



The Final Rule: Head Start Program Performance Standards

Background

The Head Start Program Performance Standards were first published in 1975 to set requirements for ensuring high-quality, comprehensive, individualized services for children and families regardless of where they live or what program they attend. Following the 2007 reauthorization of Head Start, which called for revised Standards, a Notice of Proposed Rule Making (NPRM) was released in the summer of 2015. With sign-on from nearly 2,000 individuals and organizations, including all State and Regional Head Start Associations, NHSA submitted comments on the NPRM outlining the Head Start community's enthusiasm for many of the proposed changes but with clear recommendations for areas requiring change.

On September 1, 2016, the Department of Health and Human Services announced the Final Rule implementing new Head Start Program Performance Standards. The new Rule is the first major overhaul of Head Start program Standards and one of the most significant regulatory changes in Head Start's 50-year history. In the Final Rule, significant positive changes were made to each of the three priority areas identified in NHSA's comments.

The Three Priorities of the Head Start Community

1. Extended Duration of Services

While expanding access to full-day, full-school-year programming was an important goal outlined in the NPRM, local community needs and availability of resources are critical factors in considering the implementation of this change. The Final Rule modified the NPRM's definition of full day/full school year to incorporate much needed flexibility, allowing programs to meet annual requirements for planned class operations. Phased in over the next five years, Head Start programs will transition to provide at least 1,020 annual hours of planned class operations over at least eight months for all center-based enrollment.

2. Family Engagement

Family engagement is integral to the Head Start model, the Final Rule made several changes from the NPRM that validate the importance of parent and family engagement in Head Start. The requirements for parent committees and family partnership agreements were both restored in the Final Rule, and new impasse procedures create a fair balance between a program's governing body and policy council.

3. Local Flexibility

In reality, no two Head Start programs are the same, but all must meet the same high bar of quality. The new Head Start Program Performance Standards include several provisions that encourage programs' local flexibility to support strong child outcomes and meet the needs of the families and communities they serve. Programs are able to request approval to operate a locally-designed program option through a waiver process that can be approved through the program's five-year grant cycle for specific requirements, including those around service duration and group size.

Looking Ahead

Overall, the new Standards represent a strong vision for the future of Head Start as an innovative, research-based model rooted in the commitment to achieving success for children and their families. This vision reflects the desire of the Head Start community to continuously improve and ensure outcomes for our children. We commend the Administration for listening to the Head Start community, and we look forward to working in partnership with Congress and the Administration to provide adequate resources to continuously raise the bar of quality throughout Head Start.

Questions or comments? Contact Tommy Sheridan at TSheridan@nhsa.org.