

Congress of the United States
Washington, DC 20515

May 23, 2025

The Honorable Robert Aderholt
Chairman
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
2358-B Rayburn House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

The Honorable Rosa DeLauro
Ranking Member
House Appropriations Subcommittee on
Labor, Health and Human Services,
Education, and Related Agencies
1036 Longworth House Office Building
Washington, DC 20515

Dear Chairman Aderholt and Ranking Member DeLauro:

As you consider Fiscal Year 2026 (FY26) Labor, Health and Human Services, Education, and Related Agencies appropriations legislation, we urge you to prioritize funding for Head Start¹. Given the significant role Head Start plays in supporting our country's most vulnerable children and families, we request \$14.91 billion for Head Start in FY26. This investment will provide a cost of living adjustment (our primary request for FY26); allow programs to address critical local priorities; and expand recruitment and development of staff for American Indian/Alaska Native programs. In addition, it would fund the demonstrated need for expansion of Head Start and facilities improvements through separate competitive grant programs to be administered by the Office of Head Start (OHS).

Leaning on decades of science, Head Start assists children in building the brain connections and self-confidence necessary for success in kindergarten and beyond. Knowing that children must be healthy to succeed, Head Start ensures they receive physical and mental health services and necessary referrals, plus balanced meals and a nutritious snack daily. Respecting the choices and responsibilities parents have in the upbringing of their children, parents play a central role in the decisions about how each program spends money, what children do in their classrooms, and how they work with community partners. Finally, acknowledging that each community has different strengths, resources, and challenges – and reflecting the unique federal to local funding of Head Start – each program is locally designed to reflect those unique traditions, priorities, and cultures.

While difficult funding decisions must be made, lawmakers on both sides of the aisle have long agreed that investing in Head Start is a fiscally responsible course of action because the Head Start model has proven remarkably successful. Research shows that Head Start alumni are more likely to graduate from high school, enroll in, and graduate from college; and are less likely to experience poor health, live in poverty, or need public assistance as an adult. And Head Start parents and caregivers, having benefited from goal-setting, parenting training, and experiencing real engagement, are more likely to join the workforce or stay employed, setting them and their families on a path of economic self-reliance. There is

¹ Head Start includes all of the following: Head Start, Early Head Start, Migrant and Seasonal Head Start, American Indian and Alaska Native Head Start, and Early Head Start-Child Care Partnership programs.

conclusive evidence that every dollar invested in high-quality early childhood education programs like Head Start yields a return of seven to nine dollars in long-term savings and societal benefits.²

The Head Start workforce situation has markedly improved but, with early childhood education ranking in the bottom 10% of all professions in terms of compensation, it remains difficult for programs to recruit and retain staff. A lack of staff can force some classrooms to close, while others stay open, but just barely – a sick teacher can mean the difference between a classroom being open or closed, and children and families having the care and education on which they rely. With that in mind, a cost-of-living adjustment (COLA) for Head Start is our top priority – extremely critical to all Head Start programs and to the children, families, and communities they serve – and we recommend a COLA of 3.2% in FY26.

This request also supports an investment in quality improvement funds (QIF), which are statutorily designated to allow programs to address critical local needs identified in partnership with OHS. Based on demonstrated need, QIF can be used for items such as enhancing mental health services for children and families, lead abatement, or providing the training necessary for staff to support and individualize services to children with special needs, including those who have experienced opioid addiction or adverse childhood experiences. We recommend additional QIF in FY26 to allow programs to address critical local needs.

The percentage of teachers in American Indian and Alaska Native (AI/AN) programs with the access and resources to receive their bachelor's degree lags significantly behind Head Start teachers with bachelor's degrees nationwide. The Tribal Colleges and Universities–Head Start Partnership Program helps expand the number of teachers from AI/AN communities to address the growing need for Head Start services, and we recommend additional funding in FY26 to expand the program.

While some Head Start programs are struggling to hire staff and reopen temporarily closed classrooms, many programs are fully staffed and completely open, but with hundreds of children on wait lists. Nationwide, the waitlist is estimated to exceed 170,000. That's because Head Start serves just a fraction of those eligible – Head Start reaches only 26% and Early Head Start only 13% of eligible children. Indeed, fewer than 15% of programs that applied for Head Start expansion grants in 2024 received funding, demonstrating that a significant need for expansion remains. We recommend funding for a competitive grant program to be administered by OHS to expand Head Start services.

Finally, to provide a safe, welcoming, and nurturing environment for children and staff, many aging Head Start facilities need federal investment for high-quality repairs and improvements. An OHS report in FY15 projected that need at over \$3.8 billion, and inflation has increased that to an estimated nearly \$5 billion. We recommend funding for a competitive grant program to be administered by OHS to repair, renovate, rebuild, or replace Head Start facilities.

² Ludwig, J. and Phillips, D. (2007). The Benefits and Costs of Head Start. *Social Policy Report*, 21 (3: 4); Deming, D. (2009). Early childhood intervention and life-cycle skill development: Evidence from Head Start. *American Economic Journal: Applied Economics*, 1(3): 111-134; Meier, J. (2003, June 20). Interim Report. *Kindergarten Readiness Study: Head Start Success*. Preschool Service Department, San Bernardino County, California; Deming, D. (2009, July). Early childhood intervention and life-cycle skill development: Evidence from Head Start, p. 112.

For decades, Congress has united around Head Start – a program found in every Congressional district across the country – to provide high-quality early learning and support for our nation’s underserved children and their families. FY26 represents an opportunity to reinvigorate this vital federal-to-local partnership. Head Start is our nation’s flagship early learning program, which Congress must continue to invest in and allow Head Start to continue putting children and families on the path to success in school, in work, and in life, ultimately leading to greater prosperity for future generations. Thank you for your consideration of this critical request.

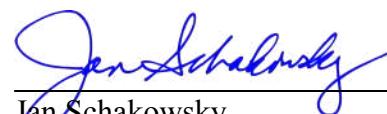
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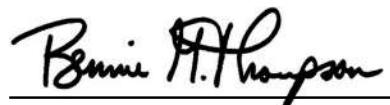
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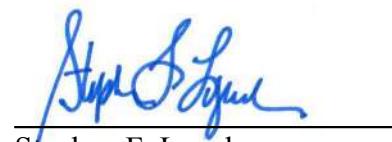
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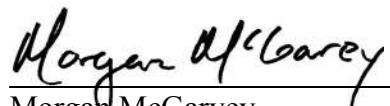
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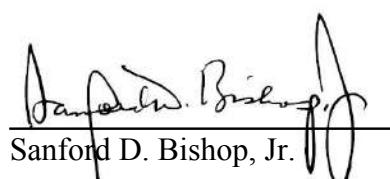
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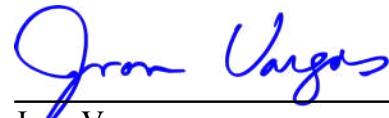
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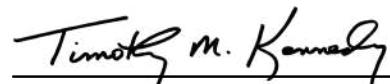
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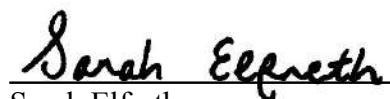
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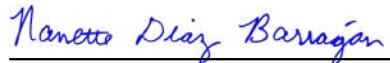
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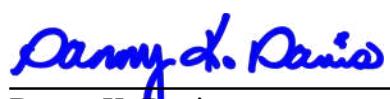
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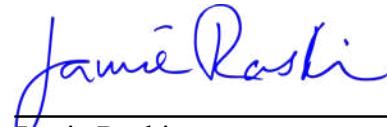
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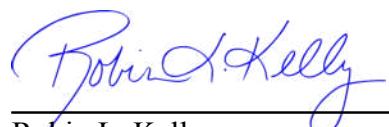
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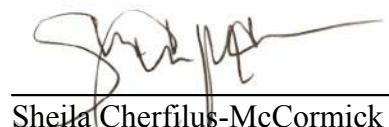
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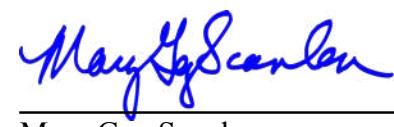
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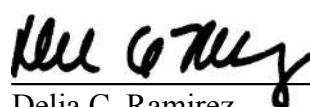
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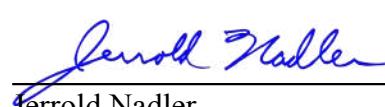
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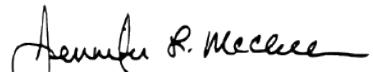
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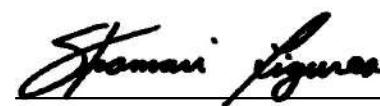
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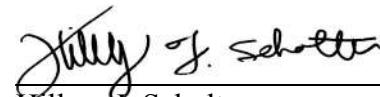
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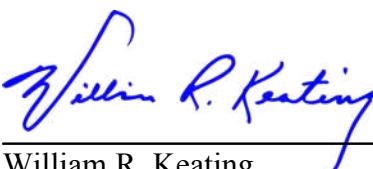
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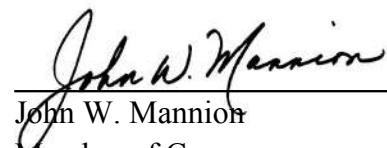
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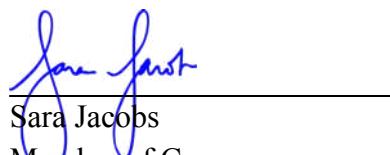
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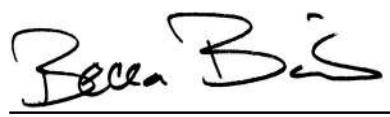
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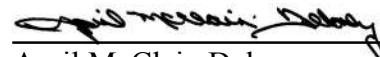
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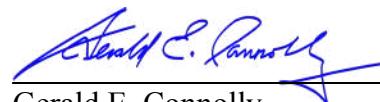
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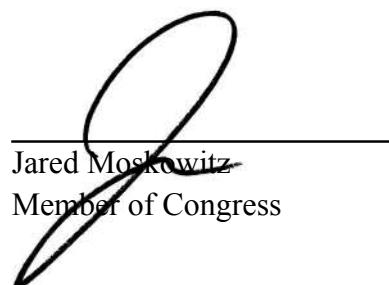
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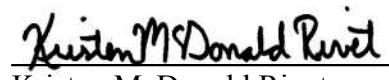
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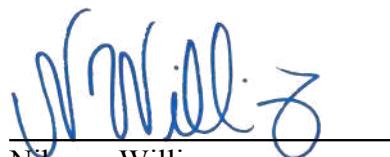
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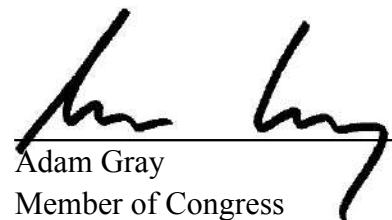
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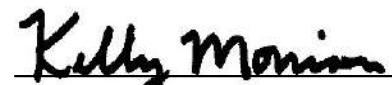
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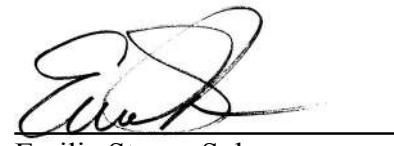
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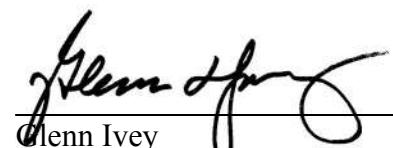
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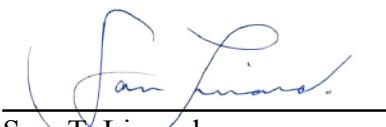
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