

Head Start and Montessori Education

Head Start funds early childhood education and comprehensive wrap-around services for low-income families. Head Start is not itself a curriculum but does require programs to use a research-based curriculum that is aligned with the Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework. Montessori programs can increase access to high quality Montessori education by serving Head Start eligible children. This brief outlines the various parameters of the Head Start Act, considerations particular to Montessori programs and recommendations for Montessori advocates.

Eligibility

Age

- Early Head Start: birth to three-years-old
- Head Start: three-years-old to five-years-old
 - Children must be three by the date used to determine eligibility for public school in the community in which the Head Start program is located.
 - A child must not be eligible for kindergarten

Income

- Children living in families below the poverty line, children in foster care, homeless children, and children whose families receive TANF or SSI.
- In certain cases, families at or below 130 percent of the poverty line can be eligible, if the program demonstrates that they have advertised the program and not enough families are enrolled. These students may make up 35 percent of the program.

Considerations for Montessori Programs:

Adult-Child Ratio and Class Size Requirements: Programs must adhere to the Head Start Act or state requirements, whichever is more stringent. Under Head Start Guidelines, the following limits are applied based on the age of *the majority* of children; mixed age classrooms that combine kindergarten aged children with Head Start eligible children may be able to exceed these caps:

- 4- & 5- year-olds: 17-20 children, with two paid staff persons per class
- 3-year-olds: 15-17 children, with two paid staff persons per class
- Infants and Toddlers: maximum of eight children, with two paid staff persons per class

CLASS Assessment: The CLASS tool is mandated by federal legislation for all Head Start programs. In certain domains, the expectations of the CLASS tool differ from what one would observe in a high-quality, fully implemented Montessori learning environment due to intentional choices embedded in the Montessori approach. Therefore, CLASS scores may not fully reflect the quality of the educational environment in a Montessori context. Currently CLASS scores would only impact direct grantees and not delegate agencies (see below).

Mandatory Enrollment in QRIS: Each program must be enrolled in a state or local Quality Rating and Improvement System (QRIS)

- Some state QRIS systems do not yet include Montessori in their list of approved curricula yet give a higher rating to programs using an approved curriculum.
- Some state QRIS systems do not yet recognize Montessori teacher training.
- In addition to CLASS being mandated by the Head Start Act, most states' QRIS programs mandate an environmental rating tool (ECERS, ITERS), whose expectations differ from what one would observe in a high-quality, fully implemented Montessori learning environment due to intentional choices embedded in the Montessori approach. Therefore, ECERS scores may not fully reflect the quality of the educational environment.

Staff qualification requirements: Head Start requires that 50% of lead teachers have at least a bachelor's in early childhood education or a bachelors and coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education and experience teaching pre-school age children. For classrooms without a teacher meeting these qualifications, teachers must have an associate degree in early childhood education or an associate degree in a related field and coursework equivalent to a major relating to early childhood education, with experience teaching preschool-age children. If the state's QRIS has additional requirements, those must be followed.

Chokeables and Breakables: The Performance Standards state that the learning environment must be free from chokeables and hazards which may interfere with the use of certain Montessori materials.

Becoming a Head Start Provider:

There are currently three options available for early childhood education providers who would like to serve the Head Start eligible population. Due to Head Start requirements for grantees to provide a range of services from healthcare to parent involvement, Montessori schools are likely best positioned to be delegate agencies, providing educational services on behalf of a direct grantee.

- **Direct Grantee:** Direct grantees assume full administrative and programmatic oversight, fulfilling requirements not only for early childhood education but for a range of wrap around services. The Office of Head Start accepts applications every five years.
- **Delegate agency:** Some direct grantees choose to delegate all or some of the grant requirements to other local providers (delegate agencies), including early childhood education services. Delegate agencies create an agreement with the Head Start grantee regarding funds and responsibilities. State Head Start Collaboration Offices can provide assistance in connecting potential delegates to grantees.
- **Early Head Start – Child Care Partnerships:** This program connects child-care centers with Early Head Start programs to expand affordable childcare and wrap-around services for families.

Fund Administration and Distribution

Federal Program Administrator: Head Start is administered by the Office of Head Start (OHS) within the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS).

Grant Reporting and Accountability: Head Start grantees must demonstrate they have appropriately spent Head Start funds only on Head Start eligible children. Programs must have a cost allocation plan that includes:

- Sources of revenue
- Proportion of children eligible for Head Start
- Methods for determining how costs will be divided among various sources
- Justification for the allocation system

Braiding and Blending Funding Sources:

- Head Start funds cannot be blended as programs must demonstrate they have only spent Head Start funds on Head Start eligible children.
- Head Start grantees must fund 20% of their services through non-federal funding which means Head Start funds will always be braided with other funding sources. It is typical for Head Start programs to braid funding from multiple agencies, including child-care subsidies and the USDA Child and Adult Care Food Program for meals and snacks.
- Children who do not meet the Head Start eligibility requirements may be financed through tuition, foundations, state pre-k funds, or other sources.
- Public pre-k and kindergarten funding can be braided together to enable typical Montessori 3-year mixed age groups

State-level Intersections

Programs must follow state QRIS and licensure requirements.

Congressional Renewal

Head Start's authorization lapsed in 2012, but Congress funds Head Start through annual appropriations.

Recommendations

In order to make participation in Head Start increasingly viable for Montessori schools, Montessori advocates should:

- Continue to engage with state QRIS programs to ensure that QRIS rubrics and policies adequately recognize Montessori teacher preparation and do not inadvertently penalize Montessori programs. There are states in which Montessori advocates have successfully created crosswalks for accredited schools and/or gotten Montessori recognized as an approved curriculum.
- Continue advocacy efforts around state child-care regulations that adversely impact Montessori implementation.
- Join with other organizations around calls to increase Head Start funding; the yearly recurrence of appropriations provides avenues for sustained advocacy around funding levels.
- If and when the Head Start Act is up for reauthorization, advocate for a Montessori credential to be recognized as a pathway to becoming a teacher in a Head Start Montessori classroom.

Additional Resources

- [2007 Head Start legislation](#)
- [Head Start Performance Standards](#)
- [Head Start Early Learning Outcomes Framework](#)