

Head Start Program Performance Standards Center-based Option

Beth Meloy: We're going to walk you through the first section in subpart B, program structure, which is one of the three standard options we detail the center-based program option.

Maggie Quinn: You'll see that this section follows the same format as our two other standard program options, the home-based and the family child care program option. Beth, maybe you can tell us a little bit about the center-based program option section.

Beth: Sure. First of all, it defines that the setting for a center-based program option is primarily in the classroom. Then it goes on to detail the requirements related to ratios and group size. Grantees will find these fairly familiar, because they're relatively unchanged. Basically what we've done is we've built in a little bit of extra flexibility. While all programs still have to maintain ratios at all times, there is a little explicit flexibility built in for brief absences of no more than five minutes. For example, if a teacher needs to step out to use the restroom or talk to a parent in the hall.

Maggie: That's great. The standards now also allow programs to replace one teaching staff member with a teaching staff member or trained volunteer who do not meet the teaching qualifications for the age during nap time. This might make more sense for Head Start programs, but also programs serving infants and toddlers are really going to need to figure out whether or not they would want to exercise this flexibility, because they still need to be responsive to the individualized schedules of babies and young toddlers.

Beth: Right. Then just one other additional flexibility that we've built in is that the rule now explicitly allows for Early Head Start programs to serve nine children in a group size as long as they have three qualified teachers.

Maggie: That's great. The standards for the center-based ratios and group size are a little bit more flexible in a couple of different ways.

Beth: That's right. They are. Maggie, in our program structure overview video, we talked about one of the biggest changes in the program performance standards, which is, of course, the extension of the program duration for Head Start and Early Head Start. Do you want to tell us a little bit about the specifics?

Maggie: Sure. This section starts with the requirements for Early Head Start center-based programs to provide 1,380 annual hours to all children by August 1, 2018, which is about two years from now. It also explicitly allows teen parenting program models as a standard option, so programs can offer center-based during the school year and home-based during the summer break.

Beth: And then the requirements for Head Start center-based program options are next, right? They're structured a little differently from the Early Head Start program. Can you talk about that?

Maggie: Sure. First of all, the requirements will move Head Start programs to providing 1,020 annual hours to the children they serve over time. Programs are required to provide 1,020 annual hours to 50% of their center-based slots by August 1, 2019 and to 100% of their center-based Head Start slots by August 1, 2021.

Beth: It also allows a little more flexibility in that programs that align with their local education agency's schedule for first grade can say that they're sort of meeting the requirement for the 1,020 annual hours, right?

Maggie: Sure. We built in a little bit of flexibility here where some LEAs require fewer than 1,020 annual hours, but it's really close. Children are still getting that higher number of hours and exposure to early learning, but it also allows the programs to have access to buses and facilities that they don't have access to outside of the school year.

Beth: That's important.

Maggie: There's one additional nuance to this section, which is that it gives the secretary the authority to pull back these requirements, so pull back the 50% or reduce the 100% requirement if Congress does not give us additional funding to prevent slot loss.

Beth: How are programs going to know whether or not they need to meet the requirement or what the requirement is by 2019 or 2021?

Maggie: I'm glad you asked. The dates of the secretarial determinations are 18 months before programs would need to comply. Programs will know well in advance what the requirement is going to be if they're shooting for 50% or 100% or some lesser percentage. They'll have plenty of time to thoughtfully plan for those transitions.

Beth: That's great. Since one of the reasons that we did that is because we're concerned about slot loss, particularly wanting to prevent any displacement of children who are currently enrolled, there's also a clear allowance for programs to request and receive an extension of one year, for both the Early Head Start center-based duration requirements and the 50% Head Start center-based duration requirements, if they need that extension in order to make sure that they're not displacing any child.

Maggie: Beth, what about Migrant and Seasonal Head Start programs? Did they still have to reach these minimums?

Beth: No, they don't have to reach the minimums, and that's because migrant and seasonal programs are really building their schedules around the needs of the migrant and seasonal families and their work schedules. What we do require is that migrant and seasonal programs provide the maximum amount of exposure that they can, so as many hours for as many days as possible while still meeting those work requirements.

Maggie: Before we move on, I also want to highlight that this section also talks about how programs should plan their calendars by estimating the number of days that they think they might be closed during the year and planning accordingly so that they can meet these minimums.

Beth: That's so important, and so is really the last section in this program option which details the requirements that programs have to meet around licensing and square footage. What it says is that they have to meet their state, tribal, or local licensing requirements. If the requirements from their state, local, or tribal licensing differ from the Head Start program performance standards, they really just have to ensure that they're meeting the most stringent requirement.

Maggie: What if the state system exempts them from licensing?

Beth: That's a really important nuance that you're pointing out there. We explicitly make it so that center-based programs only have to meet the licensing requirements. They don't have to be licensed. It really doesn't matter whether or not the state exempts them. They're still going to want to meet the licensing requirements.

Maggie: That is really what's in the 1302.21 section, but there are so many other performance standards that apply to the center-based program option.

Beth: Really, they all do, right?

Maggie: In particular, programs are going to want to focus on subpart C, the education and child development services, for information about what services in the classroom should look like.

Beth: And then also, of course, subpart I, human resources management, which talks about the staff qualifications that Early Head Start teachers and Head Start teachers need to have, as well as their competencies, and then, of course, all of the professional development and training supports that programs need to provide to ensure that they're really delivering high quality services.

Maggie: Be sure to tune in for those videos as well.