

# This federal program provides free child care for eligible families. It can't find staff <sup>[1]</sup>

**Author:** Windes, Isaac

**Source:** Fort Worth Star-Telegram

**Format:** Article

**Publication Date:** 30 Jun 2022

## AVAILABILITY

Access online <sup>[2]</sup>

## EXCERPTS

Classrooms across the Dallas-Fort Worth Metroplex sit empty this summer as organizations that operate the federally funded child development program Head Start struggle to attract and retain enough staff to keep them open.

In Fort Worth, leaders say the crisis, which has crescendoed since the end of pandemic-era lockdowns, is to blame for a 15% vacancy rate in centers operated by the nonprofit Child Care Associates.

"Our enrollment is down," said Kara Waddell, CEO of Child Care Associates. "And it is not because there isn't an interest among children. Our enrollment is down because of closed classrooms."

In Dallas, a center manager for ChildCareGroup's Eastfield Center, a Head Start-funded program, said the issue has compounded the mental health toll of the COVID-19 pandemic on parents, educators and children. It also leads to some difficult choices.

"If a parent walks in, I can't say 100% that ... we're ready to receive your baby," Angela Reagans said. "Because if I have two or three staff calling in, then there's no coverage for the classroom. And so we unfortunately have to turn the families away for that day."

Even as wait lists continue to grow in high-need areas, leaders of the organizations say they have no choice as the crisis becomes a frantic sort of new normal.

"I think that's very consistent for Head Start and Early Head Start across the region and across the country," Waddell said. "It's not that families don't want or need services, it's that we can't hire enough ... and Head Start is unique in that it requires a higher-degreed or accomplished professional with a CDA (Child Development Associate) and other backgrounds."

In a recent national survey published by the National Head Start Association, 90% of respondents' programs closed classrooms permanently or temporarily due to a lack of staff.

That trend is reflected in multiple programs that operate Head Start and Early Head Start centers.

Head Start and Early Head Start programs are free, nationally funded and designed to promote school readiness for children from low-income families. Early Head Start serves pregnant women and families with children under age 3. Head Start programs serve children between 3 and 5 years old. Home-visiting services to support expectant mothers are an additional program option.

## MASS EXODUS OF EARLY EDUCATORS HAPPENED AFTER PANDEMIC BEGAN TO SUBSIDE

Kathryn McCartney, the CEO of the Head Start of Greater Dallas, said that prior to the pandemic there would be a regular rotation of staff as early educators left for other careers or school districts, but nothing like what she has seen in the last several months.

"When things started opening, we did have about 75% of our staff come back," she said. "But during that year we started actually losing teachers."

As of June, 18% of the entire workforce at the Head Start of Greater Dallas had left, McCartney said, causing her and other leaders to make strategic choices when placing students in classrooms. About 10% of classrooms have closed as a result, she added.

The limited staff also puts the centers in a precarious position when teachers need to call out — something that is still a greater threat as cases of COVID-19 continue to ebb and flow in the background.

"We have exhausted every substitute agency in this area. We have used all of them," McCartney said. "But it still puts us in a dilemma because they're trained in early childhood, but they're not trained with Head Start standards. So that puts extra pressure on the teacher that is in the class ...to ensure that we stay in compliance with Head Start standards, as well as the state standards."

The numbers in the federal programs track with the rest of the sector, which has struggled to recover post-pandemic across the country — with a particularly slow recovery rate in Texas.

The child care sector in the United States, a profession that is paid among the lowest in the nation, has been in an escalating state of crisis, advocates and experts say. Drove of qualified early educators are leaving the field for industries that pay higher wages and provide more benefits, just as millions of Americans seek child care in order to return to the workforce.

But the child care crisis — catapulted into the national conversation by the coronavirus pandemic — has been quietly unfolding in communities across the U.S. for years.

The child care industry dropped nearly 373,000 employees, or 36% of its workforce in the first months of the pandemic, with educators filing for unemployment, or taking jobs as servers and retail workers. As the economy reopened, and enrollment ticked back up, child care operators ran into a problem: No one was coming back.

Analysis of federal job data by the Center for the Study of Child Care Employment at Berkeley showed positive signs — after falling in recent months Texas added more jobs, reaching 87.9% of pre-pandemic levels in February 2020.

Sandra Pena, Head Start and Early Head Start director at the Center for Transforming Lives, said that things have gotten better over the last six months, but are still challenging.

“We definitely have vacancies,” she said. “And it just feels like as soon as we hire, we’re losing other staff for other reasons so it’s like this perpetual like, OK, we’re trying, we’re almost there.”

The groups are using Head Start funds to provide incentives to attract and retain staff to fill the current vacancies and also create a workforce that will stick around.

### **BONUSES, BENEFITS AND EDUCATION AWAIT PROSPECTIVE EARLY EDUCATORS**

Centers are working with local school districts to help train students interested in working in early childhood education to receive certification and training while still in school and offering to pay for higher education for existing educators who want to advance.

“We are giving sign-on bonuses according to their degrees,” McCartney said. “And we are also providing longevity funds for our staff that have stuck with us.”

ChildCareGroup, which provides Head Start services in Dallas, has given across-the-board raises and increased starting salaries, according to Tori Mannes, the CEO and president.

“Recently we actually just rolled out a recruiting incentive for staff, because it is a great way to hire good new teachers,” she said. “We offer training, we pay for teacher certification and degrees and then we’re increasing our social media presence and our posting sites, so that we can broaden our reach.”

The programs already provide benefits that others in the early education sector cannot, like 401K plans, vision, dental and PTO.

“That’s really important because historically, those kinds of benefits ... have not traditionally been a part of many early childhood sectors,” Mannes said.

Waddell of Child Care Associates said the organization hired staff at an event to provide baby formula and other resources to parents.

“We hired people there and got them into programs where they’re earning their (Child Development Associate),” she said. “So we took people that have no experience that were like, I love this, I love what you do. And we’re getting them, we’re hiring them in as interns or apprentices, and helping them earn their credentials, so that they can take those jobs.”

While the efforts being made could fill the vacancies that exist right now, there is a growing need that will increase the amount of early educators required in the future.

“We have a three-lane highway, and we need a 12-lane highway to handle the workforce needs,” Waddell said. “We’re not going to hit the numbers we need.”

Workforce sustainability and development are at the top of the agenda for the Blue Ribbon Action Committee on Child Care, which was formed in November to prioritize funding from the American Rescue Plan made available amid the pandemic, and is made up of philanthropic leaders, child care advocates and educators from across the Dallas-Fort Worth area.

### **STAFFING WOES COULD COMPLICATE EXPANSION PLANS**

The staffing issues come as Head Start centers across the region look to expand — in some cases dramatically — to meet the growing needs of care, including infant and toddler care.

About \$28 million of COVID funds in Tarrant County is being funneled into efforts to expand and maximize resources for infant-toddler classrooms.

Waddell presented at a Tarrant County Commissioners Court meeting that there are wide swaths of the county with no available, affordable infant-toddler care.

According to the presentation, to maximize existing infrastructure and resources, the county and Child Care Associates will seek partnerships with municipalities, school districts, higher education and other public entities with a goal of doubling the county’s investment of \$28 million and adding 50 new infant-toddler classrooms in high-need neighborhoods.

The staffing crisis could complicate those plans.

“The concern is build it and they won’t come,” Waddell said. “That’s why we are going to have to be very intentional about not just the places and spaces we need, but most critically, the people we need. Luckily, it takes a while to build buildings, and we’ve gotten some time to help think through that.”

Mannes, who is also planning for more Head Start seats, said that with unprecedented attention on the critical sector following the pandemic, there is a chance to rethink the field, with an eye toward greater compensation.

“If we want and expect quality in the early childhood space, it’s imperative to compensate teachers at a level that they can pay their bills, because they get into this business because they love children, they feel called to this work, they care for and nurture our young children,” she said. “But they can’t pay their rent in hugs. They’ve got to be able to make a living wage.”

**Region:** United States <sup>[3]</sup>

**Tags:** child care <sup>[4]</sup>

workforce <sup>[5]</sup>

recruitment and retention <sup>[6]</sup>

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