



E X E C U T I V E S U M M A R Y

OBJECTIVES

1. To determine the enrollment levels of Head Start grantees.
2. To describe grantees' challenges to maintaining full enrollment.
3. To assess the Administration for Children and Families' (ACF) monitoring of enrollment.
4. To assess ACF's enforcement of full enrollment.

BACKGROUND

Established in 1964, Head Start is a nationwide program designed to increase school readiness in children from low-income families. Within ACF, the Office of Head Start administers Head Start. In fiscal year (FY) 2005, ACF provided \$6.8 billion in funding to grantees for approximately 900,000 Head Start children. Grantees are local public agencies, private organizations, Native American tribes, and school systems.

To determine the enrollment levels of Head Start grantees, we analyzed attendance data from 200 randomly sampled grantees. We also surveyed sampled grantees and ACF staff regarding challenges to maintaining full enrollment. To assess ACF's monitoring of enrollment levels, we reviewed the accuracy of the enrollment data reported by grantees. To assess ACF's enforcement of full enrollment, we interviewed grantees and ACF staff.

FINDINGS

Almost all Head Start grantees had high enrollment levels. In the 2006 program year, 40 percent of grantees were fully enrolled. Eighty-one percent of Head Start grantees had enrollment levels of 95 percent or higher. Enrollment levels by grantee ranged from full enrollment to a low of 68 percent.

Overall, this translated into 5 percent of Head Start slots that were funded but not filled. Head Start slots that are funded but not filled equal Federal dollars that are inefficiently used.

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Grantees cited challenges to maintaining full enrollment. Grantees cited the requirement to fill 90 percent of Head Start slots with very low-income children, competition with State and locally funded prekindergarten programs, and transportation issues as the biggest challenges to maintaining full enrollment.

ACF's monitoring of enrollment levels may rely on inaccurate data. For the 2006 program year, only 11 percent of grantees reported to ACF actual enrollment levels that matched the actual enrollment levels we determined based on attendance records. We also question the ability of 26 percent of grantees to maintain accurate attendance records and thus their ability to determine enrollment accurately.

ACF's enforcement of full enrollment has increased overall but varies by region. ACF has increased its practice of reducing or withholding funds to grantees not at full enrollment. However, reductions varied greatly by region. In particular, there were variations among regions in the levels of underenrollment that prompted funding reductions and the amounts of the reduction. ACF has also increased its supplemental monitoring and is providing additional technical assistance to grantees.

RECOMMENDATIONS

Based on the results of our review, ACF should:

Address grantee challenges to maintaining full enrollment. ACF should focus particular attention on the challenges identified in this report: the requirement that grantees fill 90 percent of slots with children from very low-income families, competition with State and locally funded prekindergarten programs, and transportation issues.

Ensure that enrollment data are accurate. To help ensure the accuracy of reported enrollment data, ACF should work with grantees to facilitate the maintenance of accurate attendance records and provide Program Information Report training to grantees.

Issue guidance concerning the use of funding reductions for grantees not at full enrollment. To ensure consistent enforcement of the full enrollment requirement, ACF should clarify guidelines to regional offices concerning the level of enrollment that warrants a funding reduction. ACF should also issue guidance concerning the calculation of funding reductions and the process of negotiating funding reductions with grantees.

AGENCY COMMENTS AND OFFICE OF INSPECTOR GENERAL RESPONSE

ACF indicated general support for our recommendations. However, ACF pointed out problems with two suggestions we offered on how our recommendation to address grantee enrollment challenges regarding the requirement that grantees fill 90 percent of slots with children from very low-income families might be implemented. We continue to recommend that ACF address grantees' reported challenges to maintaining full enrollment, including challenges related to the income-eligibility guidelines.