SUPPORTING CHILDREN STARTS WITH SUPPORTING TEACHERS

Lessons from the Head Start Innovation Fund and Implications for Early Childhood Policy.

UNITED WAY
Greater Cincinnati

STRENGTHENING THE ADULTS AT THE CENTER OF THE CLASSROOM

United Way of Greater Cincinnati established the Head Start Innovation Fund (HSIF) in 2025 in response to two interconnected challenges facing community-based Head Start providers: increasing teacher turnover and retirements that were reducing workforce stability, and growing social-emotional and behavioral needs among young children.



Working with five nonprofit Head Start providers across our region, the Fund explored a straightforward idea: ***What happens when we invest not only in children, but also in the educators who support their development every day?***

Continued

WHAT IS HEAD START?

Head Start is a federal early childhood program designed to help children from families with low incomes build a strong foundation for school and life. Its approach extends beyond early learning to support children's health, social-emotional development and family well-being.

Cincinnati also has a special connection to Head Start's history. Theodore "Ted" Berry, A civil rights leader, attorney and later Cincinnati's first Black mayor, helped establish Cincinnati's Community Action Commission before joining President Lyndon Johnson's War on Poverty. In Washington, Berry led the Office of Economic Opportunity's Community Action Programs, where he oversaw the early implementation of Head Start, along with programs such as Job Corps and Legal Services.

Through a partnership with the Consortium for Resilient Young Children, participating educators across 19 classrooms received professional development paired with classroom observation, individualized coaching, reflective practice and trauma-informed behavior and classroom management strategies. Rather than treating professional development as a one-time training, the initiative surrounded educators with ongoing support to help them translate knowledge into everyday practices.

100%

of participating classrooms met or exceeded the 80% attendance goal.

After its first year, the results offer promising evidence that strengthening educator capacity can contribute to stronger classrooms, greater workforce stability and improved outcomes for children. All participating classrooms met or exceeded the goal of 80% average attendance and retained teachers at a higher rate.

WHY THIS MATTERS NOW

These local lessons come at an important moment for Head Start nationally.

In August 2026, the federal Administration for Children and Families proposed significant revisions to the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Among other changes, the proposal would:

- remove federal requirements for structured coaching and assessment beyond the 15 hours of annual professional development required by statute
- eliminate current suspension and expulsion protections for children
- remove the monthly mental-health consultation requirement
- eliminate current service-duration requirements, which would allow programs to operate as few as three hours per day
- significantly reduce or eliminate other child health and family well-being services

The proposal is intended to reduce federal administrative burden and give Head Start providers greater local flexibility. Our local experience, however, shows why it is important to consider the value existing requirements provide. For example, assessment requirements can help identify where teachers need support to strengthen their practice, while service-duration requirements help provide consistency for children and reliable child care for working parents. As policymakers consider where greater flexibility is appropriate, the key question is whether removing a requirement also removes some of the infrastructure that helps educators, children and families succeed.

WHAT WE LEARNED

1. **Supporting educators' professional development strengthens classrooms.**
   Across participating classrooms, 83% of teachers improved their overall practice scores and reported meaningful gains in their confidence to address children's social-emotional needs. Overall classroom proficiency increased from 37% to 52%.

   These results suggest that generic training alone is not the entire solution. Educators benefited from opportunities to receive individualized coaching, reflect on their practice and apply what they learned

to real situations in their classrooms. Participants emphasized that trauma-informed coaching and reflective practice were important parts of that growth. Coaching provided a supportive space to reflect on challenging situations, consider how a child's experiences may influence their behavior, and think through how to respond. For example, coaches worked with teachers to identify and implement practices that support age-appropriate choices and calm spaces to maintain a stable response and environment during distress.

Educators described this support not as addressing a lack of skill, but as guidance that helped them apply their skills with greater confidence while navigating the stress and emotional demands of their work. Ongoing coaching, reflection and trauma-informed support helped educators translate knowledge into everyday practice while also tending to their own well-being.

On paper, assessment requirements and structured coaching can look like additional process. In practice, they provide the feedback loop that helps professional development translate into stronger teaching.

> ***"Coaching helped me shift my mindset from asking, 'Why didn't you?' to asking, 'What got in the way?' It helped me focus more on building relationships, recognizing families' strengths and taking care of myself so I can continue showing up for families."***
>
> *— Ayesha, Family Service Worker*

2. **Stronger classrooms can help children get support before challenges escalate.**
   United Way's Head Start Innovation Fund is based on evidence that supporting teachers is critical to ensuring children are successful. Without strong protections and teacher supports, challenging behavior could more readily result in exclusion rather than intervention. Across the project, only 13 of 342 children served were recommended for a higher level of care, with most of those referrals occurring early in the year, before teachers received additional training. The goal is not only to respond when a child's behavior reaches a crisis, but to equip educators with the skills, supports and classroom strategies to address children's needs earlier — helping more children remain engaged and successful.

3. **Stability matters — for educators, children and families.**
   Young children learn through stable relationships, predictable environments and consistent participation. Creating those conditions requires educators who are supported to manage children's increasingly complex behavioral needs while maintaining their own well-being. All 19 participating classrooms met or exceeded 80% average attendance, maintained or increased enrollment and experienced lower staff turnover than their organizations' overall staff retention rate (0-4% turnover compared with 2-9%).

   That stability matters beyond the classroom. Families need reliable, sufficient program hours so children can consistently benefit from early learning and parents can depend on Head Start as part of the child care infrastructure that enables them to work. Greater flexibility can be valuable, but flexibility that results in shorter or less predictable programming can undermine the consistency children, educators and working families need to succeed.

All participating classrooms retained teachers at a higher rate than peer classrooms without supports.



These findings do not establish that the Head Start Innovation Fund alone caused those outcomes. However, the results do suggest what can happen when we invest in the adults around children. Rather than expecting teachers to manage challenging behavior on their own, the project strategically surrounded educators with training, coaching, reflective practice and targeted support. Teacher practice improved, confidence grew and children's social- emotional outcomes moved in the right direction.

FROM LOCAL EVIDENCE TO POLICY ACTION

The first year of the Head Start Innovation Fund reinforces a simple lesson: supporting young children requires supporting the adults and systems around them.

Based on what we are learning locally, United Way of Greater Cincinnati encourages federal, state and local leaders to protect and strengthen public investment in high-quality early childhood education, including the workforce and infrastructure necessary for children to thrive.

Learn more about how United Way supports educators, children and families.