



FLORIDA HEAD START ASSOCIATION, INC.

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CONTACT INFORMATION

- **Mailing Address**
Florida Head Start Association, Inc.
111 N. Gadsden Street, Suite 200
Tallahassee, FL 32301
- **Telephone:**
850-694-6477
- **Email:**
info@flheadstart.org
- **Web Address:**
www.FLHeadStart.org

October 15, 2021

Dr. Bernadine Futrell
Director of the Office of Head Start
Mary E. Switzer Building
330 C ST SW, #4304B
Washington, DC 20201

Dear Dr. Futrell,

The Florida Head Start Association (FHSA) writes in support of the joint letter pinned by the National Head Start Association (NHSA) calling for the Office of Head Start (OHS) to allow grantees program flexibilities when it comes to the operations of their Head Start, Early Head Start, Early Head Start Child Care Partnerships, and Migrant/Seasonal Head Start/Early Start programs.

As you are already aware, the COVID-19 pandemic has grappled the nation in various ways. It has undoubtedly allowed us to see where our strengths and weaknesses lie. The Head Start community was one of the significant strengths during this time. That is all because of the continued support provided by the OHS and their flexibility in allowing programs to determine what needs best suited their families. We have seen programs rise above and become great innovators during the past two years while serving our most at-risk children and families. We ask the OHS to continue this path in allowing programs to meet families where they are.

Based upon the 2019 Performance Information Report, Florida Head Start programs serve over 42,000 children and their families and employ over 12,000 staff. I am almost certain these numbers have shifted downward due to a multitude of reasons. Florida is a vast state with many diverse areas. We have heard from programs throughout the state that most parents still do not feel comfortable sending their children back to in-person learning. Requiring all programs to meet their enrollment goals may not be the best solution at this time.

Another challenge in our state is the early childcare workforce shortages. Most programs are overwhelmed by staffing shortages caused by the pandemic due to loss of life or people choosing not to return to work because of concerns about COVID, its variants, and Florida's minimum wage increase. Our state passed legislation to raise the minimum wage to \$10.00 per hour and reach \$15.00 per hour by 2026. Due to higher-paying wages, this increase has opened the door for Head Start employees to seek employment elsewhere, either within the school system or outside the early childcare industry. Families also see the ramifications of this minimum wage increase. Some will no longer be eligible for Head Start but still cannot pay the high costs of childcare services elsewhere. Then there are the vaccine requirements the Biden Administration mandates for all Head Start staff to become fully vaccinated by January 2022.

The OHS can meet programs where they are by ensuring programs suffer no more and allow them to do what's suitable for their families. The FHSA asks the OHS to consider the recommendations put forth by the NHSA that would allow for:

1. Suspension of under-enrollment plans until September 1, 2022
2. Suspend all in-person monitoring until October 1, 2022
3. Enable grantees to provide a hybrid learning module to accommodate their families and staffing shortages
4. Issue a Program Instruction or Information Memorandum on provisions allowing programs flexibility to tackle workforce shortages
5. Expand Head Start eligibility
6. Ensure regional office staff and grantee specialists are providing the same flexibilities and guidance

I am confident that together we can begin to overcome all of the challenges the pandemic has brought on, reshape the Head Start community, and build it back better than ever before.

We appreciate the thoughtful approaches OHS has provided grantees to get their programs back to full capacity and continue to provide in the future. We look to the collaborative working relationship to ensure all of Florida's most at-risk children and families are at the forefront and at the heart of the work we do.

Sincerely,

Dr. Maite Riestra-Quintero

Dr. Maite Riestra-Quintero
President
FHSA

Wanda Minick

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Executive Director
FHSA

CC: Ms. Maria Goss, Region IV Office of Head Start Regional Program Manager
Mrs. Yasmina Vinci, Executive Director, National Head Start Association
Mr. Tommy Sheridan, Deputy Director, National Head Start Association
Ms. Myra Ingram, Executive Director, Region IV Head Start Association