

# "It Feels Better When You Have Somebody in Your Corner:"

*Head Start Teachers Share Insights on Recruitment,  
Retention, and Supporting the Workforce*

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# Introduction

The COVID-19 pandemic confronted an already fragile early childhood sector with new and pressing challenges. These have often been felt most acutely by early childhood educators, including those in Head Start classrooms. The last two and a half years have presented the sector with additional challenges in recruiting and retaining its workforce. While many other professions have recently experienced a robust recovery, early educators are not returning to work in similarly strong numbers. In fact, the child care field has lost 8.4% of its essential staff since February 2020.<sup>1</sup>

To better understand teachers' direct experiences during this unprecedented time and document their suggestions for improving workforce recruitment and retention, GEEARS: Georgia Early Education Alliance for Ready Students conducted a series of focus groups throughout 2022 with members of the early childhood workforce representing a number of settings, including center- and home-based child care, Head Start, and Georgia's Pre-K. The report that follows outlines findings from the focus groups conducted **specifically with Head Start teachers and assistant teachers.**

The focus groups revealed that educators' passion for teaching and working with young children is often dampened by low pay and a lack of resources or support. This is driving some to leave Head Start classrooms.

While focus group participants described a range of challenges facing the workforce, they were also eager to share potential solutions to help recruit and retain more early childhood educators. The findings have important implications for policymakers, Head Start leaders, and others who work with current and prospective Head Start teachers.

## Methodology

In May and June of 2022, GEEARS conducted four virtual focus groups with a combined 24 Head Start teachers and assistant teachers. The participants—15 teachers and nine assistant teachers, including one man and 23 women—were employed in Head Start classrooms across the state, representing 19 different Georgia counties. The majority (71%) identified as Black or African American, while 21% identified as white and 8% as multiracial.

*Head Start is a federal-to-local grant providing comprehensive services to children experiencing poverty, with categorical eligibility extended to families participating in public assistance programs such as SNAP and TANF, families experiencing homelessness, and children who are in foster care. As federal grantees, Head Start programs must comply with federal regulations around qualification and/or credentialing requirements. Funding for Head Start grantees is allocated by the federal government using a cost-per-child calculation. Local Head Start grantees must operate within the funding allocations they receive from the federal Office of Head Start.*

## Why do teachers enter and stay in the early childhood field?

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Teachers who indicated they were planning to continue teaching in Head Start pointed to their passion for the work and their love for the children they serve. Many participating teachers were former Head Start parents or attended Head Start as children. They consistently stated that they believed in the Head Start model.

When asked why she works for Head Start, one teacher from North Georgia said, “I love the children. My [own] children were in Head Start. I know. I can relate to the parents. I feel that's where I belong. That's where I'm needed. I plan on retiring from Head Start.”

A teacher from metro Atlanta spoke of her passion for teaching and said that a desire to help the next generation compelled her to enter the field. She said, “I really like this teaching thing. I really enjoy it...I really wasn't sure what I wanted to do, but I just knew it was dealing with children. I guess one hope for me would be that all the children know they are loved, and they are safe within my care.”

A love of working with children also compelled teachers to stay in the classroom. As one South Georgia educator said, “I just love watching them learn. To see that light--I don't know what it is. We start in August and by December, it's like a light bulb comes on. Everything that you've been saying since August—it's like they finally get it and they're becoming more independent. And I love to love on them. We have a lot of children that need that extra love that they don't get at home, so that's what drives me to stay. I want to love on them as much as I can.”

## Why are teachers leaving Head Start?

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Throughout the focus groups, teachers cited examples of work-related stress and overwork. Several participants stated that their work-related stress was higher than their personal, familial, or financial stress. One educator said she was “just really, really stressed out.”

When asked to identify why teachers leave the field, participants cited this stress, the availability of higher-paying, less-stressful jobs, and a sense of feeling abandoned in classrooms where staffing shortages have left teachers with few supports or safety nets.

### ***Higher-paying, less-stressful jobs***

Attrition in the field, teachers reported, has been exacerbated by the availability of higher-paying, less-stressful jobs, either in other fields or in local school systems. Many believed that jobs outside of the Head Start classroom would be less stressful and offer better pay and benefits. For example, one educator in rural Georgia said, “You know you get worn out when you can go to McDonald's or Walmart or even the mill and make twice what we make.”

An assistant teacher from outside of Atlanta indicated this was especially true for educators without college degrees. She said those without degrees tend to have less opportunity and lower pay within Head Start. “We work just as hard as a teacher with a degree, so it's unfair. That's why you have a lot of people leaving, because you can go get a warehouse job making \$18.50 an hour, starting off, first month, with a bonus.”

Head Start teachers are also leaving to take other education-related jobs they deem less stressful or offer higher pay. One metro Atlanta teacher said, “I do know a teacher did leave the field because she stated that she could be a sub[stitute teacher] and be getting paid the same amount that she was currently getting with less stress and less expectations. So, she left and went to another center and became a sub.”

Another teacher in South Georgia was considering leaving for her local school system, saying, “I do consider staying in [education], but maybe moving out of Head Start...and going into a more public-school setting, just because there is a little bit more opportunity.”

### ***Lack of Support and Feeling Alone***

Many of the teachers interviewed said they’ve considered leaving the classroom because staffing shortages have led to a lack of support within the classroom. As one Head Start teacher said, “It’s not the stress of the children. I mean I have a great class this year. Most of it is staff. I’ve been in the [Head Start] classroom by myself. I have no assistant or sub.”

Participants recognized that many Head Start programs are facing staffing shortages but felt the extra workload often fell on teachers’ shoulders. Several teachers indicated they left or were considering leaving the field because teaching in understaffed classrooms felt like an insurmountable challenge.

A teacher in South Georgia voiced her distress about the workload of educators in short-staffed programs, explaining, “Getting actual people that are qualified to be in the permanent position has been nearly impossible. That makes it hard on everyone in the building because we are all working multiple roles.”

A fellow South Georgia educator shared a similar sentiment, saying of a colleague, “She left and my supervisor was so upset that she left because she is a good teacher. We lost her because she was by herself in a classroom.”

Another teacher put it bluntly: “A lot of it comes from us being burned out, and I know me personally being burned out because [of] the lack of staffing.”

Several teachers described ignoring their own physical needs due to a lack of staffing. One educator in South Georgia said, “Everybody is like, ‘I am done.’ We have no help. There are supposed to be two people in a classroom. There has not been. We’ve got no subs. We are strapped. A teacher .... couldn't get out [of] the room [to use the restroom].”

In another example, a South Georgia educator said, “We don't get any type of lunch break or any time out of the classroom. My kids arrive at 8 a.m. and they leave at 3 p.m. and I am with them at every minute of that day.”

***Head Start teacher and assistant teacher pay is determined by the local grant recipient agency based on the grant award and the wage comparability study required by the Office of Head Start. Grantees are subject to additional COLA funding (Cost of Living Adjustment) when the federal budget is authorized by Congress to do so, most recently in FY022. The operational budget for Head Start services is typically dependent on the federally allocated cost per child funding amount and may be supplemented by local and private dollars.***

# Suggestions for improving teacher recruitment and retention in Head Start

In addition to inquiring about teachers' experiences over the course of the pandemic, we asked them how they might improve early childhood educator recruitment and retention across several categories: compensation (including bonuses, stipends, and tax credits), benefits, career development, and work environment.

Moderators utilized both anonymous polls and follow-up questions to ascertain teachers' recruitment and retention ideas. The polls gauged teachers' responses to specific categories of support, while the follow-up questions allowed teachers to expand on how those mechanisms would be most beneficial to them.

Overall, higher pay was deemed critical to recruiting and retaining Head Start teachers and assistant teachers. It is important to note, however, that educators did not believe higher pay alone was sufficient. Instead, they voiced support for a layered approach to improving teachers' experiences. In addition to higher pay, the educators advocated for benefits such as paid leave and health insurance.

Outside of compensation and benefits, Head Start educators shared their preferences related to work environment and career development, such as incentives for reaching career or educational milestones or professional development opportunities specifically tailored to Head Start teachers' needs.

## Compensation

### *Higher Pay*

Overwhelmingly, teachers and assistant teachers across the state indicated that higher pay was critical to improving the Head Start workforce. Several indicated that, although they loved their jobs and wanted to stay, they were not sure they could afford to support their families on their current incomes.

"I think I'm gonna switch and just work with military families," one South Georgia teacher confided. "Less stressful, more pay. Like I said, it's not all about the pay, but I have a family, and I'm tired of living from check to check and that's what Head Start is [making me do]."

While bonuses and stipends were welcome, teachers indicated that an increase in hourly or salaried pay would help most. One educator said, "I have received, I think, two of the POWER payments [bonus payments administered by the state using federal COVID relief dollars] and

**Head Start lead teachers are required to have at least an associate's or bachelor's degree in child development or early childhood education or equivalent coursework. Assistant teachers must have at least a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or similar state awarded certificate, or be enrolled in an associate, baccalaureate or CDA credential program that will be completed within two years of being hired.**

they are nice. They are appreciated. But I know, for me, my hourly wage and what I bring home every week to take care of my family...is more important than just, 'Hey, here is \$500 this year. We'll see you in five years.'...It's not consistent. It's not something I can bank on. It's not something that I can, you know, use on a regular basis."

Participants indicated that higher pay was important not only for teachers like themselves but for all staff employed in a Head Start setting, including those in support roles. One metro Atlanta educator said, "I think it should be more pay and I don't think your raises should be based [only] on you earning another degree. There are women in the kitchen and that have been cleaning... You're paying these people \$7-and-something in 2022 and gas is over \$4 a gallon, so how does it add up? [They have] been there 30 years. Even though I'm an educator in the classroom with a master's degree, they should be right there [with me, being paid] 20-something, almost 30-something dollars an hour."

### **Summer Pay**

Focus group participants consistently identified summer breaks as periods of high attrition and considered ways programs might better support teachers over the summer. Teachers stated that summer was especially challenging because, in some cases, their Head Start employment—and wages—ceased for several weeks. During that gap, they were expected to either find another job or even file for unemployment and public benefits.

One metro Atlanta teacher said, "Your staff should know where their food's gonna come from, how they're gonna pay that car note. Your employees should not be sitting in their classrooms on the last day of school when they're supposed to be breaking down the classrooms, filing for food stamps, filing for unemployment. That is not a good representation of a well-known organization."



Even when they do apply for unemployment and public benefits, teachers do not always receive them, and awareness of these benefits was inconsistent across programs. One teacher from North Georgia said, "I've never applied for my unemployment because I did not think preschool teachers are eligible. But I also know that at the center where I work, those teachers do [apply], and most of them do not get it. It's like there's no rhyme or reason to who gets it and who doesn't, so I guess just some adequate information about how they can even apply because every year. It's so stressful. What are we going to do all summer, you know? Where am I going to find a job for two months?"

Several of the teachers indicated that their programs withheld money from their paychecks to cover the summer months. Teachers expressed that without an overall pay raise, their monthly pay throughout the year is inadequate.

One South Georgia educator said, “Yes, I'm getting money, but it was already mine, so I make less throughout the year to cover the money I'm going to make during the summer. So, it is more difficult because I end up getting a summer job most of the time.”

The many educators who rely on additional jobs to make ends meet during the summer could be less likely to return to Head Start in the fall, some teachers noted. The same North Georgia teacher said, “[Other employers are] paying 18 dollars an hour so it's like, come summer, all these teachers are going to go there because they need money over the summer, you know? And there's a good chance we're not going to get them back.”

### ***Bonuses, Stipends, and Tax Credits***

To gauge teachers' preferences for compensation supports outside of traditional hourly pay or salaries, moderators shared basic proposals about bonuses, stipends, and tax credits that could be utilized to support early childhood educators.

While teachers prioritized hourly pay raises or salary increases over such strategies, bonuses, stipends, and tax credits all received generally positive feedback, with some caveats:

Educators felt that incentives should be consistent, guaranteed, and predictable each year and should not adversely affect the amount they would receive or owe on annual tax returns. When asked about the amount an incentive would need to be to compel a teacher to stay in the field or enter the field, many participants agreed that it would need to be \$5,000 or greater.

Consistently, educators indicated that they preferred reliable, annual incentives. For example, one South Georgia teacher said, “The stipend, if it's going to be guaranteed, ‘Hey, every year before you go on summer break, we're going to give you an extra \$500,’ then that's money I can bank on and know it's coming.”

The teachers also expressed preferences regarding when the incentives would be dispersed. One educator said, “You know most people want the incentive before back-to-school, or before summer, or right before Christmas. It's the timing of the incentive.”

Tax credits may be a preferred method for distributing incentives since they are reliable and do not adversely affect an educator's tax return. Teachers expressed particular concern about the potential for bonus payments to cause disruption or confusion with the tax filing or return process.



For example, one North Georgia teacher, discussing the POWER supplemental bonus payments distributed to eligible teachers throughout 2021 and 2022, shared, “I did receive the POWER payment, but the only thing I didn’t like about that is, when it came to tax time, it ended putting me in the tax bracket where I ended up owing money because it put my income up. And you know, I wasn’t even expecting that. I didn’t realize it was going to do that.”

## Benefits

Teachers indicated that compensation is a critical consideration when making employment decisions, but also underscored the importance of benefits packages on their overall career satisfaction and decision to remain in the field. Access to benefits, including health insurance, paid time off, and retirement, was inconsistent across participants’ program locations.

### *Health Insurance*

Overwhelmingly, when polled, teachers rated health insurance as “extremely important” or “important” to them. Access to health insurance varied across the state, with larger Head Start grantees more likely to have the ability to offer health insurance. Some participants explained that they received health insurance through their employer but struggled to afford their premiums and cost-sharing.

One South Georgia educator said, “Some of the surgery I needed, I was not allowed to have with the health insurance we had.”

There were other barriers to teachers receiving care.

One teacher described the lack of in-network doctors in her area, saying, “I don’t have the insurance because there’s no way I could afford it. And being told which doctors we have to use? I don’t want to have to drive an hour, two hours to Atlanta, or an hour all the way to Athens, and not be able to use the doctors in my area that are five minutes down the road.”

Another teacher lamented that her employer-sponsored health insurance did not include her spouse, saying, “They do offer [health insurance], but it’s only for the worker and the children, not a spouse. I have seen employees leave because their spouses need to be covered as well, which I think is kind of contradicting. You want to keep families together. We are family advocates. We are promoting this family togetherness, but at that same time, you’re offering health insurance that does not cover a whole family.”

One South Georgia teacher referenced other employers’ offerings, saying, “I am having to wipe our savings out just to pay my health insurance...[In] public school you don’t have to worry about that.”



## ***Paid Time Off***

Paid time off was a benefit that elicited strong opinions from participants. Many identified a lack of paid time off as a major factor in educators' decisions to leave the field. "We are only accumulating two hours every pay period, so you don't get enough time," one metro Atlanta educator said. "I understand you want that continuity of care, but when you burn out your teachers, and you lose them, you have nothing else to fall back on."

The educators interviewed described policies that varied significantly across sites. Some described having only sick leave and no vacation leave. Others described having vacation leave they were only allowed to use on certain days, like during school breaks. These limitations can prove especially challenging for new teachers who haven't accrued vacation leave and therefore are required to forfeit income. One educator in South Georgia said, "With the paid time off, we do get sick leave and PTO, but our PTO days are covered for holidays like spring break. We don't get to decide if we want to work or not, so they take PTO days for spring break, and if you're new, it takes a lot of time to even accrue those hours, so they actually go their first year without getting paid for those holidays."

Others feared that an accident or illness would cause them to lose their income entirely and pointed to the more stable, guaranteed paid time off offered elsewhere. One teacher said, "I was in a car wreck. [At] public school, they have said if I am out of work, I will get paid. But my program right now, I am not getting paid."

Finally, educators indicated that paid time away from the classroom allows them to be stronger teachers. As one Savannah-area teacher said simply, "We need mental health days."

## ***Retirement***

Retirement plans were ranked by all educators as either "extremely important" and "important." One South Georgia educator specifically attributed teacher turnover to a lack of retirement plans and other benefits, saying, "The other program that I was in, they were losing teachers and they wanted to know why. I did a survey, and it was mainly because they didn't offer insurance year-round because it was a seasonal program and they didn't offer retirement."



Teachers felt that retirement plans provided a sense of security. “Retirement plan—I think that’s a good benefit,” one North Georgia educator said. “I just look forward to having it once I retire, just a back-up plan, whatever I need extra money for. It’s just good to know I have something after I retire.”

Another South Georgia teacher reiterated the desire for a reliable safety net, saying, “I feel that if you are going to put your time and years into a job, any job, any field, that there should be certain benefits that comfort you to know, ‘OK, this is the right path for me.’ The retirement benefits, that is something to look forward to.”

## Career Development

Many teachers and assistant teachers described aspirations for advancement within Head Start. Some assistant teachers aimed to become lead teachers, for example, and some lead teachers wanted to become managers. Many sought additional degrees or credentials to further their careers. The educators responded positively to a variety of mechanisms that would help them pursue their professional goals.



### *Incentives after Milestones*

Educators often reported that they were not rewarded when they achieved certain career or educational milestones. One educator, who had plans to leave her Head Start position for one in a school system, said, “I just received my master’s degree on the fourth of April. Guess what my pay raise was with a master’s degree? You gave me 45 cents.”

In addition to recognizing educational milestones, educators indicated that tenure at a program or number of years teaching should be acknowledged or considered. One educator said, “It doesn’t have to be, like, every day, but it could be something, ‘Here, I appreciate you for doing good work. I see you doing this. I see you doing that.’ Actions speak louder than words. Show something.”

### *Tuition Assistance and Loan Forgiveness*

Tuition assistance and loan forgiveness were popular strategies among educators in the focus groups.

One educator from Middle Georgia said, “We do accumulate a lot of expenses when we go to school, so if it was some kind of incentive that could help us pay off some of these loans... sometimes we’re in \$100,000 worth of debt by the time we finish school and we don’t even make that kind of money in the education field, so that’s hanging over your head.”

On the other hand, there were some concerns that teachers might be asked to continue to work for low wages because they receive tuition assistance or loan forgiveness—that the assistance itself might be offered in lieu of higher compensation. But teachers felt like these incentives should be accompanied by living wages. “With the tuition assistance,” one South Georgia teacher said, “they want you to sign something stating that you’ll work with them after you get your degree, but it’s usually because when you get your degree, you’re not getting paid for it.”

Teachers responded favorably to programs such as DECAL Scholars that incentivized additional educational attainment but expressed concern that there was not widespread knowledge about such opportunities. One educator said of their supervisor, “She had never heard of [the program], and she was an assistant director. She knew nothing about it, and she would see some of us coming to the director to get the paper signed off on, and we would even go to her to get the paper signed off, but she had no clue.”

### ***Career Planning and Mentorship***

Educators consistently indicated that mentorship and career planning were “extremely important” or “important.” Teachers and assistant teachers reported a desire for mentorship but felt that the guidance they received was often offered in a punitive manner.

Additionally, teachers wanted mentors who were more connected to and familiar with their classrooms and programs. One South Georgia educator said, “We have mentor coaches. If they would come around more to see what we’re doing in the classroom, I think that would kind of help.” Another South Georgia teacher shared a similar sentiment: “I was thinking, we should have in-house trainers and lead teachers so you can have that support in-house, as well as the education coaches and mentors.”

As to career planning, many teachers indicated a desire to stay within Head Start and move into different roles. However, they did not feel supported in this endeavor. Programs were so desperate for teaching staff that teachers were not encouraged to seek other positions or advancement opportunities. As one teacher said, “In my personal experience, there’s no offer of incentives or any kind of advancement. It’s kind of like, ‘We want you to stay where you are because we need you so bad.’”



## Work Environment

In addition to discussing compensation and benefits, Head Start educators shared their preferences related to work environment and supports.

### ***Recognition and Respect, including Support from Leadership***

Many teachers indicated they felt a lack of recognition and respect from program leadership, policymakers, and the public.

Some educators cited a perceived lack of respect as a reason for leaving a job with a particular employer. One educator from South Georgia said, “For me, the respect part is more important, because I want you to understand my role, you know? And that changes throughout the day depending on the circumstance. I just need respect more than I would need the recognition for it because I do my job just because that's what I want to do. But there has to be respect. That's just a requirement for me and that makes a big difference in whether you want to get up every morning and go to a place of employment.”



Teaching assistants, in particular, felt that they lacked the respect of their colleagues and desired specific recognition. For example, one said, “I hear a lot of, ‘The teacher did great,’ you know? ‘The teacher helped this child behave better. The teacher did this.’ But it's never, you know, ‘Oh, thank you, TA, for helping,’ and stuff like that.”

Many of the participating educators felt a disconnect between the work they do in the classroom and their experience with leadership. Some reported that they felt disregarded or overlooked. In addition, teachers felt some supervisors took them for granted by asking them to complete duties beyond the scope of their job description.

A South Georgia educator said, “It feels better when you have somebody that's in your corner and...not talking down to you or treating you like some little kid, you know? ‘Oh, your job's not important. Just do what I say.’ That hurts.”

While signs of respect were important, teachers also sought action from leadership that demonstrated teachers' importance to the program. In addition to higher pay, bonuses, or stipends, educators wanted to know that program leaders were listening to them. "The stress is more about respecting and listening to what we have to say because we're the ones in the classrooms with the students every day," one educator from South Georgia said. "Because if you're not going to listen to what we're going to say, it doesn't make sense. It doesn't work in the classroom for a person outside looking in. It just seems that's where the stress is coming from and you're burning us out. And then the lack of pay, the lack of respect, the lack of support—that's where a lot of the stress comes from."

Focus group participants indicated that the sense of disrespect extended beyond their specific place of employment. They felt it from policymakers and other leaders, as well. One South Georgia teacher said, "Education is a huge expense for the government, and it keeps getting cut and keeps getting cut. When they need a budget cut, they go straight to the schools and say, 'You're not going to have an art program anymore. You're not going to have a music program anymore. You can have 30 kids now, instead of 20.'"

### ***Day-to-Day Work Environment***

Educators pointed to changes in their day-to-day work environment that could support retention in the field. Specifically, they cited reducing paperwork, supporting breaks throughout the day, and updating facilities.

These teachers indicated that the burden of duplicative paperwork cut into their planning time. One teacher from South Georgia said, "We have to do the same paperwork over and over. We had to do observations on paperwork, we had to do observations in the computer. It's the same thing. It's so much redundancy that's not needed."

There was significant frustration among the participants about the lack of planning time during the day. As one South Georgia teacher said, "You're supposed to get 30 minutes before the kids come, but they have said it over and over again, if you have kids in your classroom, you got to focus on your classroom, so if you're getting to work at 7:30, you got kids there...where am I going to get my thirty minutes of planning time? Afternoon, kids are supposed to be picked up by 2:30. You still have kids there at 2:50, 3:00—when are you getting your time?"



Educators recognized that the staffing challenges facing the field have exacerbated the stress that current staff were experiencing, with one South Georgia teacher saying of their employer, “That establishment is literally running off of subs. You don’t have any staff of your own.”

Another teacher from North Georgia indicated that staffing challenges affected her teaching and observation results, saying, “When you’re short-staffed, things just don’t go the way you expect them to go. We never know when those observations are coming and...I just feel like we are being judged so hard for things that are out of our control.”

In addition to staffing disruptions, some teachers noted that facility challenges affect their day-to-day work environment. One South Georgia teacher noted that these issues also affect the children, saying, “We’ve had three or four classrooms this year that have no air conditioning in them at all because they can't afford to fix the AC units. It's like we've got these classrooms with two teachers and 20 kids. We live in South Georgia. It's been 90 degrees this last week and they have no AC in those classrooms.”



Both facilities and staffing challenges contributed to more responsibilities for teachers, including cleaning their own classrooms. As one teacher from North Georgia stated, “We have to clean our classrooms in the afternoon. Our janitors only come twice a week if they decide they want to come, so in between all that time with no kids, we have to prep.”

Minor updates could improve teachers’ perceptions of their work environment. One South Georgia teacher said, “This may sound a little crazy... but if you could give us quality nutritious meals, things that you would eat yourself, that would make things better. Just, I mean let me get a salad every day if that's my choice. I know we have to eat family-style meals, but [what they serve us is] nothing I’d put in front of my family.”

## ***Instructional Supports***

Teachers lamented that professional development often does not meet their needs. What they could really use, teachers indicated, is instructional support tailored to the specific realities of Head Start. Many teachers reported that the training they typically receive does not address the realities of their specific students or their classrooms. “We do want to do what's best for them, but we're not always equipped,” said one South Georgia teacher.

“I felt like the children were missing so much before they ever got to me,” said another. “I guess what I really hope to accomplish is that all of our babies get the help that they really need.”

Educators often pointed out that their experience in the classroom was not reflected in the instructional support they received. They indicated that they would prefer that those providing instructional support spent time in their classroom. One South Georgia teacher said, “They print this stuff off Google ... but they're not in there dealing with this child. This is something that they think will help in your classroom, but they're not actually standing in the classroom to understand.”

Additionally, educators were concerned that there was not enough variety in the training offered. “Nothing against the trainers,” one South Georgia teacher said, “but it is the same trainings over and over.”

### **Supports for Children with Challenging Behaviors and Those who have Experienced Trauma**

It's worth noting that in each focus group, teachers underscored the importance of supporting children with challenging behavior and those who have experienced trauma. All but one teacher indicated that this type of support was “extremely important” to them, consistent with federal Head Start standards that emphasize the importance of nurturing adult-child interactions and mental health and wellness for staff and children.



Teachers indicated that to better support children with challenging behavior and those who have experienced trauma, they needed more teachers in the classroom, more support from experts, and better training.

Educators noted that a large number of their students need accommodations or specialized instruction. One assistant teacher in South Georgia said, “This is my first full year as an assistant teacher, and we had a class of 16. Out of that 16, we maybe had three that didn’t need behavioral accommodations...It would be better if someone would come in and actually see, you know, what’s going on and give directions on that specifically.”

Even teachers with experience in special education cited the need for more targeted resources to support young children with challenging behaviors. As one metro Atlanta teacher said, “I actually do have a background in special education, but I still don’t have the required resources that I need or the support to help me in the classroom with those challenging behaviors.”

Teachers had ideas about what “support” for young children exhibiting challenging behavior should look like. In the South region, one teacher suggested: “getting a disability aid to come in or a specialist to come in from an outside source to work with the kid once or twice a week.”

Other teachers reiterated that appropriate training is critical. In North Georgia, one teacher said, “We don’t get the proper training to help those babies in our classrooms...Every year they tell you the same thing. ‘Use a picture schedule.’ There’s, like, a list that they go down. You know, we all do that, and we’re still suffering from the same behaviors.”

Another teacher in South Georgia said, “I can’t tell you how many videos I have watched where they have like three kids to three adults in the room and everyone sitting crisscross applesauce and it’s so perfect, and I’m like, ‘Not in here.’”



# Recommendations for Policymakers and Head Start Leaders

The challenges facing the early childhood workforce are complex and require a layered approach on the part of various stakeholders. Teachers' experiences, perspectives, and suggestions can help inform policymakers' and Head Start leaders' decision-making. The recommendations outlined below include some key steps stakeholders can take to address the challenges facing the workforce.

## Compensation

### ***Base Pay***

As a result of per-child funding allocations from the federal government, Head Start grantees are limited in what they can offer their staff in terms of base-pay increases. Policymakers should prioritize increased funding for Head Start, including increasing the per-child funding amount. Additionally, policymakers should provide dedicated funding for teacher and assistant teacher pay, set a minimum base salary, and consider additional funding for tenure, education, and credentials. Particular attention should be paid to summer pay to ensure that teachers and assistant teachers are compensated consistently throughout the year.

### ***Bonuses, Stipends, and Tax Credits***

In addition to the base and hourly pay, policymakers should consider mechanisms to increase supplemental pay, such as tax credits specifically for early childhood educators. Teachers expressed broad support for various approaches to supplemental pay, with an emphasis on the predictability of payments. Teachers should be recognized for both tenure and educational milestones.

## Benefits

Federal funding often dictates what Head Start programs can offer their staff. Larger programs may be able to offer more robust benefits selections than their smaller counterparts.

### ***Health Insurance***

- Federal policymakers should consider funding year-round health insurance for Head Start employees, with considerations for accessibility and affordability, such as the health insurance packages that already exist for other federal employees.
- Employers who cannot provide health insurance to staff should consider utilizing a health insurance navigator during open enrollment, typically during November and December. Navigators (free of charge) can help staff find health insurance on the public exchange at [www.healthcare.gov](http://www.healthcare.gov). Many of these plans are more affordable because of federal supplements. Health insurance navigators can be found at [www.healthyfuturega.org](http://www.healthyfuturega.org) or [www.glsp.org](http://www.glsp.org).
- Employers who do provide health insurance should consider year-round plans, network adequacy, and family benefits when making selections.

## Other Benefits

Head Start teachers' access to paid time off, family leave, and retirement plans should more closely mirror those offered by the private sector, K-12, and the federal government.

## Career Development

Consider providing both financial supports (e.g., tuition assistance, fees, books & supplies) and flexibility for teachers interested in advancing their education.

- State and federal policymakers should bolster programs like DECAL Scholars that support ECE professionals in pursuing education and new skills.
- Policymakers and leadership should ensure Head Start teachers can equitably gain access to opportunities for loan forgiveness, such as the Public Service Loan Forgiveness (PSLF) Program, regardless of the setting in which they work.
- Program leaders should ensure teachers' awareness of such opportunities and support them in accessing and navigating them.

Mentorship and professional development opportunities should be robust, relevant, and non-evaluative.

- Program leaders should collaborate with teaching staff to determine which professional development opportunities would be most beneficial and support individual teachers to create plans based on needs, interests, and strengths.

## Work Environment

Program leaders can express respect for their educators through public recognition and small changes in the workplace. They should also ask staff how they want to be recognized.

To better help educators serve children with challenging behaviors and those who have experienced trauma, programs should consider partnering with mental health clinicians, building on the mental health work Head Start programs have already begun to implement. Over the last few years, many more mental health clinicians have been trained in how to support young children and their families, as well as early childhood educators.

- State and federal policymakers should consider investing additional funding into supporting mental health services for young children and their families.
- Program leaders can consult the Georgia Association for Infant Mental Health (GA-AIMH) at [www.ga-aimh.org](http://www.ga-aimh.org) to learn about staff training, reflective supervision, and to connect with mental health services for young children and their families.

Program leaders should consider ways to provide sufficient time for teachers to plan, use the restroom, and interact with other adults. For example, some Head Start programs have implemented flexible scheduling for staff.

Program leaders should institute systems, such as substitute pools or shared services, that can address the staffing shortages that contribute so greatly to teacher burnout.

Other strategies to support staff, as outlined in a recent Office of Head Start report<sup>2</sup>, include:

- Brief unscheduled wellness breaks
- Two-way communication with staff
- Robust orientation and onboarding
- Clear personnel policies and procedures
- Promoting clear staff roles and responsibilities

# Conclusion

These focus groups made clear that the Head Start workforce continues to face complex challenges. While some of these challenges, like low pay, are endemic, others may be temporary. Educators expressed hope that there are solutions to these challenges. Furthermore, Head Start educators are passionate about the Head Start mission and serving young children.

There is no simple solution for the challenges that face Head Start and the rest of the early childhood education workforce. But with many stakeholders working together and with a public investment that reflects our society's critical need for fairly paid early childhood educators working in adequately staffed programs, we will continue to see progress.

This report outlines teacher-informed solutions that could help Head Start cultivate and retain quality educators. GEEARS urges lawmakers, policy influencers, and Head Start leaders to explore these options and to continue to center the voices of the Head Start educators who work with students, parents, and administrators every day.

**For more information, visit [www.geears.org](http://www.geears.org).**





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