



Why Do Head Start Grant Recipients Apply to Convert Enrollment Slots?

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Federal guidance allows Head Start¹ grant recipients to submit a conversion application to the Office of Head Start (OHS) to shift funding (i.e., convert enrollment slots) from services for Head Start preschool-age children to Early Head Start services for pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. Head Start grant recipients applying to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start are required to provide evidence showing that the proposed slot conversion will best meet the needs of children and families in the community. To do this, many grant recipients use or update their required Community Assessment (*Head Start Program Performance Standards*, 45 CFR 1302.11)² to demonstrate how the proposed changes in their conversion application align with the community's needs, strengths, and resources. This brief examines why Head Start grant recipients convert existing Head Start enrollment slots to center-based Early Head Start enrollment slots based on the reasons cited in their conversion applications.

¹ The term Head Start refers to grant recipients that offer services for preschool-age children and their families. The term Early Head Start refers to programs serving families with children ages birth through 3; many also serve expectant families.

² Determining Community Strengths, Needs, and Resources, 45 CFR 1302.11 (2022), <https://www.ecfr.gov/current/title-45/subtitle-B/chapter-XIII/subchapter-B/part-1302>.

Grant recipients may have different reasons for converting enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start, including the following:

- **Some Head Start programs' communities may have insufficient supply of infant-and-toddler care and education to meet families' needs.** Many communities need more infant-and-toddler care and education that is affordable and high-quality (Chaudry et al. 2021; Henley and Adams 2018; Jessen-Howard, Malik, and Falgout 2020; Workman and Jessen-Howard 2018, 2020).
- **Some Head Start programs may experience challenges filling their enrollment slots for preschool-age children.** These challenges can result from competition with public prekindergarten programs (Derrick-Mills et al. 2016; GAO 2003; Morrissey, Lekies, and Cochran 2007; New Mexico Legislative Finance Committee 2019), changing community demographics and high living costs (GAO 2003; Smith and McHenry 2019), and program management and recruitment practices (GAO 2003).
- **Some Head Start programs may wish to provide birth-through-age-5 services to offer continuity of care for children.** Children and families can benefit from the deeper relationships that can be built when they experience continuous care from the same educators (Chaudry et al. 2021).³ One way to offer continuity of care is to provide Head Start and Early Head Start services in the same setting.⁴

About This Brief

This brief describes why grant recipients convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start slots based on a review of conversion applications submitted to the OHS. The motivation to convert slots may differ for those who wish to convert to home-based versus center-based slots. This brief focuses specifically on grant recipients that applied to convert to center-based slots.

³ "Using Mixed-Age Groups to Support Continuity of Care in Center-Based Programs," US Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), Administration for Children and Families (ACF), Office of Head Start (OHS), April 26, 2022, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/using-mixed-age-groups-support-continuity-care-center-based-programs>.

⁴ "Using Mixed-Age Groups to Support Continuity of Care in Center-Based Programs," HHS, ACF, OHS.

BOX 1

Key Findings

- Most conversion applications (88 percent) cited community need for infant-and-toddler care and education as a motivation for converting enrollment slots to center-based Early Head Start.
- More than half of conversion applications (66 percent) referenced enrollment challenges or competition to provide preschool-age care and education as a motivation for converting enrollment slots to center-based Early Head Start.

Source: Authors' analysis.

Methods

Sample

To identify grant recipients that converted enrollment slots from Head Start to center-based Early Head Start, we searched the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES). HSES is the central system where grant recipients submit all reports and applications to OHS. We identified all Head Start grant recipients in Regions 1 through 10⁵ that submitted applications through HSES to convert enrollment slots to center-based Early Head Start in 2020, 2021, and 2022 and had those applications approved by June 2022. We included 41, 39, and 28 Head Start grant recipients from 2020, 2021, and 2022, respectively, in this study. After initial coding, we dropped three grant recipients where the conversion application narrative was not available in HSES, resulting in a total sample of 105 conversion applications for this analysis.

Measures and Analytic Approach

We coded Head Start grant recipients' conversion applications to capture information about the grant recipient, proposed conversion, and motivation to convert enrollment slots (see the appendix for the codes the team used). We calculated the share of grant recipients citing different motivations for the proposed conversion. Conversion applications could include mentions of more than one motivation, and therefore the share of conversion applications citing different motivations for conversion add up to more than 100 percent.

⁵ Grant recipients in Region 11 (the region representing grant recipients providing services to federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes) are not required to follow the same process as grant recipients in other regions, and those from Region 12 (the region representing grant recipients providing services to Migrant and Seasonal Workers) provide services for children from birth through age 5; therefore, grant recipients from these regions were not included in the sample.

Findings

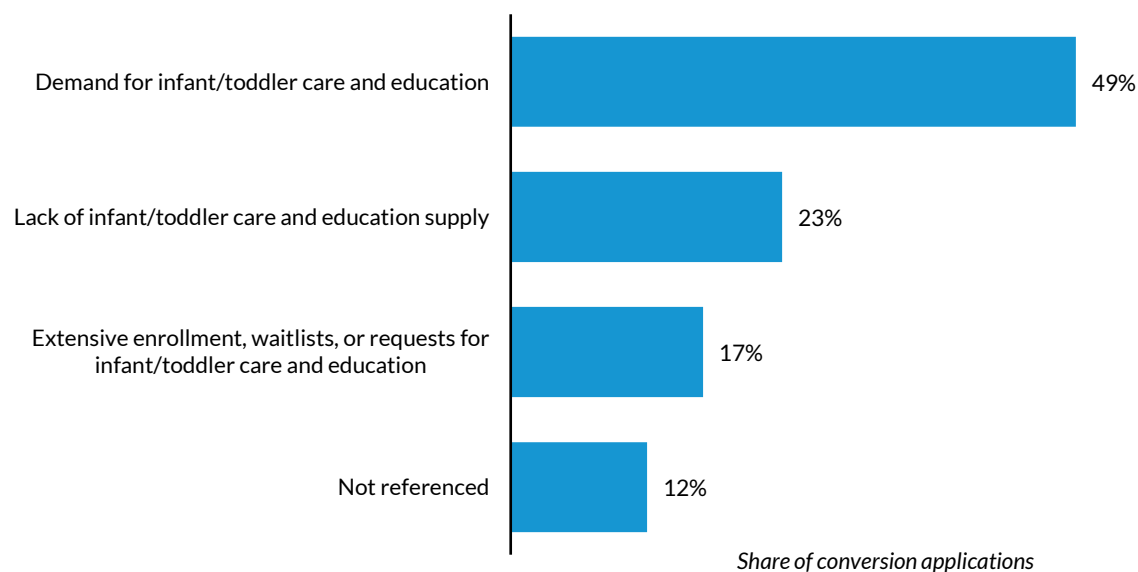
Why Do Head Start Grant Recipients Apply to Convert Enrollment Slots to Center-Based Early Head Start?

About 88 percent of conversion applications cited community need for infant-and-toddler care and education as a rationale for applying for conversion.

Most conversion applications (88 percent) cited community need for infant-and-toddler care and education as an explicit reason for the proposed conversion. About half of conversion applications (49 percent) referenced community need for Early Head Start in the form of high demand for infant-and-toddler care and education as a motivation (figure 1). Conversion applications also referenced community need based on inadequate supply of infant-and-toddler care and education (23 percent) and as reflected by extensive Early Head Start enrollment or waitlists (17 percent) as a motivation. Only 12 percent of conversion applications did not cite community need for Early Head Start services when describing their rationale for the proposed conversion.

FIGURE 1

Share of Conversion Applications Citing Aspects of Community Need as a Reason for Applying for Conversion



Source: Urban Institute coding and analysis of applications to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start, downloaded from the HSES.

Note: N = 105 conversion applications.

The majority of conversion applications cited Head Start enrollment challenges as a reason for applying for conversion.

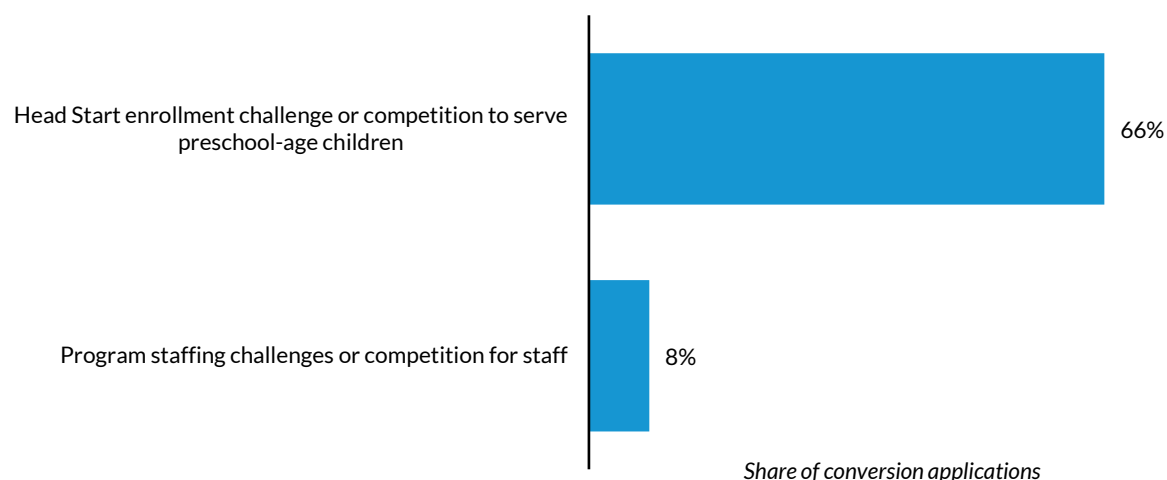
More than half of conversion applications (66 percent) cited enrollment challenges as a reason for converting enrollment slots (figure 2). Among these conversion applications, the most often cited challenges were (1) maintaining Head Start enrollments (54 percent of those citing enrollment challenges) and (2) competition to serve Head Start–eligible children from other preschool-age care and education providers (41 percent of those citing enrollment issues). Conversion applications citing competition as a motivation mostly referred to growth in local or state preschool programs, but some also cited high availability of preschool-age care and education from child care providers or other early education programs.

Few cited staffing challenges as a reason for applying for conversion.

Only 8 percent of conversion applications cited program staffing challenges, including Head Start or Early Head Start staffing requirements and difficulty hiring qualified staff, turnover, and competition for staff from other providers, as a motivation for the proposed conversion (figure 2).

FIGURE 2

Share of Conversion Applications Citing Issues Related to Head Start Enrollment Challenges and Program Staffing Challenges as a Reason for Applying for Conversion



Source: Urban Institute coding and analysis of applications to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start, downloaded from the HSES.

Notes: Values do not add up to 100 because the figure shows the share of grant recipients that indicated issues related to Head Start enrollment challenges were a reason for conversion, and separately the share that stated program staffing challenges were a reason for conversion. *N* = 105 conversion applications.

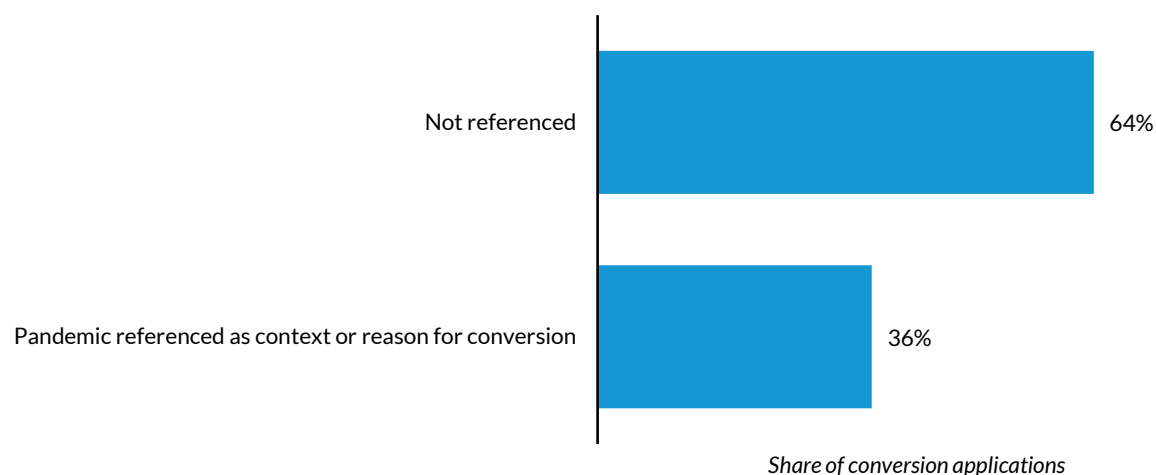
Children have left to public school in this current program year...This trend continues to impact the ability of our program to meet funded enrollment. This continuous struggle to meet the program enrollment is the reason for this application for conversion of slots.
—grant recipient conversion application

About a third of conversion applications reference COVID-19 as context or a reason for conversion.

More than one-third of conversion applications (36 percent) cited the pandemic as context or a reason for the proposed conversion.⁶ Most of these conversion applications stated that the pandemic either caused or exacerbated program enrollment and operational challenges. Some conversion applications also referred to lower availability of care and education options resulting from pandemic restrictions affecting the ability to meet community need for services.

FIGURE 3

Share of Conversion Applications Referencing COVID-19 as Context or Reason for Conversion



Source: Urban Institute coding and analysis of applications to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start, downloaded from the HSES.

Note: N = 105 conversion applications.

⁶ We originally coded the pandemic as context versus a motivation for conversion separately. However, we realized that different instances overlapped too much to distinguish consistently and reliably and combined the two categories.

The 2020–21 [Program Information Report] reflects a drastic decrease in the number of working families that our program served. We believe this is due to COVID and the lack of child care options that were available....In an effort to assist families with rebuilding, [the grant recipient] would like to assist with closing the gap by adding more support for families with infants and toddlers.

—grant recipient conversion application

Conclusion

Grant recipients applying to convert slots from Head Start to Early Head Start must demonstrate how the change will best meet the needs of the community and support program quality and sustainability. Most applications to convert enrollment slots (88 percent) cited community need in the form of infant-and-toddler care and education demand, lack of supply, and enrollment or waitlist levels as part of their motivation for proposing to convert slots. In recent years, the growth of state and local public preschool programs has led to increased capacity to serve Head Start–age children in other settings. In line with this trend, about two-thirds of conversion applications in fiscal years 2020, 2021, and 2022 (FY 20–22) cited Head Start enrollment challenges or competition from other providers serving preschool-age children as a reason for proposing to convert slots.

Grant recipients experienced additional challenges during the COVID-19 pandemic. More than one-third (36 percent) of approved conversion applications from FY 20–22 cited the pandemic as a motivation or a contextual factor for the proposed conversion.

Further independent analyses are needed to confirm a lack of infant-and-toddler care and education, saturation of preschool-age care and education, and other reasons cited as motivations in conversion applications. Future research could also continue to track if the reasons cited for conversion and the share of grant recipients reporting different reasons persists postpandemic.

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Appendix. Methodology

We accessed the HSES to identify conversion applications seeking to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to center-based Early Head Start that were approved by the regional OHS in fiscal years 2020, 2021, and in 2022 through June. We limited the sample to grant recipients in Head Start Regions 1 to 10.⁷ This yielded a sample of 41 conversion applications in the 2020 cohort, 39 conversion applications in the 2021 cohort, and 28 conversion applications in the 2022 cohort for a total of 108 unique conversion applications. After initial coding, we dropped 3 conversion applications where the narrative was not available to code, resulting in 105 conversion applications included in the analysis.

Analytic Techniques

For this brief, we reviewed each conversion application and coded information on the grant recipient, the proposed conversion, and the stated rationale for conversion. We developed a set of fields to capture information in each of these areas and a coding scheme (see codes in table A.1 below) based on a preliminary review of 10 conversion applications. We refined and added categories to the coding schema after internal review and coding additional conversion applications. We coded all reasons grant recipients stated as their rationale for the proposed change so a single conversion application could have multiple motivations for conversion flagged. Some categories that applied to only a small number of conversion applications were combined for analysis and reporting purposes. After quality assurance review to check coding and improve consistency across conversion applications, we further cleaned,

⁷ Grant recipients in Region 11 (the region representing grant recipients providing services to federally recognized American Indian and Alaska Native tribes) are not required to follow the same process as grant recipients in other regions, and those from Region 12 (the region representing grant recipients providing services to Migrant and Seasonal Workers) provide services for children from birth through age 5; therefore, grant recipients from these regions were not included in the sample.

collapsed, and refined coding, validated coding across fields, and analyzed the data using the Stata statistical programming package.

Limitations

Our data analysis is based on a sample of grant recipients that submitted applications to convert enrollment slots from the start of fiscal year 2020 (October 1, 2019) through June 2022 and is not representative of all conversion applications. The sample includes only conversion applications approved during this period and not those submitted through the competitive grant process. Some conversion applications also included Head Start reductions or other changes, such as Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership grants that are also reflected in the proposed changes to funded slots, but we did not focus our coding and analysis on these other changes. We report themes we identified based on the coding and analysis of conversion applications narratives, and figures are based on information grant recipients voluntarily reported.

TABLE A.1
Analysis Constructs and Coding

Construct	Coding
Grant recipient information	
General information	Grant recipient name, number, state(s), and Head Start region where operating.
Documentation availability	Indicators for whether the conversion application narrative and community assessment documents could be located and downloaded from HSES or elsewhere.
Self-described service area	Copied in narrative from conversion application that includes the description of the grant recipient's service area.
Conversion information	
Proposed changes to HS and EHS slots	Narrative was copied from conversion application describing proposed changes.
Number of HS and EHS slots before conversion and proposed HS and EHS slots postconversion	The number of existing funded HS and EHS slots and number of funded HS and EHS slots proposed postconversion.
Converts slots from full time to part time or part time to full time	Codes whether conversion application proposed converting any HS or EHS slots from full time to part time or vice versa. Coded as missing/not provided if grant recipient did not include information on full-time/part-time status of slots.
Location(s) converting slots	Copied in narrative from conversion application describing the specific sites or communities where grant recipient proposed converting slots.
Conversion application dates	Date grant recipient originally submitted conversion application, date application was approved, and timing of conversion going into effect.

Construct	Coding
Conversion rationale	
Reason cited for conversion	Copied in narrative containing mentions of stated reason(s) for conversion.
Conversion application explicitly cited community need for infant-and-toddler care or education as a rationale for converting	Whether the stated reason for conversion cited community need for infant-and-toddler care or education. Coded as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ demand for infant-and-toddler care and education cited, ■ lack of infant-and-toddler care and education supply cited, ■ extensive enrollment, waitlists, or requests for infant-and-toddler care and education cited, or ■ not referenced.
Conversion application explicitly cited HS enrollment challenges as a rationale for converting	Whether the stated reason for conversion cited HS enrollment challenges. Coded as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Head Start enrollment challenges cited, ■ competition with public preschool or other preschool-age care or education providers cited, ■ high level of effort to fill Head Start slots cited, or ■ not referenced.
Conversion application explicitly cited staffing challenges as a rationale for converting	Whether the stated reason for conversion cited program staffing challenges. Coded as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ insufficient HS staffing because of turnover/retention issues, ■ insufficient HS staffing because of lack of qualified candidates/requirements for staff (i.e., Head Start Program Performance Standards degree requirements), ■ insufficient HS staffing because of competition from public preschool or other early care and education programs, ■ insufficient HS staffing because of other challenge with hiring staff, ■ insufficient staffing of Head Start teachers cited (other or unspecified reason), or ■ not referenced.
COVID-19 pandemic referenced as a factor in applying for conversion ^a	Whether the stated reason for conversion cited or referenced the pandemic as the reason or context for conversion. Coded as <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ pandemic referenced and related to reason for conversion. ■ pandemic referenced as context for proposed conversion, ■ not referenced, or ■ not applicable (conversion application submission proceeded pandemic).

^a We combined the “related to reason for conversion” and “context for proposed conversion” categories and, separately, the “not referenced” and “not applicable” categories in the analysis after reviewing individual entries and identifying overlap that made it difficult to differentiate the categories.

Note: EHS = Early Head Start. HS = Head Start.

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