



# Kansas Head Start 2024 Needs Assessment

*Conducted by the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office in  
partnership with the Kansas Head Start Association*

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## Introduction

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The Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office (HSCO), funded through a grant from the Department for Health and Human Services/Administration for Children and Families/Office of Head Start (DHHS/ACF/OHS), conducts an annual needs assessment to identify gaps in collaboration amongst Kansas Head Start<sup>1</sup> (KS HS) grantees, their partners, and other service providers. HSCO engaged the Kansas Head Start Association (KHSa) to conduct the 2024 Kansas Head Start Needs Assessment (2024 KS HS Needs Assessment). HSCO and KHSa work in close partnership together to connect Kansas HS programs<sup>2</sup>, staff, and families with important resources and services throughout the state.

On behalf of HSCO, KHSa conducted the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment between August and October 2024. The process consisted of planning for data collection, gathering information from KS HS programs, reviewing and synthesizing results, considering connections to efforts in the broader Kansas early childhood system and HSCO national priorities, and developing the final report and summary. Data and information for the report came from three primary sources:

- Focus Groups: KS HS program directors received an invitation to participate in one of three, 45-minutes focus groups held in August and September of 2024 (8/22, 8/30, and 9/11). Focus group questions covered program approaches and needs related to partnerships, services to KS HS families and children, and KS HS workforce recruitment and retention.
- Surveys: Each KS HS program director received an invitation to participate in a 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment Survey via SurveyMonkey. Surveys covered program curricula and data management systems, potential conversions or reductions to funded enrollment, federal grant monitoring timelines, and program accomplishments and successes. Individuals who did not participate in a focus group had the opportunity to answer the focus group questions via the survey.
- Information gathered by KHSa from KS HS programs during program visits and KHSa's annual collection of funded enrollment data.

## More about the Kansas Head Start Collaboration Office

Established by the 2007 Head Start Act, Head Start Collaboration Offices exist "to facilitate collaboration among Head Start agencies...and entities that carry out activities designed to benefit low-income children from birth to school entry, and their families." In Kansas, the HSCO is located within the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the state's child welfare agency. Built upon the fundamental premise of its mission to promote healthy families, DCF supports the Kansas HSCO's efforts to promote improved linkages between Head

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<sup>1</sup> Per the August 21, 2024, final rule making regulatory changes to the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), Head Start encompasses all Head Start program options (Head Start preschool, Early Head Start, and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnerships).

<sup>2</sup> Throughout the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment, KS HS programs refers to federal grantees/grant recipients.

Start and other child and family agencies providing health, mental health, family, and special needs services to children and families in Kansas.

HSCO grants support the development of multi-agency and public and private partnerships at the state and national levels to: assist in building early childhood systems; provide access to comprehensive services and support for all low-income children; encourage widespread collaboration between Head Start and other appropriate programs, services, and initiatives; augment Head Start's capacity to partner in state initiatives on behalf of children and their families; and facilitate the involvement of Head Start in state policies, plans, processes, and decisions affecting target populations and other low-income families. The Kansas HSCO builds relationships as part of an integrated early childhood system, reflecting a shared commitment to improving the lives of young children and their families through better collaboration between HS grantees, state governments and agencies, Head Start Associations, and local communities.

Each state's HSCO provides a structure and a process for the DHHS/ACF/OHS to work and partner with state agencies and local entities. In 2023 OHS updated its national priorities<sup>3</sup> to guide the work of each state's HSCO

- Collaborate with state systems to align early care and education services and supports for children and families prenatally to age five.
- Work with state efforts to collect and use data on early childhood programs to guide decision-making and improve child and family outcomes.
- Support the expansion of and access to high-quality workforce and career development opportunities for staff.
- Coordinate with school systems to ensure continuity and alignment across programs, as appropriate.

Additional HSCO priority areas on a regional level may include services to children experiencing homelessness, services to children with disabilities, health services, child welfare, parent and family engagement, community services, and services to military families.

## More about the Kansas Head Start Association

The Kansas Head Start Association strengthens leadership, learning, partnership, and advocacy opportunities for Head Start families, staff, and programs. Founded in 1997, KHSA is a non-profit organization supporting 25 publicly funded Head Start grantees across Kansas communities. KHSA is dedicated to representing the important and critical impacts of Head Start programs to local, state, and national decision-makers while also communicating their challenges and resource needs.

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<sup>3</sup> (DHHS/ACF/Office of Head Start, 2023)

## Key Findings

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Throughout the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment process, programs shared challenges and successful strategies for providing Head Start services. While each shared circumstances, approaches, and partnerships specific to the communities in their service areas, a few common themes surfaced.

1. Programs are creative, flexible, and committed to services and partnerships that meet the needs of children and families in their communities.
2. Opportunity exists to strengthen the recruitment and enrollment of families categorically eligible for Head Start services (families receiving public assistance, with a child placed in foster care, and/or experiencing homelessness).
3. Recruiting and retaining qualified Head Start staff in both classroom and non-classroom positions is a continued challenge impacting enrollment.

## Head Start in Kansas: An Overview

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A mix of school districts, community action agencies, and non-profit organizations administer \$90 million+ in federal Head Start grants in Kansas. These programs provide services to Kansas families through all Head Start options.

- Kansas has 25 federally funded Head Start grantees:
  - Two tribal programs<sup>4</sup>.
  - Twelve school district or school district affiliated programs.
  - Four Community Action Programs.
  - Seven non-profit organizations.
- Kansas Head Start programs employ 2,454 individuals.
- Programs provide comprehensive services in the majority of Kansas counties (78 of 105) through four (4) program models:
  - Head Start preschool services for preschool aged children.
  - Early Head Start center-based services in a child care setting for infants and toddlers.
  - Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership services for infants and toddlers in partnership with community child care providers.
  - Early Head Start home visiting services for pregnant women, infants, and toddlers.
- In FY23, Kansas programs received funding for 6,257 Head Start slots:
  - 4,708 Head Start preschool.
  - 1,505 Early Head Start (inclusive of EHS-CCP).
  - 44 American Indian/Alaskan Native (AIAN) slots.

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<sup>4</sup> Visit [www.ksheadstart.org](http://www.ksheadstart.org) for a full listing of grantees.

- Head Start services in FY23 in Kansas included:
  - 444 classrooms in 145 centers.
  - 73,720 home visits.
- Eleven (11) Kansas grantees also receive Kansas Early Head Start (KS EHS) funding.
  - Nine (9) are funded for KS EHS-CCP and KS Home Visiting (KS-HV); one (1) is funded for KS EHS-CCP only; and one is funded for KS-HV only.
  - The Kansas Department for Children and Families funds KS EHS grant contracts with TANF and CCDF funds<sup>5</sup>:
    - KS-HV = \$5,233,327 (TANF)
    - KS EHS-CCP = \$7,506,797 (CCDF).

DHHS/ACF/OHS awards and monitors federal grants. Head Start funds are unique in that they are federal-to-local. Each program, within the parameters of the Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS), matches their program delivery model to the local needs of the community, as identified in their comprehensive community needs assessment. Grants are renewed every five years to programs in good standing as determined by federal monitoring.

## Kansas Early Childhood Context

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Both HSCO and KHSA work collaboratively with key partners in the broader Kansas Early Childhood System, including all three state agencies governing and funding components of the state's early childhood system: the Kansas Department for Children and Families (DCF), the Kansas Department of Education (KSDE), and the Kansas Department for Health and Environment (KDHE).

Several initiatives related to early childhood resources, funding, and programming in Kansas impact and shape the context within which KS HS programs provide services.

- Kansas early childhood partners recently completed an update to the Kansas Early Learning Standards<sup>6</sup> and the Kansas Core Competencies for Early Childhood Care and Education Professionals<sup>7</sup>.
- In 2023, Kansas Governor Laura Kelly designated a Kansas Early Childhood Transition Task Force to review and make recommendations related to the governance of early childhood in Kansas.<sup>8</sup> The Task Force recommended, in its final report to the Governor, that Kansas consolidate the governance of its early childhood programs.
- The Kansas Children's Cabinet recently released the *All In For Kansas Kids 2024 Early Childhood Strategic Plan*<sup>9</sup>. The plan identifies strategic goals for strengthening the early childhood system, organized under three pillars: Ecosystem, Early Childhood Workforce & Environments, and Experiences of Children & Families.

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<sup>5</sup> (The Hunt Institute, 2023)

<sup>6</sup> [https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Early%20Childhood/Kansas\\_Early\\_Learning\\_Standards.pdf](https://www.ksde.org/Portals/0/Early%20Childhood/Kansas_Early_Learning_Standards.pdf)

<sup>7</sup> <https://kccto.org/kansas-core-competencies/>

<sup>8</sup> (The Hunt Institute, 2023)

<sup>9</sup> (The Kansas Children's Cabinet and Trust Fund, 2024)

## 2024 Needs Assessment Participants

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Fourteen of the 25 KS HS programs, or 56%, participated in the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment process.

Table 1. Program participation in 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment.

Activity	# Participating
Focus group only	3
Online survey only	5
Focus group & online survey	6
<b>TOTAL</b>	<b>14</b>

Programs shared valuable insights during the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment regarding the challenges, strategies, and impacts of KS HS programs. Participation in this year's process was similar to that of the past few years. However, in order to further increase that engagement by programs in the future, consideration will be given to shifting the timing for the needs assessment data collection process to the spring when programs are not in the midst of back-to-school hiring and orientation and 45- and 90-day HSPPS requirements.

## Kansas Head Start Program Details

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New for 2024, the KS HS Needs Assessment Survey included questions about curricula and data management systems used by KS HS grantees; monitoring dates; and recent or planned conversions or reductions of funded Head Start enrollment slots.

- Curriculum:
  - For the preschool option, grantees primarily use Frog Street, Creative Curriculum, and High Scope.
  - For the Early Head Start home visiting option, programs primarily use Parent as Teachers and Frog Street.
  - For the Early Head Start center-based option, programs primarily use Frog Street.
  - Programs also mentioned the use of Conscious Discipline.
- Data management systems:
  - The most frequently used data management system by KS HS programs is Child Plus, followed by Go Engage.
  - Visit Tracker is also used by a few programs.
- Grant cycles and monitoring reviews<sup>10</sup>:
  - Over 50% of KS HS programs had a FA2 monitoring review in the past two program years.

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<sup>10</sup> From information provided by grantees during and outside of the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment Survey. FA1 is the initial monitoring review in the 1<sup>st</sup> or 2<sup>nd</sup> year of the 5-year grant cycle. FA2 is the comprehensive review in the 4<sup>th</sup> or 5<sup>th</sup> year.

- Approximately one in three programs are due for an FA1 or FA2 monitoring review in the coming year.
- Programs are in various years of the five-year grant cycle across Kansas. About 20% are in their fifth year and about 20% recently began the first year.
- Enrollment/conversion<sup>11</sup>:
  - Nearly one-third of programs report that they are considering, have submitted, or have been approved for an enrollment reduction or conversion of slots.<sup>12</sup>

## CONSIDERATION AND CONNECTIONS

While KS HS programs use a variety of curriculum and data management systems, enough overlap exists to provide opportunities for shared learning and information exchange. Many of these curriculum choices are also used by community child care providers. Additionally, the commonality provides opportunity for cross-walking and alignment with the Kansas Early Learning Standards.

Kansas Head Start programs are on varied grant cycles, with staggered start dates and federal monitoring review dates. Consequently, the focus and capacity of programs to engage in partnership building and collective efforts ebbs and flows. Additionally, with a number of programs recently adjusting or planning to adjust their funded enrollment through reductions and/or conversion of slots between program options, the reach and capacity of programs in local communities will continue to shift over time. Fluctuations in the number of funded slots reflects responsiveness by programs to family and workforce needs through adjustments in program capacity and options within existing funding allocations.

### Connections to Head Start Collaboration Offices: National Priorities

- Priority Area 2 - Work with state efforts to collect and use data on early childhood programs to guide decision-making and improve child and family outcomes.

### Connections to the *All In For Kansas Kids* 2024 Early Childhood Strategic Plan

- Pillar 1, Goal 3 - Measure impact across the full continuum of early childhood services over time and use the data to make changes that reduce disparities and improve outcomes for children.

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<sup>11</sup> From information provided by grantees during and outside of the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment Survey. Grantees must submit a formal request to the Office of Head Start to reduce funded enrollment or convert slots from one program option to another.



## Kansas Head Start State and Community Partnerships

During the 2024 KS HS Need Assessment process, programs shared their current involvement with and/or interest in participation on various work groups as well as their recent interactions (within the past six months) with state and local organizations and departments that govern, fund, or provide services to Head Start eligible families.

Table 2. Participation in groups by Head Start program staff. n=13

Group	Staff Participation	Program Interest
State Interagency Coordinating Council (SICC)		
Local Interagency Coordinating Council (LICC)	9	
Early Childhood Recommendations Panel		4
Links 2 Quality (L2Q) Advisory Group		
Statewide Home Visitation Leadership Group		2
WDAG: Core Competencies Work Group		
WDAG: Individual Professional Development (IDP)	1	
WDAG: Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion		
Statewide Registry System		
Kansas Early Learning Standards (KELS) Revision Group	1	1
Early Childhood Integrated Data Systems (ECIDS)		2
Anti-Racism Community of Practice		
KSDE McKinney Vento monthly calls		2
Statewide Homeless Coalition		4
Child Care Systems Improvement Team (SIT)		
Kansas Breastfeeding Coalition	1	1
Kansas Family Leadership Team		1
Maternal Child Health Council		3
Immunize Kansas Coalition		1
Partnership for Early Success		1
Kansas Kindergarten Transition Learning Community	3	1
Safe Kids Kansas		2

Table 3. Interaction in past 6 months with state and local partners and agencies. n=13

Organization	# of programs
Kansas State Department of Education	12
Kansas Department of Health and Environment	12
Kansas Department for Children and Families	12
Foster Care (contractor or providers)	11
National Head Start Centers	11
Higher Education	9
Vocational Schools	5
Local USDs (McKinney Vento programs, Kindergarten Transition, Special Education Services)	12
Health Care Providers	13
Mental Health Providers	13
Local Child Care/Preschool Providers	13
Child Care Aware of Kansas	11
KCCTO (Kansas Child Care Training Opportunities)	6
Housing Authority	4

Additionally, programs answered questions about partnerships in their local communities, including partnership with their local school districts.

- *Please share one or two examples of successful community partnerships during the past year. How did these partnerships help meet the needs of families or connect families to resources?*
- *Who are the main service providers that families access for resources in your community? What types of resources do they provide?*
- *Please share one or two successful strategies for working with community partners and service providers to recruit and enroll families who are categorically eligible in the following categories: What are the barriers?*
  - *Public assistance*
  - *Experiencing homelessness*
  - *Foster care*
- *What is your most successful strategy for engaging school district partners in coordinated transition practices? What is the greatest barrier to coordination?*
- *How do you coordinate with school districts and families to meet the needs of children receiving special education services?*

Both focus group and survey participants mentioned a variety of community partners ranging from mobile dental clinics, mental and behavioral health providers, higher education, and local organizations providing food and or critical resources for families. Specific examples include:

- Partnering with an Institute of Higher Education for graduate students to provide mental health therapy services.

When we have families that are in crisis who are immediately needing to be served, we're able to access that. So that's been a huge partnership that has supported us in removing some of the barriers for mental health, both for the families that we serve, but also for staff. – Focus Group Participant

- Partnering with a local organization that provides a registered behavior tech in the classroom for children with autism, with the costs covered by the family's insurance.
- Partnering with an Institute of Higher Education to send Speech-Language Pathology students to classrooms to provide extra support for children.
- Partnering with a local women's organization to provide resources for snack bags for families.
- Mobile dental clinics (mentioned by more than one program).
- Partnering with local health providers to provide on-site clinics.

They have a van, they drive around, that's all painted with teeth all over it, and toothbrushes. I ended up being at the one of the places they were at today, and the kids are just like pumped. They cannot wait to get on the tooth truck. They get on, and then they get off, ... it's lovely because then they love the dentist, and if they need to go for more than just a checkup they're not as scared. – Focus Group Participant

Focus group participants talked about the importance of communication, networking, and relationship-building between their program staff and the partner's staff to support these types of connections and access to resources for families. Because of staff turnover on both sides of these partnerships, relationship-building is an ongoing focus for programs. Strategies used by programs include inviting partners to events at their programs, including partners in Policy Councils, and hosting shared staff training.

We invite them to do either a tour to talk to us about our program and what we offer, so that they understand the families that we need...we also have invited them to serve as a community partner for our back-to-school night. That way they're meeting families face to face. They're able to talk about their services, but then learn more about our families. The main thing that I think has really helped us is we invite them to be a part of our Policy Council. They come every month. They have us come, sit at their agency during an event to pass out flyers and get lists together for us. They call us now sometimes and say "we have this coming up. This may be a great opportunity". – Focus Group Participant

Specific to working with partners to recruit families that are categorically eligible for Head Start, programs mentioned challenges such as inconsistent communication and difficulties connecting, especially with foster care providers. Successful strategies include many of those mentioned above for working with all community partners: ongoing communication and intentional networking with staff from other organizations. One program mentioned shared community events as an important strategy for recruitment. Several programs mentioned the usefulness of the lists provide by HSCO quarterly to programs of families receiving public assistance in their communities. Another program mentioned a creative partnership with the Local Interagency Coordinating Council and their Health Advisory Council to combine efforts and reduce the number of meetings that partners attend, which has opened up opportunity for greater understanding of enrollment opportunities.

We have had a difficult time connecting with the resources listed. There are turnovers in staff and an inconsistent message to help families. – Survey Participant

I think most of them [referral] right now are coming from either word of mouth or people in the community know or our boots on the ground staff or have a relationship with the case manager or a partnership with the case manager. It really happens at the local level. – Focus Group Participant

Partnerships with school districts vary greatly across KS HS programs, based on the number of districts with which a program works in their service area, whether the program is housed in a district facility or is a school-district grantee, and the availability of Pre-K services. Partnerships are primarily focused on transitions into kindergarten or shared services for children with IEPs. Of 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment participants, 35% work with six to 10 districts, 43% work with two to five districts, and 15% report working with over 10 districts. Successful strategies are similar to those for working with other partners: consistent communication and contact. However, for programs working with large numbers of districts, this type of engagement is challenging, especially for supporting kindergarten transitions.

Our greatest barrier seems to be state-funded preschool making the relationship feel more competitive than collaborative in some districts, which makes transition practices difficult. – Survey Participant

...[K]eeping the relationship open all year, not just when it's time to do our transitions at the end of the year. We invite them to our events. We talk to them about the students that are coming to their district all year. – Focus Group Participant

The children with IEPs are usually the best in terms of transition, because there's lots of meetings happening, lots of support for that family. It's usually the children without IEPs where we find it a little bit more difficult to interact directly with the kindergarten teachers...each school district looks a little bit different in terms of kindergarten readiness and what's expected... - Focus Group Participant

## CONSIDERATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

At the local level, KS HS programs have a wide range of partnerships with organizations and agencies that provide critical services and resources for Head Start families. At the state level, the HSCO Director and KHSA Executive Director represent Head Start on several state early childhood related task forces and work groups and interact frequently with key staff from organizations and agencies that govern, fund, or provide services to Head Start eligible families. KHSA maintains a current list of current and past participation by Head Start program staff, KHSA, or HSCO on various state groups, updating the list throughout the year.

However, as shared by programs, programs must invest time and energy in sustaining these partnerships and building new ones in response to the needs of families in their program. Additionally, several programs indicated an interest in having a more active role in state level partnerships and work groups. Opportunities exist at the local and state level to connect KS HS programs with key partners and service providers in order to strengthen supports and opportunities for eligible families.

### Connections to Head Start Collaboration Offices: National Priorities

- Priority Area 1 - Collaborate with state systems to align early care and education services and supports for children and families prenatally to age five.
- Priority Area 4 - Coordinate with school systems to ensure continuity and alignment across programs, as appropriate.

### Connections to the *All In For Kansas Kids* 2024 Early Childhood Strategic Plan:

- Pillar 1: Goal 1 - Strengthen the continuum of early childhood services through widespread collaboration across state and local partners.
- Pillar 1: Goal 4 - Promote agreements between public and private sectors to expand early childhood initiatives.

## Family Engagement in Kansas Head Start Programs

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During the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment, programs shared strategies and approaches for family engagement in response to the following prompts.

- *Please share a few strategies you have found successful in the past year for connecting families with community resources.*
- *Please provide one example of a successful activity or event you held this past spring or summer to promote family engagement or to link families to resources.*

Focus group and survey participants mentioned that the relationship with community partners is critical for being able to connect families to community resources, echoing much of what programs share regarding strategies for successful community partnership building. Other strategies mentioned by participants included resource events, program communications to families (like newsletters and social media) that highlight available services and resources, and parent training sessions provided by partners.

*We have taken field trips to community agencies to familiarize staff with resources and contacts. We have a scheduled monthly meeting to bring agencies in to share their program info with staff. – Survey Participant*

*The best way we connect parents is by knowledgeable staff. -Focus Group Participant*

When asked about successful family engagement events and activities, programs shared approaches for providing parent education and creating community amongst parents and families, ranging from large, annual events to smaller, frequent opportunities. Specific examples include:

- Parent Meeting/Family Game Night combo activity.
- Big Truck/Touch-a-Truck events (or other, large festival type events).
- Head Start graduation celebrations.
- Classroom events for parents and other important adults to visit and have snacks or complete a special activity with children.
- Parent education sessions (both in person and virtual), including monthly sessions in classrooms.

*We've had Go Truck Go for years. We offer that to the community. We usually have between 500-700 people come...that's always a huge event. But we've been doing that for, you know, 30 years. So everybody knows about it. People call us because they want to make sure they're included. – Focus Group Participant*

Our donuts with dudes ... we have an incredible turnout for that. It's really neat, always watching them leave, because it's like the parking lot just floods with a bunch of men. And you know we don't always get that...it was really cool this last year. The way that the dads are chatting with each other like they were building some community because it's just really come and play on the playground with other dads and their kids, and have some donuts. It was cool seeing those connections being made. And that's really something that we're trying to foster this year...coming up with more creative opportunities to bring families together that's not us teaching them something. It's just community time. – Focus Group Participant

Focus Group participants also identified the top five needs of their family via a poll. Top responses from all focus group sessions included:

- Affordable Housing.
- Access to Mental Health Resources.
- Access to Child Care.
- Transportation and Fuel.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

Kansas HS programs invest a significant and ongoing amount of time and staff effort into connecting the families they serve with resources and services in their communities. The needs of families are vast, but needs for critical supports and services pertaining to family well-being and economic security are especially prevalent. Programs are creative and nimble in their approaches to engaging parents and families in their programs, consistently offering popular events and activities that draw families to them, while also trying out new approaches to engaging families around parent education topics and to encouraging parents and family members to participate in classrooms and program activities. Programs could and should be learning from each other's challenges and successes in the area of family engagement. Additionally, opportunities may exist to strengthen partnerships and collaborations at the state level that facilitate services and resources for families in local communities.

Connections to Head Start Collaboration Offices: National Priorities

- Priority Area 1 - Collaborate with state systems to align early care and education services and supports for children and families prenatally to age five.

Connections to the *All In For Kansas Kids* 2024 Early Childhood Strategic Plan:

- Pillar 1, Goal 2 - Connect families to the right service at the right time through comprehensive networks of resources and programs.
- Pillar 1, Goal 5 - Support policies and initiatives that increase capacity, enhance quality, improve access to services, and contribute to economic security for families.

- Pillar 1, Goal 6 - Strengthen existing tools and create new resources to ensure providers offer families seamless transitions in support of their child's interests, healthy social-emotional development, and academic potential.
- Pillar 3, Goal 1 - Engage families in opportunities to connect and learn while encouraging family input and acting on insights from lived experience.
- Pillar 3, Goal 4 - Prioritize the mental health of children and families by offering accessible, multi-generational services and opportunities for connection in supportive environments.
- Pillar 3, Goal 5 - Ensure families experience respectful and responsive interactions across the full continuum of early childhood services.



## Staff Recruitment and Retention in Kansas Head Start Programs

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The 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment process also included an opportunity for programs to share information about Head Start workforce preparation, recruitment, and retention.

- *Are you familiar with the revised career pathway? How do you anticipate benefitting from or utilizing the pathway?*
- *Have staffing difficulties effected your ability to remain fully enrolled? Do you have any other issues or concerns related to staffing that you would like to share?*

Overall, programs have limited engagement and familiarity with the recently created Kansas early education career pathway. Those with familiarity have mostly used it to inform discussions with their local high school and community colleges/universities. Others are aware, but have not found it to have much impact on their programs. Others mentioned that they have staff following pathways as described, but through their own efforts with local partners.

*I'm aware of it, but I'm not in it, so I would need help getting started or more information. It just kind of floats out there. Because when we're in the moment, we're doing our own thing and getting staff through our own programs. – Focus Group Participant*

Regarding the impact of staffing on program enrollment, several programs described ongoing challenges with hiring and retaining staff for both teacher positions and non-classroom positions. Factors impacting staffing include pay, especially for family support positions, availability of qualified staff, and the broader workforce competition. Even for programs in which staffing has not impacted enrollment, it is a constant effort to recruit and retain staff members.

*In fact, I've had multiple applicants that I've felt like, they're overqualified. So, I'm going to call them first, and they're like, yeah, I'm going to decline an interview if that's the rate of pay. – Focus Group Participant*

*We're constantly looking at ways to recruit qualified teachers or other staff, and then also retaining them, because everybody is short staffed, so they can look any day and see jobs available. – Focus Group Participant*

*We are actually short a teacher this year. So, we've had to increase the class size to meet full enrollment. We've had to increase the size of the other classes and our home base, which I dislike doing because of the high needs of the children we serve. – Focus Group Participant*

*...finding those that are qualified because, I could have filled my position this year. But I I'm not. I would rather have more children in a classroom with a highly qualified teacher and staff, over putting children with someone that's not qualified and not gaining the skills. – Focus Group Participant*

We don't have candidates that are qualified for our teacher positions. This has made it impossible to open several of our Head Start classrooms. We also have several Early Head Start teacher positions open that we have been unable to fill.

— Survey Participant

As part of the focus group, participants completed a poll regarding the top five professional development needs of their staff members. While two topics were top answers for all participants (challenging behaviors and mental health), respondents had limited overlap in their answers.

## CONSIDERATIONS AND CONNECTIONS

Staffing recruitment and retention is an ongoing area of focus for KS HS programs, and many programs are investing significant time and energy into the process while still experiencing shortages and/or impacts on their program enrollment and service options. While it is not a challenge for all programs or for all positions, pay rates impact hiring significantly for some programs, and almost universally for family support and other program support positions. Because of the varied levels of experience of both newly hired and veteran staff, professional development needs touch on many topics. The revised HSPPS require most programs to meet pay and benefit benchmarks within the next seven years, which accelerates the urgency of many of these issues.

Connections to Head Start Collaboration Offices: National Priorities

- Priority Area 3 - Support the expansion of and access to high quality workforce and career development opportunities for staff.

Connections to the *All In For Kansas Kids* 2024 Early Childhood Strategic Plan:

- Pillar 2, Goal 1 - Support strategies to increase the overall compensation of early childhood professionals and improve the financial sustainability of programs.
- Pillar 2, Goal 2 - Build workforce capacity to provide high-quality early childhood services.
- Pillar 3, Goal 3 - Support early childhood professionals to help them reach their professional development goals.

## Kansas Head Start Program Accomplishments

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At the conclusion of both the 2024 KS Head Start Needs Assessment Focus Groups and Survey, programs shared any additional challenges and highlighted their successes and impacts.

- *What other challenges, other than those already shared, exist? What would help your program make progress around this challenge?*
- *What accomplishments are you most proud of this year?*

Overall, programs did not have additional challenges to share beyond those that surfaced in the focus group discussions or survey responses, but reiterated the impact of workforce challenges and the intensive needs of children and families, especially for mental health services. Programs recognized and celebrated the many ways they impact the lives of children and families in their communities. When asked about accomplishments, programs shared progress with adapting to enrollment challenges, successful federal monitoring reviews, strong parent engagement, strong partnerships with community organizations, and an increased commitment to staff wellness and retention.

*We retained 82% of our staff from last year this year, and we're super proud of that...and that's all of our positions. It is pretty huge...we've done a lot of work around staff health and wellness. – Focus Group Participant*

*Four years ago, we were sitting at ... [high] turnover, which is insane. And this year we're only at 9%. So, we have full positions. We have very happy staff. And our culture is completely shifting...it was a big undertaking. But we did it, and we're coming out on the other side looking good. – Focus Group Participant*

*I feel like our culture here has changed a lot...and I know it was a lot of the work of our mental health specialists, making sure that we looked at trauma, informed care, ways to deal with burnout. – Focus Group Participant*

Survey participants answered an additional question about what they want their communities to know about their programs. One specific comment echoed the sentiment of all respondents.

*We strive to meet the individual needs of every child and family we serve. We believe in partnering with other community resources to help families meet their goals. Our staff show up every day dedicated to serving others and we are proud of their commitment and determination while facing significant challenges. – Focus Group Participant*

## Summary

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Both KHSA and HSCO are appreciative to all who participated in this process. While many of the challenges and strategies shared by programs during the 2024 KS HS Needs Assessment process are similar to the challenges and strategies shared by programs during the 2022 and 2023 Needs Assessments, this year's findings touch on the sustained impacts of workforce challenges and intensive family needs on KS HS programs. Cultivating and sustaining partnerships to support their efforts is an ongoing focus of programs in their local communities. Supporting the staff they have while continuing to identify innovative and creative ways to develop, recruit, and hire staff to fill classroom and non-classroom positions, while paying competitive wages is an ongoing struggle requiring diligence and attention by program leaders. While these challenges provide opportunities for developing and growing additional partnerships at the state and local levels, and prompt programs to be flexible and creative with their time, efforts, and resources, these factors all impact the capacity of programs to serve Head Start eligible children and families.

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