

Introducing the New Head Start Program Performance Standards

Overview: ERSEA

Dr. Blanca Enriquez: Welcome to this overview on ERSEA. I want to introduce Catherine Hildum and Elizabeth Borda Rivera, as they discuss the requirements related to child and family eligibility and program requirements for the recruitment, selection, and enrollment of eligible families.

Catherine Hildum: I am happy to be here today to talk to you about ERSEA.

Elizabeth Borda Rivera: Me too. What does ERSEA mean?

Catherine: It means eligibility.

Elizabeth: Recruitment.

Catherine: Selection.

Elizabeth: Enrollment.

Catherine: And attendance. Really important parts of the regulations for grantees.

Elizabeth: That's Subpart A, this is where the program begins.

Catherine: It really is, it's the very beginning. Programs need to really determine what's in their community and who is eligible before they can do anything else. Much of this section is grounded in requirements in the Head Start Act, as well as research on best practices, innovations that we have heard from the field including Head Start grantees and requirements include, from the act, include removing barriers to serving children who are homeless.

Elizabeth: And this informs the program's structure and everything about the program, doesn't it?

Catherine: It really does, it all starts with community-wide strategic planning and needs assessment, which is in the first section. After a program determines its service area it needs to assess the community. That section has now been aligned with the five-year grant cycle.

Elizabeth: And now it must be reviewed annually, correct?

Catherine: It must be, five years is a long time and we know that communities can change, so programs are required to review every year the elements of their Community Needs Assessment.

Elizabeth: And moving on to eligibility.

Catherine: This was all revised in 2015 and much of this is also required in the Head Start Act, so it would take an act of Congress to make any changes to this section. And we'll have further information about this section in subsequent conversation. So next we go on to recruitment. In this section, it really includes efforts that programs must make to actively recruit the most vulnerable populations including children who are homeless, children in foster care and children with disabilities.

Elizabeth: And can we talk now about the selection process?

Catherine: Absolutely.

Elizabeth: This clarifies 10 percent total funded enrollment is for Head Start and Early Head Start program grantee, correct?

Catherine: Correct, so the 10 percent of a program's total funded enrollment including all the models that they run must be children with disabilities. So, that's clarified in this final rule. This process, or this section also talks about how programs must prioritize children for enrollment, again, going back to the most vulnerable children first, including homeless children, children in foster care, and children with disabilities.

Elizabeth: So let's talk about enrollment.

Catherine: Absolutely. This section has a new provision, some new provisions, one of which allows programs to reserve slots for these vulnerable populations that I have mentioned. Children who are homeless, children in foster care, and actually also pregnant women. Those slots can be reserved for up to 30 days. In the next section, attendance. That has a new focus, actually. It's really on implementing strategies to promote regular attendance for each child.

Currently, the attendance section focuses on developing a system. If average attendance falls below 85 percent, but the new focus is really paying attention to promoting regular attendance for every child, really to ensure that programs know the patterns and know what their children need.

Elizabeth: And that includes supporting attendance of homeless children.

Catherine: Absolutely, absolutely. Making sure that they can get there as well as making sure that they can attend a program even if they don't have the required paperwork. They can attend for up to 90 days as long as they meet the state licensing requirements for immunizations are met.

Elizabeth: That's excellent.

Catherine: Yeah, so it's a really good, as we have discussed earlier, there are a lot of provisions here, especially in ERSEA, that remove barriers for the attendance and enrollment of homeless children.

Another provision I think is really important to note here is that a focus on ensuring that every child is safe.

So if a program knows attendance patterns and a child is not in attendance without explanation the program really needs to check and find out where that child is, so within an hour of the program start, if a child is not there and they haven't heard from the parent, they need to make efforts to reach the family to ensure that child is safe. Really, I mean, I call it "the no child left on the bus provision," because it just ensures that children aren't unattended.

Elizabeth: Catherine, I love that. It's catchy, but more importantly, it gets to the heart of the matter, which is safety first.

Catherine: Absolutely, that's really first and foremost for Head Start programs and we need to ensure that children are safe, that's why we exist. Speaking of that, the next section is really important as well. It's a brand new section on suspension and expulsion and it codifies a longstanding practice that Head Start programs don't expel children.

Elizabeth: That's right

Catherine: And we really, severely, limit suspension.

Elizabeth: The final section is on fees, and I think there is a new provision in this section.

Catherine: There is, actually this section is where, you know, I would like to talk a little bit about a focus on potentially serving mixed income groups. The research shows that all children benefit, both low income and higher income children, and their families benefit if income groups are mixed. So, this makes it clear that programs can consider accepting private pay from families who are not Head Start eligible.

They still, as always, need to serve their Head Start funded enrollment, but there are some really great innovations that programs are doing across the country and I think it's exciting that programs are going to be able to learn from each other about how this might work and whether it makes sense for their communities.

Elizabeth: So programs should determine if it's appropriate and feasible to serve mixed income groups.

Catherine: Absolutely, right, and there is still, you know, a long-standing requirement that families can't be charged for Head Start services within the Head Start day, but there is a possibility to accept fees for families who are not Head Start eligible and not part of that Head Start enrollment.

Elizabeth: Great.

Catherine: Really exciting. Again, there is lots of exciting provisions. I think there would be more conversations about Community Needs Assessment. People will have some questions about that and about eligibility could use a little more conversation, but really, that's kind of the overview of what's in here and we hope that people read it carefully.

Elizabeth: Yes, yes, well this has been an excellent conversation and I really appreciate your providing more clarity in this overview for me. Thank you, Catherine.

Catherine: Thank you, I appreciate talking to you. [Music]