

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-25-106954](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

The Department of Health and Human Services' OHS has used the same interim manager for nearly 25 years to temporarily run programs in communities that have lost their provider. GAO was asked to review OHS's oversight of programs under interim management.

This report examines the extent to which OHS's monitoring allows it to assess whether programs under interim management meet Head Start standards related to service quality, child safety, finances, and enrollment, among other things.

GAO compared OHS's oversight to relevant federal laws, regulations, and OHS's monitoring procedures; analyzed enrollment data from the 2017-2018 through 2022-2023 school years; and compared state licensing violations to OHS records. GAO interviewed OHS officials and interim manager representatives, visited three Head Start programs to interview staff who worked under interim management, and interviewed representatives of another four programs that exited interim management since 2018. GAO selected programs that varied in size and time under interim management.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is making seven recommendations, including for OHS to update aspects of its monitoring of Head Start programs under interim management and enforce enrollment standards. HHS concurred with five recommendations and did not concur with two, citing variation in program monitoring. GAO clarified and continues to believe they are warranted, as discussed in the report.

View [GAO-25-106954](#). For more information, contact Jacqueline M. Nowicki at (202) 512-7215 or nowickij@gao.gov.

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HEAD START

Action Needed to Reduce Potential Risks to Children and Federal Funds in Programs under Interim Management

What GAO Found

When a community loses its Head Start provider, the Office of Head Start (OHS) deploys its interim manager to temporarily operate this federally funded early childhood education program. Since 2000, OHS has placed more than 200 programs under interim management. As of September 2024, 18 of 1,600 Head Start programs nationwide were under interim management. However, GAO found that OHS skipped crucial monitoring steps and did not enforce certain standards for programs under interim management for at least the last 5 school years. For example, it did not monitor half of the 28 programs due for monitoring between January 2020 and June 2024—leaving it unaware of documented and potential child safety incidents and other concerns. Further, OHS had neither assessed classroom quality nor monitored finances for all programs under interim management—both of which are required under the Head Start Act. Lastly, OHS officials stated that they had never enforced enrollment standards or required Head Start funds to be returned for children not served. In the 2022-2023 school year, GAO found that fewer than half of the nearly 4,000 Head Start seats available in programs under interim management were filled.

Local staff from all three Head Start programs GAO visited shared concerns about their experiences during interim management, including unqualified staff, unsafe facilities, and poor fiscal stewardship (see fig). Staff at all three programs told GAO that unqualified staff were put in classrooms to teach. Staff at two programs said facility hazards, including mold, were not properly remediated. Staff at all three programs expressed concerns about fiscal management—from expensive and unnecessary equipment orders in one program to a lack of essential supplies, like diapers and wipes, in another.

Interim Management Experiences from Selected Local Head Start Staff



Source: GAO analysis of interviews and supporting documentation; GAO (illustration). | GAO-25-106954

OHS officials said they work closely with the interim manager to keep Head Start programs open under challenging circumstances. However, OHS has not consistently monitored programs under interim management or enforced enrollment standards for these programs. Without taking these required steps, OHS leaves children vulnerable to low quality services and jeopardizes their school readiness. Further, it exposes federal Head Start funds to potential waste.