ASPE ASSISTANT SECRETARY FOR PLANNING AND EVALUATION | OFFICE OF HUMAN SERVICES POLICY

DATA POINT

Increases in Head Start Change in Scope Requests from FY21 to FY24 Have Resulted in the Largest Reduction of Funded Slots in the History of Head Start

Alayna Schreier and Amanda Benton

KEY POINTS

- The total number of Head Start Change in Scope requests increased from 104 in FY21 to 886 in FY24.
- The majority of Change in Scope requests were for enrollment reductions, with over 19 times as many requests in FY24 as compared to FY21.
- Despite the federal operations budget for Head Start increasing by about 11 percent between FY22 and FY24, Change in Scope requests during that period resulted in a loss of 97,625 funded slots, with nearly 90 percent of that loss occurring in Head Start Preschool as compared to Early Head Start.

BACKGROUND

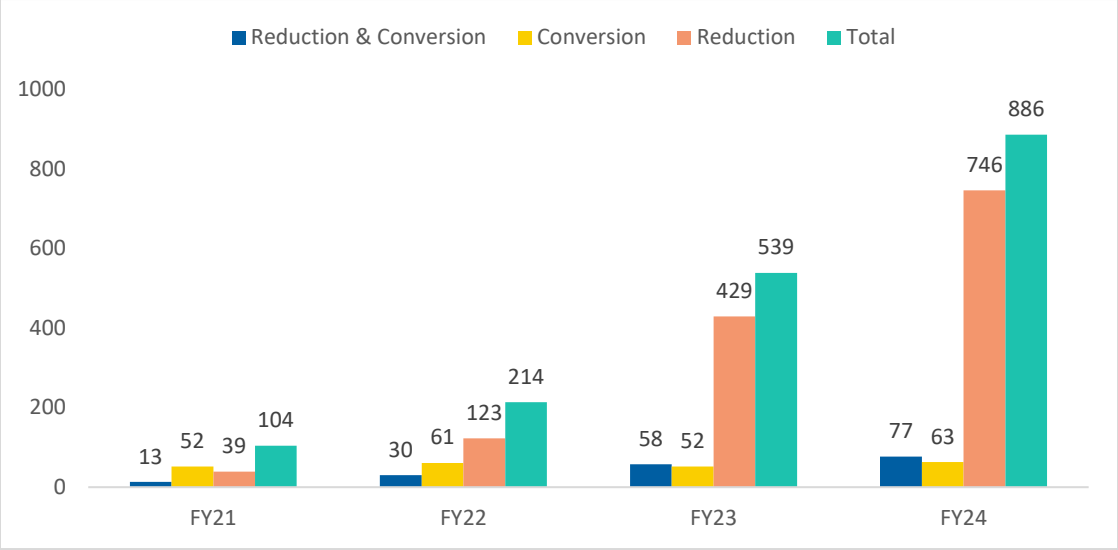
Head Start provides high-quality, comprehensive early learning and development, health, and family well-being services to children birth to five years of age. In Fiscal Year 2024 (FY24), Head Start was funded to serve 715,873 children and pregnant women.[1] The Head Start Act requires each Head Start agency to enroll 100 percent of its funded enrollment and maintain an active waiting list at all times.[2] When community or program data show that funded enrollment or service structure no longer matches need, grant recipients may request a Change in Scope. The Head Start Act permits programs to propose a reduction to their funded enrollment to maintain quality of services (Sec.640(g)(3))[3] or to convert Head Start Preschool slots to Early Head Start slots to better meet community needs (Sec.645(a)(5)).[4]

CHANGE IN SCOPE REQUESTS HAVE INCREASED BY OVER 800 PERCENT FROM FY21 TO FY24, DRIVEN LARGELY BY REQUESTS TO REDUCE ENROLLMENT

The total number of Change in Scope requests increased from 104 in FY21 to 886 in FY24. The majority of the Change in Scope requests were for enrollment reductions. There were over 19 times as many enrollment reduction requests in 2024 as compared to 2021 (746 and 39, respectively). Between FY22 and FY23, requests for enrollment reductions increased by over 300 percent, and then nearly doubled again from FY23 to FY24.

The number of requests to convert Head Start Preschool slots to Early Head Starts have remained largely stable from FY21 to FY24. Given the increase in total Change in Scope requests over time, conversions represent less than 10 percent of all Change in Scope requests in FY23 and FY24. Between FY21 and FY24, Change in Scope requests that include both enrollment reductions and conversions from Head Start Preschool to Early Head Start represent between 8 and 14 percent of total requests, annually.

Figure 1. National Change in Scope Requests Grew Exponentially between FY21 and FY24

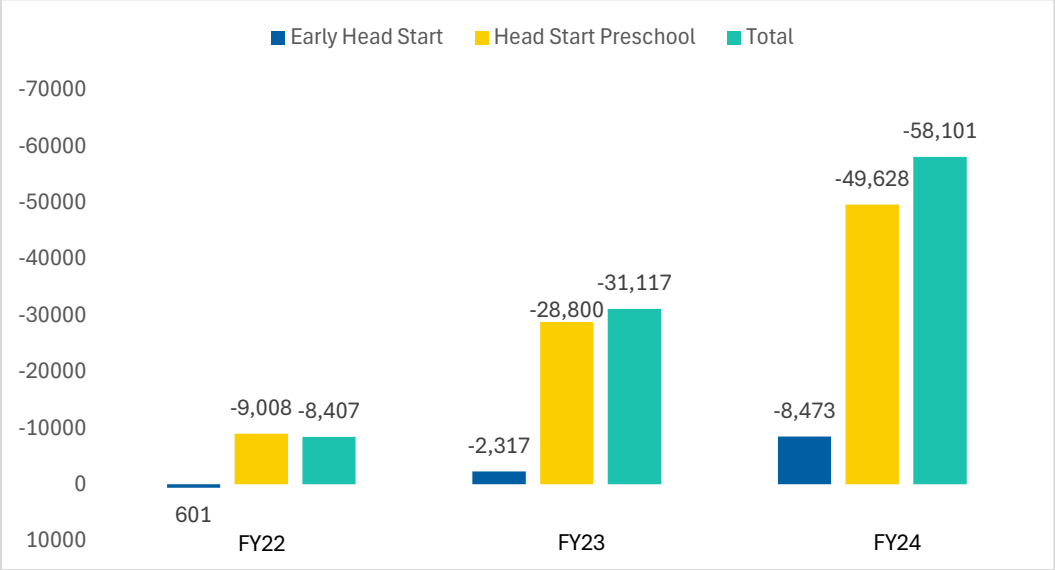


Note: This figure represents the number of Change in Scope requests submitted as part of recipients' FY21-FY24 applications.

THE INCREASE IN CHANGE IN SCOPE REQUESTS FROM FY22 TO FY24 RESULTED IN NET LOSS OF NEARLY 100,000 FUNDED SLOTS

Despite the federal operations budget for Head Start increasing by about 11 percent from FY22 to FY24,[5] between FY22 and FY24, Change in Scope requests resulted in a net loss of 97,625 funded slots. Nearly 90 percent of total funded slot loss occurred in Head Start Preschool programs, with just over 10 percent of slot loss impacting Early Head Start programs. The significant reduction in funded slots corresponds to the significant increase in Change in Scope requests beginning in FY23 and continuing through FY24. In FY22, Early Head Start did not experience any slot loss and instead gained a small number of total funded slots.

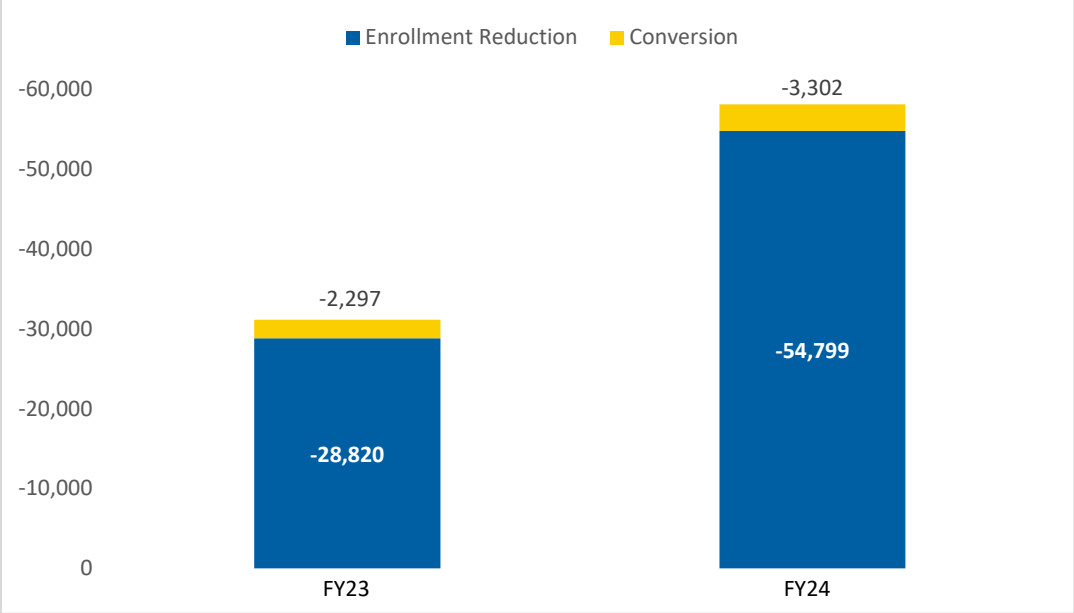
Figure 2. Total Head Start Slot Loss from Enrollment Reductions and Conversions Grew, FY22-FY24



Note: This figure is based on ACF internal data that were available after FY22.

Approximately 94 percent of total funded slot loss across FY23 and FY24 is attributable to enrollment reduction requests, with the remaining slot loss attributable to conversions from Head Start Preschool to Early Head Start slots. In FY23, about 93 percent of total funded slot loss was attributable to enrollment reduction requests (28,820 funded slots) compared to conversion requests (2,297 funded slots). In FY24, about 94 percent of total funded slot loss was attributable to enrollment reduction requests (54,799 funded slots) compared to conversion requests (3,302 funded slots).

Figure 3. Nearly All Funded Slot Loss is Attributable to Enrollment Reductions, FY23-FY24



Note: FY23 and FY24 data combine Early Head Start and Head Start Preschool.

CONCLUSION

Change in scope requests increased substantially from FY21 to FY24, resulting in the largest reduction of funded slots in the history of Head Start. These changes to funded enrollment levels mean that Head Start can serve fewer children and families at a higher cost per child. ACF could consider re-evaluating how Change in Scope applications are approved to ensure that the program serves as many eligible children and families as possible.

REFERENCE

[1] Office of Head Start. Head Start Program Facts: Fiscal Year 2024. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. https://headstart.gov/program-data/article/head-start-program-facts-fiscal-year-2024
[2] 42 USC 9837
[3] 42 USC 9835
[4] 42 USC 9840
[5] Office of Head Start. Head Start Program Annual Fact Sheets. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Head Start. https://headstart.gov/browse/series/head-start-program-annual-fact-sheets

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Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation

200 Independence Avenue SW, Mailstop 447D
Washington, D.C. 20201

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