing Changes Today

The proposed rule is not final, and current Head Start Program Performance Standards remain fully in effect while the federal rulemaking process moves forward. OHSAI is asking every program, board member, and family in its network to continue operating exactly as they do today, to take the time to understand what the proposal would change, and to submit public comments to regulations.gov before the comment period closes on October 6, 2026. Comments carry the most weight when they include specific, Ohio-grounded detail: how current ratios, screenings, family engagement, and administrative support translate into outcomes for real children and families, and what would change if those requirements disappeared.

OHSAI will continue working closely with its network of Head Start and Early Head Start programs across all 88 Ohio counties in the weeks ahead to make sure Ohio's experience and Ohio's voice are heard, and the association is preparing additional resources, talking points, and comment templates for members and partners as the comment period continues.