RESEARCH REPORT

The Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS) Case Studies

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Introduction

Federal guidance allows Head Start grant recipients to apply to the Office of Head Start to shift funding (i.e., convert enrollment slots) from Head Start services for preschool-age children to Early Head Start services for pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. This process necessitates strategic planning and the careful development and implementation of new processes with the aim of ensuring high-quality service delivery tailored to the unique needs of pregnant women, infants, and toddlers and delivered in accordance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Scant information is available about how grant recipients navigate the conversion process, the challenges they face along the way, and factors or supports that facilitate the process.

The Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS) project aims to fill these gaps in knowledge for grant recipients, the Office of Head Start, technical assistance providers, and others. The project is funded by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation in partnership with the Office of Head Start within the Administration of Children and Families of the US Department of Health and Human Services.

This report presents findings from one component of the HS2EHS project: six case studies of grant recipients that converted enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start in 2021. Our research team, a partnership between the Urban Institute and MEF Associates, highlights case study findings pertaining to the entire conversion process from start to finish, beginning with how grant recipient staff decided whether to convert enrollment slots through implementation of new or expanded Early Head Start services. We discuss how different program characteristics and contexts affected the conversion process for programs participating in the HS2EHS case studies, highlighting what helped and what challenged them. We also summarize characteristics of the participating programs and recommendations from study participants for improving the process to convert enrollment slots and implement high-quality Early Head Start services.

Purpose

The aim of this report is to shed light on the process of converting enrollment slots from start to finish. Based on our team's earlier assessment of the knowledge base about conversion, we identified four

phases of slot conversion: (1) assessing community and program need; (2) developing the application to convert enrollment slots; (3) preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services; and (4) implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services following conversion. For each phase, we detail why and how grant recipients make certain decisions; what internal and external factors influence the conversion; and what facilitates and what hinders the process.

Key Findings and Highlights

Using a case study approach, we identified several findings about each phase of the conversion process:

- Assessing community and program need for conversion of enrollment slots:

  - » Most grant recipients identified a lack of infant and toddler education and child development services in their community as the primary motivation for pursuing conversion.

  - » Program leaders consulted several data sources to assess community and program needs, including internal and external sources. All six grant recipients relied on their community assessments to understand community need.

  - » In determining whether to convert slots, program leaders we interviewed considered where the new Early Head Start slots would be located and whether they would be home-based or center-based. None of the program leaders we interviewed mentioned considering converting slots to family child care services, services for pregnant women, or services offered through partnerships with child care providers for the local conversion, although some of the programs offered these options.

- Developing the application to convert enrollment slots:

  - » To put together the applications to convert enrollment slots, program leaders had to determine how many slots to convert, develop a budget, and demonstrate the need for conversion.

  - » Participants from several programs asked Office of Head Start Regional Office staff for guidance about what information to include in the application. Some also accessed resources on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website to help craft their applications and shape their approaches.

- Preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services:

    » Participants described how indoor and outdoor spaces had to be designed and outfitted to be appropriate for infants and toddlers.

    » Grant recipients filled new Early Head slots by pulling from existing waitlists or carrying out regular recruitment activities.

    » Program leaders had to find new teachers for the new Early Head Start classrooms and ensure that staff received the necessary qualifications and competencies to support work with infants and toddlers.

- Implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services after conversion:

    » Participants from all grant recipients in the case studies indicated that they were successfully implementing Early Head Start following conversion.

    » To deliver high-quality Early Head Start services, program leaders had to consider several ways in which Early Head Start practices differ from Head Start, informing everything from the selection of classroom materials to the ways in which staff interfaced with families.

    » Participants suggested two factors may be associated with successful implementation of Early Head Start following conversion: (1) previous experience converting enrollment slots; and (2) being a large program with a large budget.

Facilitators and Barriers to Conversion of Enrollment Slots and Delivery of High-Quality Early Head Start Services

Among grant recipients participating in the case studies, the following factors facilitated successful conversion:

- leadership and staff support, policy council involvement, and low turnover among leaders

- understanding of and access to data about community needs

- knowledge of how to meet Head Start Program Performance Standards for Early Head Start

- sufficient time and attention to create detailed plans

- existing waitlists of families seeking high-quality infant and toddler education and child development services

- leaders' and educators' knowledge of what is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers

Barriers and challenges associated with converting enrollment slots and delivering high-quality Early Head Start services included the following:

- lack of adequate information about what is expected in conversion applications

- the timing of application approval

- facility renovations being more time-consuming and expensive than anticipated

- insufficient awareness of the time commitment required for infant and toddler screening and reporting

- challenges recruiting and retaining Early Head Start educators

- unmet need for infant and toddler professional development, coaching, and support

Methods

We used purposive sampling to identify six Head Start programs that had converted enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start between April and October 2021. These six programs varied in whether they offered Early Head Start services before conversion and whether they had undergone any previous conversion of enrollment slots. Additionally, we aimed to achieve diversity in sample programs' geography, urbanicity, the share of slots converted to home-based and/or center-based Early Head Start, the length of time between submission of an application to convert and approval, the policy context (e.g., availability of public preschool), and grant recipient size (enrollment).

Our team conducted virtual site visits between November 2022 and March 2023. We interviewed participants associated with each program via videoconference. Participants included Head Start program administrators, finance staff, members of governance committees, and family-facing staff, as well as community partners, Office of Head Start Regional Office staff, training and technical assistance providers, and experts with knowledge of the local early care and education context.

With participants' consent, we recorded and transcribed the interviews. We also gathered relevant information for each program from the Head Start Program Information Report (PIR) and the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES), including conversion applications and community assessments. Participating programs provided additional documentation, such as conversion implementation plans. We conducted unit and cross-case analysis to develop a picture of each program's conversion and draw out a cross-site narrative about conversion of enrollment slots.

Executive Summary

Federal guidance allows Head Start grant recipients[1] to apply to the Office of Head Start to shift funding (i.e., convert enrollment slots) from Head Start services for preschool-age children to Early Head Start services for pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. This process necessitates strategic planning and the careful development and implementation of new processes with the aim of ensuring high-quality service delivery tailored to the unique needs of pregnant women, infants, and toddlers and delivered in accordance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Scant information is available about how grant recipients navigate the conversion process, the challenges they face along the way, and factors or supports that facilitate the process.

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We organize findings around four phases of the conversion process, as illustrated in figure E.1. The HS2EHS case studies addressed several research questions to better understand each phase of the

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[1] The terms "grant recipient" and "program" are used interchangeably throughout this report to refer to entities that administer Head Start and Early Head Start grants. A grant recipient may have one or multiple grants and one or multiple locations where services are delivered. A grant recipient may or may not have delegates that administer Head Start and Early Head Start services on the program's behalf.

process, including what steps grant recipients take, what challenges programs face, and what facilitates success.

Four Phases of Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start
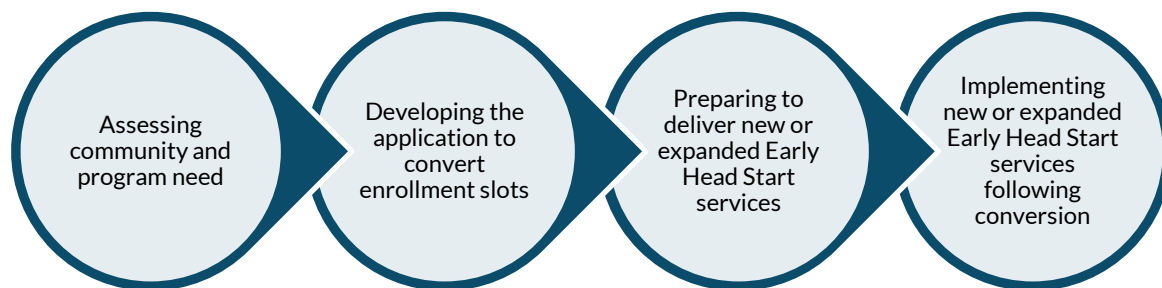
Source: Authors' framework for analysis of case study data.

Table E.1, below, presents the specific research questions organized by conversion phase.

Phases of Conversion and Associated Research Questions

Conversion phase	Research questions
1. Assessing community and program need for conversion of enrollment slots	■ What motivates grant recipients to prepare for and convert enrollment slots? ■ How do motivations vary based on policy, program, and/or community characteristics? ■ How do grant recipients make decisions about conversion and assess community needs? ■ How do grant recipients determine if the program is meeting community needs?
2. Developing the conversion application	■ How do grant recipients prepare requests for conversion? ■ What technical assistance, resources, or other supports are available and useful for grant recipients? ■ What data do grant recipients leverage when preparing a request for conversion? ■ What facilitates successful preparation of a conversion application? ■ What are the barriers to preparing a conversion application? ■ What is the Regional Office's role in supporting, reviewing, and approving requests for conversion?

Conversion phase	Research questions
3. Preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services	▪ How do grant recipients plan for Early Head Start service implementation? ▪ How do grant recipients plan for workforce-related changes that are needed to serve infants, toddlers, and pregnant women? ▪ What facilitates successful planning for conversion? ▪ What barriers do grant recipients face when preparing for conversion? ▪ What is the Regional Office's role in supporting grant recipients preparing to implement a conversion?
4. Implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services following conversion	▪ To what extent are grant recipients successfully implementing high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion? ▪ What are the characteristics of grant recipients that successfully implement high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion of enrollment slots? ▪ What facilitates successful implementation of Early Head Start services following conversion of slots? ▪ What are the barriers to implementation of Early Head Start services following conversion of slots? ▪ What technical assistance, resources, or other supports are available and useful to grant recipients implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services?

Source: Authors' framework and list of related questions.

Methodology in Brief

To answer these research questions, we conducted case studies of six Head Start programs that converted enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start.[2] We were particularly interested in how two program characteristics—history of converting enrollment slots and history of delivering Early Head Start services—might affect the conversion process. As such, we aimed to identify a sample of grant recipients that reflected variation along these two dimensions but shared the experience of converting slots within a few months of each other. We also sought to identify a set of programs that varied in features of their conversions (i.e., the share of slots converted to home- versus center-based Early Head Start and the length of time between initial submission of a conversion application and approval) and certain program characteristics (i.e., geographic region, urbanicity, agency type, enrollment, and the presence of public preschool in programs' service areas). Table E.2 summarizes the characteristics of the grant recipients participating in the HS2EHS case studies.

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[2]   See separate appendix for a detailed description of the HS2EHS case studies' methodology (Stepleton et al. 2024).

Characteristics of Head Start Grant Recipients in the Case Studies Sample

	Grant recipient 1	Grant recipient 2	Grant recipient 3	Grant recipient 4	Grant recipient 5	Grant recipient 6
Urbanicity[a]	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Rural	Urban
Program size	Large	Small	Large	Medium	Small	Large
Agency type	Nonprofit	Nonprofit	Nonprofit	Government agency	Community action agency	Community action agency
Length of time between submission of conversion application and approval	50–100 days	Fewer than 50 days	50–100 days	50–100 days	100–200 days	100–200 days
Prior experience delivering Early Head Start	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Applied to convert to home-based Early Head Start slots	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Source: Authors' analysis of HSES and PIR data.

Notes: The case study sample included grant recipients from Regions 4, 6, 8, 9, and 10. This information is not included in the table to prevent identifiability.

[a] We determined urbanicity by identifying the Rural-Urban Commuting Area Code, assigned by the Department of Agriculture, for the location of each program. Scores greater than 4 were designated as urban, and scores less than or equal to 4 were designated as rural. For each program with multiple sites, we took the mean of the sites' scores.

We carried out virtual site visits from November 2022 to March 2023. Each virtual site visit included a series of one-on-one or small group interviews conducted via videoconference, accompanied by a review of information from the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES) and documents furnished by program staff. For each participating grant recipient, we aimed to interview several members of the program's leadership; finance staff; staff working directly and regularly with children and families; a board member; at least one staff person from a community agency that partnered with the grant recipient; Office of Head Start Regional Office staff; training and technical assistance providers; and experts who could provide information on the local early care and education context.

Findings are presented below in four sections corresponding with the phases of conversion, including (1) assessing the need for conversion of enrollment slots; (2) developing the application for conversion; (3) preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services; and (4) implementation of new or expanded Early Head Start services following conversion. These sections are followed by recommendations from study participants. Recommendations fall into two categories: (1)

recommendations from study participants for the Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others related to improving the conversion process for grant recipients; and (2) recommendations from study participants for other grant recipients converting or considering converting enrollment slots.

Assessing Community and Program Need for Conversion of Enrollment Slots

For most programs, the primary motivation to convert slots was a lack of infant and toddler education and child development services in their community. In particular, participants noted a lack of high-quality and affordable services. These findings are consistent with existing research showing that many places around the country lack high-quality infant and toddler education and child development services (Jessen-Howard et al. 2018). Another commonly cited motivation for conversion was enrollment challenges resulting from competition with public and private preschool programs.

Program leaders used a variety of data sources to inform their decision to convert. Commonly used data sources included internal program data, including waitlist information and family surveys; research conducted by a local university; federal government data sources, such as the American Community Survey; state government data sources, such as early childhood agency data; local government data sources, such as school district data; data from other organizations, including surveys of child care need conducted by local groups; and data collected by other entities, such as nonprofit or advocacy organizations; and perspectives and opinions from staff and community members.

Program leaders had to make decisions about the following:

- **Where new Early Head Start slots would be located.** Program administrators identified potential locations for new slots based on community demand (using waitlist data), available facilities, and staff input.

- **Whether to offer home-based or center-based services.** Most programs converted to center-based slots in response to data indicating community need for additional center-based services.

Developing the Conversion Application

Typically, a single staff member assembled the conversion application, collecting necessary information from others on the leadership team. To put together the applications, leaders had to determine how many slots to convert, develop a budget, and demonstrate the need for conversion.

- **Determining how many slots to convert.** All six programs participating in the case studies converted at the classroom level; that is, each program converted whole Head Start classrooms into whole Early Head Start classrooms. This suggests that the program leaders in our case studies considered the number of Head Start classrooms they are aiming to close as a driver for determining the number of Early Head Start slots they would create. To a somewhat lesser degree, this also suggests that they aimed to make the budget work to support the creation of full Early Head Start classrooms when delivering center-based services. Of note, the Office of Head Start (OHS) does not recommend a specific formula for determining how many slots to convert. Instead OHS staff interviewed by the study team recommended that grant recipients consider community assessment data, staff salaries, and facility space, among other factors, when considering the number of Early Head Start slots that will be created from an approved conversion.

- **Developing a budget for conversion and delivery of new or expanded Early Head Start services.** Finance staff from programs with existing Early Head Start services used as a template the costs associated with setting up and running Early Head Start classrooms. They compared these with the costs of the Head Start classrooms being eliminated to determine if additional funding would be needed to facilitate the conversion.

- **Demonstrating the need for conversion.** Applications for conversion included much of the same data that program leaders told us they relied on when determining whether to convert. Programs' applications incorporated external data (from federal, state, or local sources), internal data (such as waitlists or family surveys), and data that were not systematically collected (like perspectives of staff).

Participants in the case studies told us that there was limited information available to them as they developed their applications, contrasting it with the more detailed guidance provided to support the preparation of new and continuation grants. As such, participants from several programs reported that they asked Regional Office staff for more information about what to include. Some also accessed individualized training and technical assistance (TTA) from regional TTA providers as well as resources

on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website to help them craft their applications and shape their approaches.

Preparing to Deliver New or Expanded Early Head Start Services

Participants described three areas of focus as they prepared for conversion ahead of delivering new or expanded Early Head Start services:

- **Planning for the physical space.** Indoor and outdoor spaces had to be designed and outfitted to be appropriate for infants and toddlers. Some renovations included adding square footage to classrooms; adding changing tables with steps for toddlers; moving or adding sinks; updating flooring; installing half-doors or widening doorframes to allow for evacuation of cribs; rearranging walls and partitions to create separate spaces for napping and play; and purchasing age-appropriate playground equipment.

- **Recruiting and enrolling infants and toddlers to fill the new Early Head Start slots.** Some programs filled the new Early Head Start classrooms by pulling families from existing waitlists. In most programs, staff also carried out their regular recruitment activities, such as sending emails to currently enrolled Head Start families, hosting recruitment events, and taking out an advertisement in the local newspaper.

- **Staffing and training for new Early Head Start classrooms.** Program leaders had to implement workforce-related changes to serve pregnant women, infants, and toddlers, including finding teachers for the new Early Head Start classrooms and ensuring that staff received the necessary training and support to work with this population. To staff the new classrooms, most programs invited educators who were already with the program to move from Head Start to Early Head Start. Some hired new staff. However, some programs struggled to recruit teachers to provide Early Head Start, resulting, in the case of one program, in delays in opening the new classrooms.

Implementing New or Expanded Early Head Start Services after Conversion

All six grant recipients participating in the case studies indicated that they were successfully implementing Early Head Start following conversion. Similarly, across all programs, we heard that the new or expanded Early Head Start services were addressing some of the community's need for infant and toddler services. Even so, participants from all participating programs told us that there was still a significant need for infant and toddler care overall in their service area.

To deliver high-quality Early Head Start following conversion, program leaders had to consider several ways in which Early Head Start practices differ from Head Start practices, informing everything from the selection of classroom materials to the ways in which staff interfaced with families. Here are some examples:

- Required screenings and assessments for infants and toddlers differ from screenings and assessments for preschoolers.

- Nutrition and health practices must be tailored to children's age and developmental needs, with infants and toddlers having distinct needs and capabilities.

- Family engagement must be modified to accommodate the needs of families of infants and toddlers; for instance, to meet the requirement to communicate with families about children's well-child visits, staff must contact the families of infants and toddlers more frequently than families with preschool-age children, as children have more frequent preventative care visits in the first years of life.

- It is necessary to identify, obtain, and train staff to deliver developmentally appropriate curricula for infants and toddlers.

- Teaching, caring for, and supporting the development of infants and toddlers differ from work with preschool-age children. For instance, Early Head Start teachers in the study described spending a great deal of time sitting on the floor and speaking continually throughout the day— departures from their work with older children who have verbal skills and engage with one another more, requiring less frequent interaction with teachers.

In the HS2EHS case studies sample, participants cited two factors associated with successful implementation of Early Head Start following conversion. First, they noted that previous experience converting enrollment slots was beneficial. Second, some suggested that bigger programs with larger

budgets may be better equipped to expand Early Head Start through conversion. Not only are they more likely to have economies of scale, especially if they already deliver Early Head Start, but they also have greater flexibility to adapt to the new service mix and accommodate unforeseen expenses.

What Are the Facilitators and Barriers to Conversion of Enrollment Slots and Delivery of High-Quality Early Head Start?

We documented several facilitators and barriers to successful conversion, many of which are similar to those documented in studies of Early Head Start–child care partnerships (Levere et al. 2019; Schilder et al. 2009; Schilder et al. 2011; Schilder 2014; Schilder, Curenton, and Broadstone 2019). However, several are unique to the conversion of enrollment slots. The following factors facilitated successful conversion of enrollment slots:

- **Leadership and staff support, policy council and governing body involvement, and low turnover among leaders** were important for all steps of the conversion process.

- **Understanding of and access to data about community needs** were essential for identifying the need for infant and toddler services and preparing the conversion application.

- **Knowledge of how to meet Head Start Program Performance Standards for Early Head Start** was beneficial, as was accessing supports needed to meet the standards.

  » For example, knowledge of Head Start Program Performance Standards for Early Head Start facility requirements and local zoning and licensing requirements for infant and toddler classrooms were deemed especially important.

- **Sufficient time and attention to creating detailed plans** that anticipate challenges and support implementation of high-quality Early Head Start were essential.

- **Long waitlists for high-quality infant and toddler education and child development services** resulted in several programs easily filling enrollment slots.

- **Leaders' and educators' knowledge of what is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers** was an important facilitator of delivering high-quality Early Head Start.

Barriers and challenges associated with converting enrollment slots and delivering high-quality Early Head Start services included the following:

- **Lack of adequate information about what is expected in conversion applications** hindered participants, sometimes resulting in an inefficient process with a lot of back and forth between programs and Office of Head Start Regional Offices.

- **The timing of application approval** sometimes created delays in opening classrooms in time for a new school year.

- **Facility renovations were more time-consuming and expensive than most anticipated** and resulted in postponed opening of new classrooms among half of the sites.

- **Insufficient awareness of the time commitment required for infant and toddler screening and reporting** was an implementation challenge for some programs.

- **Challenges recruiting and retaining Early Head Start educators** resulted in a few sites delaying opening classrooms for new or expanded Early Head Start services.

- **Unmet need for infant and toddler professional development, coaching, and support,** especially during the height of the COVID-19 pandemic, created barriers for some educators to providing developmentally appropriate infant and toddler education and child development services.

Looking Forward: Recommendations from Study Participants

Throughout our interviews, participants shared their recommendations for improving the process of converting enrollment slots, from assessing community needs through implementing high-quality Early Head Start services. These recommendations fell into two categories: recommendations for grant recipients undertaking conversion and recommendations for the Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others that support grant recipients. These recommendations are summarized below in table E.3.

TABLE E.3

Recommendations from Study Participants

Organized by the phases of the conversion process

	Recommendations for grant recipients	Recommendations for Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others that support the conversion process
Assessing the need for conversion	▪ Begin conversations with an Office of Head Start Regional Office program specialist early in the process of considering converting slots. ▪ For programs without prior experience implementing Early Head Start, request training and technical assistance as soon as possible after deciding to move forward with conversion. ▪ Collect data on community need for infant and toddler education and child development services and on availability of preschool slots on a continuous basis to identify potential need for conversion. ▪ Consult multiple data sources to make decisions about pursuing conversion. ▪ Begin discussions about conversion about one year ahead of planned implementation of new or expanded Early Head Start services, and engage program staff, the Policy Council, the Board of Trustees, or other governing bodies. ▪ Consider conversion as part of the broader strategic plan for the program.	--

	Recommendations for grant recipients	Recommendations for Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others that support the conversion process
Developing the Conversion Application	▪ Include a clear articulation of the need for conversion, grounded in community needs, in the application. ▪ Clearly articulate plans for implementing conversion in the application. ▪ Use budget templates to calculate and justify costs for conversion. ▪ Plan to implement new or expanded Early Head Start at least several months after receiving approval to convert enrollment slots. This allows time to prepare the physical space(s), hire and train staff, and enroll families.	▪ Provide grant recipients with clear guidance, such as a template, about what must be included in conversion applications. ▪ Provide grant recipients with information and tips for undertaking conversion, such as guidance on calculating the costs of conversion and a recommended timeline for the conversion process. ▪ Create checklists for Regional Office staff reviewing conversion applications, such as a checklist for fiscal specialists reviewing budgets, to speed up review and approval. ▪ Develop tools to standardize Regional Office communication about conversion. ▪ Ensure that grant recipients receive approval in a timely fashion with enough lead time to undertake necessary preparations to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services. ▪ Increase the page limit for the conversion application to reduce requests for more detail from the Regional Office.

	Recommendations for grant recipients	Recommendations for Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others that support the conversion process
Preparing to convert enrollment slots	▪ Reach out to Regional Office staff early and often to seek support and guidance about resources that could be available to programs preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services through conversion. ▪ Develop detailed timelines with activities needed to meet each of the relevant Head Start Program Performance Standards. ▪ Account for possible delays in facility renovation and construction and anticipate possible cost overruns. ▪ Proactively reach out to all local government entities that need to approve any renovations before facilities can be operational. In some communities, contacting the child care licensing office is necessary and, in other communities, checking with zoning and the fire marshal may be important. Learning about the requirements before finalizing construction can save costs and time. ▪ Engage vendors to order curriculum materials and supplies early to account for potential delays so Early Head Start services can be provided as soon as facilities are available. ▪ Plan to provide professional development supports to any existing staff who are new to Early Head Start so all have the required qualifications and competencies before working in Early Head Start classrooms. ▪ If it is necessary to hire new staff to deliver Early Head Start services, begin recruitment early in the preparation phase.	▪ Provide grant recipients with guidance and supports so program staff know what to expect after requests to convert enrollment slots have been approved. ▪ Provide grant recipients with detailed guidance about activities that can occur while the program is awaiting approval and activities that require prior approval. ▪ Provide grant recipients with sample timelines that describe the amount of time specific planning activities can take. ▪ Develop and disseminate checklists and materials for programs to clearly see differences in each Head Start Program Performance Standard for Early Head Start compared with Head Start. ▪ Share lists of resources and training and technical assistance that are available to grant recipients to plan to meet each of the Head Start Program Performance Standards that are pertinent to Early Head Start.

	Recommendations for grant recipients	Recommendations for Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others that support the conversion process
Implementing high-quality EHS services	▪ Access training and technical assistance to support implementation of Early Head Start; useful topics include appropriate staff-child interactions in infant and toddler classrooms, curriculum requirements, and assessments. For certain programs, other topics may also be relevant, such as managing mixed-age Early Head Start classrooms. ▪ Consider investing in technology to support screening and reporting to reduce the amount of time Early Head Start staff spend on paperwork. ▪ For those new to offering Early Head Start: consider providing opportunities for site leaders and teaching staff to observe other Early Head Start classrooms and take steps to have the management team on site when new or expanded Early Head Start services launch to support new Early Head Start educators and other staff.	▪ Provide tailored technical assistance, supports, and coaching to programs and staff new to Early Head Start about what is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers and how this differs from what is developmentally appropriate for three-year-olds. Several study participants noted that once educators began working with infants and toddlers, program administrators and the educators themselves recognized a need for onsite coaching and support. ▪ Develop and disseminate a conversion toolkit that is tailored to programs that have never converted enrollment slots, those that have had some experience, and those that have converted slots multiple times. The toolkit could describe barriers to successful implementation of Early Head Start and promising approaches. ▪ Disseminate materials and resources to grant recipients to support Early Head Start educators in providing high-quality, developmentally appropriate practices.

Source: Authors' analysis of case study data.

Introduction

Federal guidance allows Head Start grant recipients[3] to apply to the Office of Head Start to shift funding (i.e., convert enrollment slots) from Head Start services for preschool-age children to Early Head Start services for pregnant women, infants, and toddlers. This process necessitates strategic planning and the careful development and implementation of new processes with the aim of ensuring high-quality service delivery tailored to the unique needs of pregnant women, infants, and toddlers and delivered in accordance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. There is scant information about how grant recipients navigate the conversion process, the challenges programs face along the way, and factors or supports that facilitate the process.

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[3] The terms "grant recipient" and "program" are used interchangeably throughout this report to refer to entities that administer Head Start and Early Head Start grants. A grant recipient may have one or multiple grants and one or multiple locations where services are delivered. A grant recipient may or may not have delegates that administer Head Start and Early Head Start services on the program's behalf.

We organize findings around four phases of the conversion process, illustrated in figure 1. The HS2EHS case studies addressed several research questions to better understand each phase of the process, including what steps grant recipients take, what challenges programs face, and what facilitates success.

FIGURE 1

Four Phases of Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start
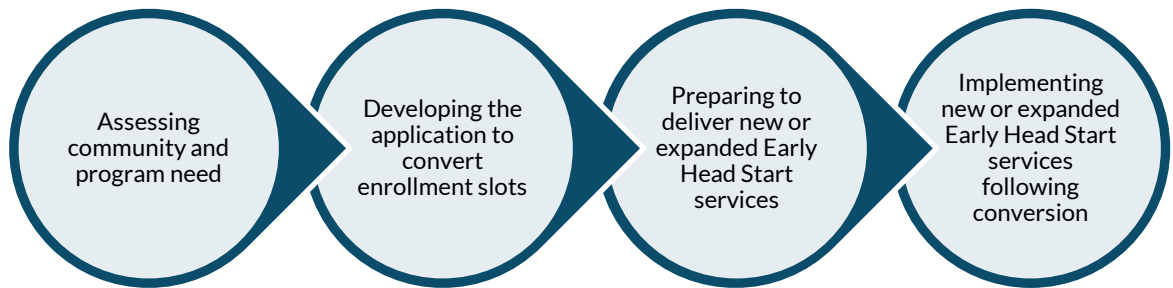
Source: Authors' framework for analysis of case study data.

Table 1, below, presents the specific research questions organized by phase of conversion.

TABLE 1
Phases of Conversion and Associated Research Questions

Conversion phase	Research questions
1. Assessing community and program need for conversion of enrollment slots	▪ What motivates grant recipients to prepare for and convert enrollment slots? ▪ How do motivations vary based on policy, program, and/or community characteristics? ▪ How do grant recipients make decisions about conversion and assess community needs? ▪ How do grant recipients determine if the program is meeting community needs?
2. Developing the conversion application	▪ How do grant recipients prepare requests for conversion? ▪ What technical assistance, resources, or other supports are available and useful for grant recipients? ▪ What data do grant recipients leverage when preparing a request for conversion? ▪ What facilitates successful preparation of a conversion application? ▪ What are the barriers to preparing a conversion application? ▪ What is the Regional Office's role in supporting, reviewing, and approving requests for conversion?
3. Preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services	▪ How do grant recipients plan for Early Head Start service implementation? ▪ How do grant recipients plan for workforce-related changes that are needed to serve infants, toddlers, and pregnant women? ▪ What facilitates successful planning for conversion? ▪ What barriers do grant recipients face when preparing for conversion? ▪ What is the Regional Office's role in supporting grant recipients preparing to implement a conversion?
4. Implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services following conversion	▪ To what extent are grant recipients successfully implementing high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion? ▪ What are the characteristics of grant recipients that successfully implement high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion of enrollment slots? ▪ What facilitates successful implementation of Early Head Start services following conversion of slots? ▪ What are the barriers to implementation of Early Head Start services following conversion of slots? ▪ What technical assistance, resources, or other supports are available and useful to grant recipients implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services?

Source: Authors' framework and list of related questions.

Methodology in Brief

To answer these research questions, we conducted case studies of six Head Start programs that converted enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start.[4] We were particularly interested in how two program characteristics—history of converting enrollment slots and history of delivering Early Head Start services—might affect the conversion process. As such, we aimed to identify a sample of grant recipients that reflected variation along these two dimensions but shared the experience of converting slots within a few months of each other. We also sought to identify a set of programs that varied in their conversion features (i.e., the share of slots converted to home- versus center-based Early Head Start and the length of time between initial submission of a conversion application and approval) and certain program characteristics (i.e., geographic region, urbanicity, agency type, enrollment, and the presence of public preschool in programs' service areas). Selecting programs that converted slots around the same time allowed us to hold some factors, like the influence of the COVID-19 pandemic,[5] mostly constant and compare the experiences and perspectives of participants associated with different programs. We focused on programs that converted enrollment slots between 12 and 18 months before the start of anticipated data collection; this allowed us to explore how postconversion implementation of new or expanded Early Head Start services was going. Our team used data from the Head Start Enterprise System (HSES) and the Program Information Report (PIR) to identify grant recipients that met our eligibility criteria and sent the resulting list to the Office of Head Start's Regional Program Managers in Regions 1 through 10, inviting them to provide recommendations or information that would help us select programs to invite to participate in the study. We held screening calls with leaders from 10 programs to discuss the HS2EHS project, their program's conversion of enrollment slots, and their interest in participating in the case studies. Taking into consideration what we learned on these calls and program characteristics, we invited six programs to participate in the HS2EHS case studies. We considered how the set of six programs we selected would reflect variation in their history of delivering Early Head Start services, their experience converting enrollment slots, geography, urbanicity, agency type, enrollment, and policy context. Table 2 illustrates features of the six programs included in the study sample.

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[4] See appendix for a detailed description of the HS2EHS case studies' methodology (Stepleton et al. 2024).

[5] All programs participating in the HS2EHS case studies received approval from the Office of Head Start to convert enrollment slots more than one year after the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic. We asked participants about what, if any, impact the pandemic had on each conversion phase; we have incorporated their responses throughout this report.

TABLE 2

Characteristics of Head Start Grant Recipients in the Case Studies Sample

	Grant recipient 1	Grant recipient 2	Grant recipient 3	Grant recipient 4	Grant recipient 5	Grant recipient 6
Urbanicity[a]	Urban	Rural	Urban	Rural	Rural	Urban
Program size	Large	Small	Large	Medium	Small	Large
Agency type	Nonprofit	Nonprofit	Nonprofit	Government agency	Community action agency	Community action agency
Length of time between submission of conversion application and approval	50–100 days	Under 50 days	50–100 days	50–100 days	100–200 days	100–200 days
Prior experience delivering Early Head Start	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	No	Yes
Applied to convert to home-based Early Head Start slots	No	Yes	Yes	No	No	No

Source: Authors' analysis of HSES and PIR data.

Notes: The case study sample included grant recipients from Regions 4, 6, 8, 9, and 10. This information is not included in the table to prevent identifiability.

[a] We determined urbanicity by identifying the Rural-Urban Commuting Area Code, assigned by the Department of Agriculture, for the location of each program. Scores greater than 4 were designated as urban, and scores less than or equal to 4 were designated as rural. For programs with multiple sites, we took the mean values of the sites' scores.

Importantly, the case study sample included only one program that converted to home-based Early Head Start slots, resulting in a disproportionate emphasis on programs that converted slots to center-based Early Head Start. Another grant recipient in the sample indicated plans to convert slots to the home-based Early Head Start option; however, the program did not ultimately convert to home-based Early Head Start. Although the experiences of grant recipients converting to the home-based Early Head Start option are not thoroughly represented in this study, research suggests that these grant recipients represent a small share of the population of grant recipients that convert enrollment slots (Schilder et al. 2022).

We carried out virtual site visits from November 2022 to March 2023. Each virtual site visit included a series of one-on-one or small group interviews conducted via videoconference, accompanied by a review of information from the Head Start Enterprise System and documents furnished by program staff. Our team worked with a liaison from each participating program to identify for interviews those people whose knowledge and experiences were relevant to the project's research questions. For each

participating grant recipient, we aimed to interview several members of the program's leadership; finance staff; staff working directly and regularly with children and families; a board member; at least one staff person from a community agency that partnered with the grant recipient; Office of Head Start Regional Office staff; training and technical assistance providers; and experts who could provide information on the local early care and education context. The mix of interview participants varied across participating sites depending on how organizations were structured and who was involved with the focal conversion (i.e., the conversion referenced in these case studies) or subsequent delivery of Early Head Start services.

Each in-depth, semistructured interview lasted no more than 90 minutes, led by an experienced member of the research team. We recorded each interview and had the recordings transcribed. Our team used Dedoose[6] to code the interview transcripts and documents using a codebook that we developed to align with the research questions. We began by analyzing data from each site visit in isolation, producing internal, standalone memos with program-specific findings. Next, we conducted cross-case analysis, using the memos and coded site visit data to support comparison among the study's programs. Throughout data collection, coding, and analysis, our team met regularly to discuss our questions, observations, and emerging interpretations.

Roadmap to the Report

The report is divided into four main sections corresponding with the phases of conversion, including (1) assessing the need for conversion of enrollment slots; (2) developing the application for conversion; (3) preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services; and (4) implementation of new or expanded Early Head Start services following conversion. At the end of each section, we summarize recommendations from study participants. These recommendations fall into two categories: (1) recommendations from study participants for other grant recipients converting or considering converting enrollment slots; and (2) recommendations from study participants for the Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and others related to improving the conversion process for grant recipients. Finally, we synthesize our findings from the study, contextualize these findings in the existing research, and highlight remaining gaps in knowledge that could be fruitfully addressed with future research.

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[6] Dedoose Version 9.0.17 is a cloud application for managing, analyzing, and presenting qualitative and mixed-method research data, produced by SocioCultural Research Consultants, LLC, in 2021. More information can be found at www.dedoose.com (accessed November 29, 2023).

Assessing the Need for Conversion of Enrollment Slots

For a grant recipient considering converting enrollment slots, the first step is to assess whether conversion will help meet the needs of both the community and the program. Program staff must gather information and consider a range of factors to make this decision. Study participants, including program staff, Office of Head Start Regional Office staff, training and technical assistance providers, and community partners, described how grant recipients moved through this initial phase of the conversion process, illustrating lessons for others considering conversion of enrollment slots.

What Motivates Grant Recipients to Prepare for and Convert Enrollment Slots?

Participants noted that a lack of infant and toddler education and child development services in their community was the primary motivation for their program to convert slots. Participants from most programs in the study noted a lack of *high-quality* infant and toddler education and child development services as well as a lack of *affordable* education and child development services options in their community. Participants also reported that insufficient supply was particularly problematic in rural areas.

A community needs assessment detailed a lot of data on child care deserts, which, all the counties we served showed up as a desert for zero to three years old. Many of our locations didn't have any [providers], and some had few.
—program director

For many programs, the conversion was in line with the organization's long-term, strategic goal to expand Early Head Start services to offer continuity of care for families and minimize children's transitions among programs. Staff from a few participating programs said parents with children enrolled in Head Start and other parents in the area frequently asked about Early Head Start availability. Staff at

most programs hoped to create a continuum of services for children from zero to five by launching or expanding Early Head Start. For instance, one program used conversion to add Early Head Start services in two locations with existing Head Start classrooms so that children could move from one classroom to the next in the same center.

Enrollment challenges, either at the grant recipient level or in a particular center, also motivated program leaders to pursue conversion in all but one of the study's participating programs. In some cases, this was exacerbated by the COVID-19 pandemic (box 1). Participants reported struggling to find children and families who met the income criterion for Head Start. For example, one participant stated that the "income threshold [to be eligible for Head Start services] is not a reliable indicator of need." That is, many children need Head Start services, but their families' incomes are too high to qualify. Competition with publicly funded and private, subsidy-eligible preschool programs contributed to enrollment challenges. For example, multiple participants indicated that families with preschool- and school-age children preferred the state-funded preschool program because it was more convenient to bring their children to one location. One program in the study reported that their local school district ended a partnership with Head Start to open a preschool program.

Only one of the participating programs was under a formal underenrollment plan for their Head Start grant at the time of the focal conversion. Still, program leaders for all the grant recipients that were struggling to enroll preschool-age children saw an opportunity to close underenrolled Head Start classrooms and redistribute the funding to support new Early Head Start classrooms. While the community's need for Head Start decreased due to the availability of other preschool programming, the demand for infant and toddler education and child development services increased. Reports of decreased demand for Head Start services and increased demand for infant and toddler education and child development services are consistent with findings from a previous analysis of grant recipient conversion applications slots between 2020 and 2022 (Lou, Berger, and Schilder 2023a).

BOX 1

Case Study Programs' Assessment of the Effects of the COVID-19 Pandemic on the Need for Conversion of Enrollment Slots

- For several programs, the COVID-19 pandemic exacerbated enrollment challenges in Head Start. For example, a participant from one program observed a decrease in Head Start enrollment since the start of the pandemic; meanwhile, Early Head Start enrollment remained consistent.

- Participants across most programs noted that uncertainty caused by the pandemic was a barrier when deciding whether to pursue conversion; they could not predict community needs, and supply chain issues hindered efforts to outfit new Early Head Start spaces.

- The widespread closure of family child care providers increased community need for slots for infants and toddlers.

- Although the pandemic was not the central reason for converting enrollment slots, dips in Head Start enrollment during the pandemic sped up leaders' decisionmaking about whether to convert slots.

Source: Interviews conducted with participants in the HS2EHS case studies.

How Do Motivations to Convert Slots Vary Based on Policy, Program, and/or Community Characteristics?

We observed differences in motivations to convert slots based on whether the program had done so before, whether the program previously provided Early Head Start services, and whether the service area was rural. Several programs indicated they experienced enrollment challenges because of competition with public preschool programs, but this competition affected programs differently.

Leaders from programs that had previously converted enrollment slots approached the decisionmaking and planning processes differently than those that had not converted slots before. Leaders across all six programs assessed community needs, but they used what was learned either to inform the decision to convert or to support a decision that had already been made, depending on their experience with converting slots in the program. When a program had previous conversion experience, leaders were regularly tracking community needs so they could predict when a conversion would benefit the community. For example, leaders from some programs described how a series of conversion requests were part of their long-term strategic plans to serve a higher share of infants and toddlers. Moreover, these leaders understood what was involved in the conversion process upfront, which made the decisionmaking process easier for the focal conversion. In contrast, leaders from programs that had not undergone conversion consulted various data sources and often engaged several staff *before* making the decision to move forward with a conversion request. They used data to discern that there was a community need in the first place and then decided that conversion was an appropriate strategy to address this need.

Prior experience implementing Early Head Start also shaped how program leaders approached conversion. Participants from several programs that delivered Early Head Start before the focal conversion drew on their knowledge of the program and systems in place to support it when developing their conversion plan. Compared with the program that had not previously offered Early Head Start, staff at programs with prior experience with Early Head Start services reported less administrative burden when applying to convert slots because they relied on their existing processes and practices. The program without prior Early Head Start experience had to build out Early Head Start plans from scratch, and some staff were hesitant about serving younger children. Staff from this program found it helpful to observe another program delivering Early Head Start to understand what would be necessary for implementation.

Leaders of programs with sites in rural locations used conversion to address challenges specific to these areas, including limited demand for preschool services and a lack of infant and toddler education and child development services. Staff from several programs explained that conversion allowed them to close Head Start classrooms in rural locations that were not meeting enrollment goals. They also reported a desire to introduce infant and toddler education and child development services in rural areas where these services were previously scarce or nonexistent.

Some programs in states with publicly funded preschool experienced competition that created enrollment challenges for Head Start. For example, several participants mentioned that their programs struggled more to enroll four-year-olds than three-year-olds because of competition for the former in their service area. Therefore, participants saw a need to shift and grow the programs' capacity to serve younger children, including infants and toddlers. Participants from one program worked with their state's public preschool program to hit their enrollment targets. Specifically, they agreed that Head Start would serve a greater share of three-year-olds while the public preschools focused on four-year-olds.

How Do Grant Recipients Make Decisions about Conversion and Assess Community Needs?

Although participating programs differed in structure and context, there was consistency in their processes for determining whether and how to convert enrollment slots. Staff from all programs conducted internal assessments and then informed or sought approval from one or more governing body. Leaders communicated with Office of Head Start Regional Office staff to varying degrees at this point in the process.

Program leaders discussed conversion internally before preparing the formal conversion application. In all programs, the program director or another member of the leadership team had primary responsibility for the conversion. The decisionmaking process usually began with the director or another member of program leadership gathering input and securing buy-in. For example, one participant stated that their program's leaders made sure all staff understood what conversion entailed and wanted to proceed before moving forward with preparing an application. Once the decision was made to convert enrollment slots, program staff began to plan and pull together elements needed for the conversion application.

Grant recipients' governing bodies, including the Policy Council and the Board of Trustees, also had a role in determining whether conversion was appropriate to meet community and program needs. For example, at one program, the director engaged the board chair early to support the decisionmaking process. They discussed what facilities were needed to deliver Early Head Start, such as equipment, space, and safety features. They also considered families' transportation needs and other items from the community assessment. Staff from most programs participating in the study stated that support from the board of trustees and the policy council was key to gaining approval for the conversion application from the Office of Head Start, as programs relied on feedback from these governing bodies to craft a sound justification of the community need. When presenting the proposal for conversion to the board of directors and policy council, leaders introduced the idea of conversion, shared data supporting the need for conversion, brought the formal proposal, and finally obtained approval to move forward with preparing an application. In these early conversations with governing bodies, program leaders addressed questions about whether currently employed staff or currently enrolled children would be displaced.

Starting discussions about conversion early to allow time to gather input from staff and the Office of Head Start is important. When determining whether and how to convert enrollment slots, participating programs sought input from a range of staff within the Office of Head Start, including regional program specialists and fiscal specialists, to varying degrees. Leaders in programs pursuing conversion for the first time relied on the Office of Head Start to provide guidance about what needed to be included in the conversion application. Some case study participants noted they were unable to locate clear instructions about how to apply or what changes needed to be made in preparation for the conversion. These staff sought more information and met several times with their program specialist to discuss the conversion budget, locations of the converted classrooms, and facilities upgrades that were needed. The program specialist for the program without prior Early Head Start experience also connected leaders to Early Head Start programs in their state to facilitate informal, peer-to-peer technical assistance.

Implementation Decisions

Once program leaders decided to pursue conversion, they had to make additional decisions about how to implement the reduction of Head Start slots and initiation or expansion of Early Head Start services.

LOCATION

Because all programs in the study had multiple locations, leaders had to decide where the new Early Head Start slots would be located. They also had to determine where to eliminate Head Start slots. All programs used data from their community assessment, and some programs also used their own data collections to help them identify where to establish the new Early Head Start classrooms. This is consistent with another review of applications from Head Start programs that converted enrollment slots between 2020 and 2022, showing that nearly 90 percent cited program data, and more than two-thirds cited data from community assessments (Lou, Berger, Schilder 2023b).

Leaders from all programs weighed a variety of considerations to determine where to open new Early Head Start classrooms, including the number of children on center-specific waitlists for Early Head Start; the availability and suitability of facilities; staffing considerations; and the local early care and education context, including licensing. Here are examples of these considerations:

- Several programs eliminated Head Start slots at centers with the greatest challenges enrolling preschool-age children.

- Several programs added center-based Early Head Start slots in areas with little-to-no center-based infant and toddler education and child development services.

- Leaders in some programs pursued conversion in locations with the highest poverty rate compared with the rest of the service area, using this measure as a proxy for need for services. For example, one program chose to use conversion to establish a new Early Head Start classroom in the portion of their service area with the highest concentration of child poverty, high birth rates, high numbers of income-eligible pregnant women, and high numbers of teen pregnancy.

- For most of the participating programs, programs converted existing Head Start classroom spaces into Early Head Start classrooms. Updating existing classrooms to ensure the environment, equipment, and supplies are age appropriate for infants and toddlers, and providing infant toddler training to qualify or credential existing staff for EHS simplified the planning process by removing the need to find classroom space and minimizing disruptions to existing staffing.

- Staff from some programs indicated that they opened Early Head Start classrooms in centers where the administrative staff were housed to provide support to teaching staff who were new to the program or new to Early Head Start.

PROGRAM OPTION

Program leaders also had to consider which Early Head Start program option(s) to deliver with newly converted slots. Programs can convert slots to center-based, home-based, or family child care services. The six programs in these case studies considered converting to center-based and home-based services even though one of the programs in the case study offered family child care services. In one instance, a program used data from their community assessment, including survey data on parents' satisfaction with current Head Start operations and data on the local supply of quality education and child development services for infants and toddlers, to determine that center-based Early Head Start would best meet local needs. The program staff noted that center-based Early Head Start would support parents' employment schedules and address an unmet need for high-quality infant and toddler education and child development services in their service area. The conversion application stated, "Full-day, center-based care ensures children and families served can benefit from the most intensive intervention and provides working families and families in school with a high-quality option for their young children so that they can sustain employment and move towards self-sufficiency." It also noted, "Center-based care supports parents' employment and education goals and provides a more intensive intervention to improve child outcomes and ensure school readiness." Study participants from one program mentioned that they never considered providing home-based services because they had only ever delivered center-based Early Head Start and had been successfully meeting the community's needs with that option.

How Do Grant Recipients Determine if the Program Is Meeting Community Needs?

Leaders from all participating programs used the community assessment process to inform their decision to convert (for a full list of data sources used to inform decisions, see box 2)**.** Specifically, all grant recipients compared the number of children that their program served with the estimated number of children who were eligible for Early Head Start and Head Start in the service area. From these data, program staff calculated the share of the community's eligible children that the program served. Participating programs were then able to identify which locations would benefit most from a conversion and where to establish or expand Early Head Start services. Program staff also used data from the

community assessment to determine child care deserts in their service area. For example, participants from one program stated that their program only served about 1 percent of eligible Early Head Start children, and only about half of the state-funded preschool providers offered infant care. The program's leaders felt these data demonstrated that there were still gaps in infant and toddler education and child development services despite the presence of state-funded preschool and Early Head Start.

The community assessment process either motivated the decision to convert or helped programs confirm an already-made decision to convert. One of the main facilitators of decisionmaking was the availability of data to help leaders make the decision to convert. Participants also indicated that data from the community assessment helped demonstrate the need to convert slots to the board members and policy council members.

As a board member, I feel like they're [program staff] very conscientious in saying, "We've noticed these trends in certain centers," and they don't just have tunnel vision to one center— they really take a look at the whole picture and how are services matching that community's needs. And they do community assessments of course too, but there's just a lot of thought. —board member

Program leaders used waitlist data as a proxy for unmet need and demand for services. Waitlist data informed the program leaders' decisions on where to establish the new Early Head Start classrooms. A member of the leadership team for one program even described keeping a list of parents that expressed interest in Early Head Start services at a site that did not have any Early Head Start classrooms. Although not a formal waitlist, this list provided evidence of demand for Early Head Start in that location.

BOX 2
Data Sources Used for Decisionmaking

- community assessments
- internal program data (including waitlist data)
- research conducted by a local university

- school district data or surveys

- local surveys of child care need

- family surveys

- input from community members

- federal government data sources, such as the American Community Survey

- state government data sources, such as state early childhood agency data

- data collected by other entities, such as nonprofit or advocacy organizations, local governments, or research or policy organizations

Sources: Data from authors' interviews conducted with participants and reviews of applications in the Head Start Enterprise System.

Additionally, several grant recipients used their own data collections, such as surveys that track local preschool program enrollment, the program's enrollment across communities (from their internal data management system), and family surveys. Staff in these programs reviewed data from local surveys of child care need or surveys that they administered, and they evaluated information describing factors like existing and potential facility characteristics and child outcomes data for classroom by age. One program's leaders used internal data to identify how many children currently enrolled in Head Start had younger siblings that would be eligible for Early Head Start; they then strategically chose to place most of the converted classrooms in the portion of their service area with projected need and no Early Head Start classrooms nearby. Other programs had staff that distributed surveys to parents to ask about families' interest in Early Head Start services and the ages of their children. In addition, one participating program examined enrollment for the next year, how many children were returning, and how many children they had to recruit to better plan for the conversion.

Staff also engaged other community members when deciding whether to pursue conversion. For example, participants from one program noted that they were able to observe other Early Head Start programs in the area before deciding to move forward with the conversion application, giving them an idea of what to expect when initiating their own Early Head Start program. In many programs, study participants engaged other community members, such as the health department, school systems, local political leaders, county welfare boards, or county judges. Program staff also sought general input from community members, Head Start families, and parents inquiring about the potential availability of Early Head Start for infants and toddlers.

Recommendations from Study Participants

Participants shared several recommendations for other programs deciding whether to pursue conversion.

Recommendations for Grant Recipients Assessing the Need for Conversion of Enrollment Slots

- Begin conversations with an Office of Head Start Regional Office program specialist early in the process of considering converting slots.

- For programs without prior experience implementing Early Head Start, request training and technical assistance as soon as possible after deciding to move forward with conversion.

- Collect data on community need for infant and toddler education and child development services and on availability of preschool slots on a continuous basis to identify potential need for conversion.

- Consult multiple data sources to make decisions about pursuing conversion.

- Begin discussions about conversion at least one year ahead of planned implementation of new or expanded Early Head Start services and engage program staff, the policy council, the board of trustees, or other governing bodies in discussions and the planning process.

- Consider conversion as part of the broader strategic plan for the program.

Developing the Application for Conversion

Once programs decide to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start, their leaders and staff must assemble a formal request and submit it to the Office of Head Start for approval. We asked grant recipients' leaders and staff to recall the steps they took to prepare their program's conversion application, what information they included, what was helpful during the application process, and what challenges they encountered. We also asked Office of Head Start Regional Office staff to describe how they work with grant recipients to prepare applications and how they review those applications once submitted.

How Do Grant Recipients Prepare Requests for Conversion?

Among most of the programs participating in the HS2EHS study, preparation of a conversion application was a collaborative process driven by a single staff person embedded in the leadership team. For example, a single staff person requested necessary information from members of the leadership team, such as a data manager and the eligibility, recruitment, selection, enrollment, and attendance (ERSEA) manager, and compiled it. This single staff person did most of the writing for the application, though others may have contributed sections. There were exceptions: staff in one participating program indicated that the process of developing the conversion application was entirely collaborative among leaders, and another program leader reported that one person on the leadership team led the application with little involvement from other staff.

When asked how they proceeded with preparing the conversion application, staff in several programs reported that they began the process of assembling their conversion application by reviewing materials they had previously submitted to the Office of Head Start, including prior conversion applications and earlier funding applications.

Staff in all six programs reported that it was necessary to determine how many Head Start slots to convert into Early Head Start slots. All six programs converted at the classroom level; that is, each program converted whole Head Start classrooms into whole Early Head Start classrooms. Four programs converted one Head Start classroom into one Early Head Start classroom. One program

closed two Head Start classrooms and opened one Early Head Start classroom. For another program, the ratio of Head Start children in a classroom to Early Head Start children in a classroom did not allow for a one-to-one classroom conversion. With additional Head Start slots leftover after classroom-to-classroom conversion, the program established another new Early Head Start classroom through an Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership grant, combining Early Head Start slots with slots filled by the child care partner.[7] This suggests that case study program leaders considered the number of Head Start classrooms they were seeking to close as a driver for determining the number of Early Head Start slots, and that, to a somewhat lesser degree, they aimed to make the budget work to support the creation of full Early Head Start classrooms when delivering center-based services.[8]

To develop a budget, study participants reported examining revenues and expenditures in Head Start, and, if the program delivered it before conversion, in Early Head Start. In programs that offered Early Head Start before the focal conversion, staff estimated the costs associated with setting up and operating Early Head Start classrooms. They compared these costs with the costs associated with operating the Head Start classrooms that were being eliminated, assessed the difference, and determined whether additional funding was needed. Some programs submitted conversion applications at the same time as requests for enrollment reductions, complicating the development (and review) of their budgets.

What Technical Assistance, Resources, or Other Supports Are Available and Useful for Grant Recipients?

Grant recipients used a variety of resources to help prepare their conversion applications. Most commonly, staff reported that they accessed support in the form of discussions with Office of Head Start Regional Office staff. During these conversations, grant recipient staff inquired about the type of information and the level of detail that the Office of Head Start wanted to see in conversion applications. Staff described consulting resources on the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website to help them build out their applications and shape their approaches. For example, one participant consulted a classroom design guide posted to the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge

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[7] This program also created one home-based Early Head Start slot.

[8] Office of Head Start staff interviewed by the study team did not recommend a specific formula for determining how many slots to consider. They noted that simply using the number of Head Start classrooms or number of slots being converted to determine the number of Early Head Start classrooms or slots that will be created may lead to budget shortfalls or have other unintended consequences.

Center website.[9] Other forms of support or assistance that participants mentioned included getting individualized training and technical assistance (TTA) from regional TTA providers and reviewing the Office of Head Start's guidance for preparing change-in-scope applications, as many conversion applications are submitted via a change-in-scope grant amendment.[10]

Grant recipients also reported variation in the amount of support accessed when preparing their conversion applications. In a couple of programs, including a program that had not undergone conversion before, staff did not report using any technical assistance or referring to any outside resources during this phase of conversion. Participants from two other programs, on the other hand, described using multiple sources.

What Data Do Grant Recipients Use When Preparing an Application for Conversion?

Participants discussed how they presented data to justify the need for converting enrollment slots in their applications. There is substantial overlap between the data that program leaders consult to determine whether to convert enrollment slots and the data that they include in applications to make the case for conversion to the Office of Head Start. Where an earlier discussion in this report focused on the former, drawing on interviews with program staff, this section explores the latter and is grounded in our analysis of the conversion applications of programs participating in the case studies.

Types of Data

As noted above, prior research has found that two-thirds of grant recipients that converted enrollment slots between 2019 and 2021 used data cited in their community assessment in their application to make the case for conversion (Lou, Berger, and Schilder 2023b). Across all programs participating in case studies, staff pulled quantitative data from external sources that they had originally cited in their program's community assessment to populate their conversion application. Other data sources were

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9 "Designing Classroom and Socialization Environments for Infants and Toddlers," Head Start Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), last updated September 24, 2021, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/learning-environments/article/designing-classroom-socialization-environments-infants-toddlers.

10 See Schilder et al. (2022). This brief showed that of the 110 applications to convert enrollment slots that were approved between 2019 and 2021, about 55 percent were amendments to change the scope of services, 26 percent were noncompeting continuation applications, and 19 percent were noncompeting new applications.

cited as well. In grant recipients' conversion applications, we identified three types of data that staff used for these purposes: federal, state, and local government data or other secondary data; internal data; and perspectives or opinions.

FEDERAL, STATE, AND LOCAL GOVERNMENT DATA OR OTHER SECONDARY DATA

Most programs noted data from the American Community Survey, an annual survey conducted by the US Census Bureau, which they used to estimate the number of Early Head Start–eligible children in their service area (Lou, Berger, and Schilder 2023b). Leaders from one program mentioned using these data to identify potential locations for the new Early Head Start classroom. Several programs also cited data from a state agency, such as a Department of Children and Families or a Department of Education, to provide information about the availability of publicly funded preschool slots in the program's service area. This information was used to demonstrate that Head Start programs faced competition in enrolling children ages 3 to 5. Some programs also presented data from their state or local Child Care Resource and Referral agency to pinpoint the number of available slots for infants and toddlers in the community, demonstrating a need for Early Head Start services.

INTERNAL DATA

Staff from all grant recipients participating in the HS2EHS case studies also accessed and used data from their own programs to justify the need for conversion. Each program's application included data on current enrollment and, if they had Early Head Start before conversion, their waitlists for infant and toddler services. A previous analysis of conversion applications from 2020 to 2022 found that about 70 percent used program data, including waitlist data, to describe unmet community need (Lou, Berger, and Schilder 2023b). In the case study sample, several grant recipients' applications also included data from their management information system about the demographics of currently enrolled families. Additionally, some grant recipients included findings from program-administered surveys of local parents about families' needs in their applications.

PERSPECTIVES AND OPINIONS

Other types of data that we found in applications were informal, based on the experiences or opinions of program staff or community members. To demonstrate the need for infant and toddler education and child development services, several grant recipients' conversion applications mentioned inquiries the program received about Early Head Start availability from families in the area. Conversion applications from several programs also cited competition with the school district(s) for preschool-age children.

Some grant recipients also included letters of support from local community leaders and organizations in their conversion applications.

What Facilitates Successful Preparation of a Conversion Application?

Program staff emphasized several factors that supported the development of the application for the focal conversion. A common theme was that leaders played a central role in facilitating the preparation of the application. In most programs, staff told us that leaders collaborated to support the person who was primarily responsible for drafting the application. Participants from several grant recipients highlighted the importance of communication from, with, and among program leaders. Staff from two programs noted another way that leaders contributed to the successful development of the conversion application: they began the planning process well ahead of when the application would be submitted, allowing ample time for information gathering, review, and revisions before approval was expected.

As noted elsewhere in this report, three of the programs participating in the HS2EHS case studies had previously converted enrollment slots, and five of the programs had existing Early Head Start programs before the focal conversion. Participants from these programs indicated that staff knowledge and experience in these areas facilitated the successful preparation of their conversion application. Staff in a couple of programs reported that it was helpful to have earlier conversion applications and budget information to reference as they pulled together the focal application.

Finally, staff from several programs reported that their familiarity with and access to data sources to cite in their applications was helpful. One program had charts and maps that they were able to use from previous Early Head Start grant applications, and another program had data from the community to support the need for conversion. When programs already had the data they needed, it was easy for them to include it in the application narrative to justify the conversion request.

What Are the Barriers to Preparing a Conversion Application?

Although each participating grant recipient ultimately received approval to convert enrollment slots, most encountered challenges along the way. Regarding preparation of the conversion application, study participants most commonly reported that they could have benefited from clearer, more

consistent, and more detailed communication from their Regional Office when preparing the application for the focal conversion. Staff in three programs indicated that there was limited information about what to include in their conversion applications and how detailed that information should be, making it difficult to prepare drafts. Reflecting this lack of standardization, staff from two programs told us that there was variation in the amount of detail that different Regional Office staff requested in conversion applications. Operating with minimal instruction, some participants reported that they received multiple requests for revisions to their applications.[11]

Three programs prepared and submitted their request to convert enrollment slots concurrently with an enrollment reduction or as part of a program renewal grant application. This complicated budget and enrollment calculations, creating challenges both for program staff preparing the conversion applications and for the Office of Head Start staff who reviewed them.

What Is the Head Start Regional Office's Role in Supporting, Reviewing, and Approving Requests for Conversion?

Each of the Office of Head Start's Regional Offices receive conversion applications every year.[12] During our interviews with Office of Head Start staff, we asked them to describe how they work with grant recipients pursuing conversion and how they process applications to convert enrollment slots. We also asked what factors facilitate or impede Regional Office staff in carrying out these roles.

Regional Office Procedures for Supporting, Reviewing, and Approving Requests for Conversion

Regional Office staff described a fairly consistent approach in their work with grant recipients aiming to convert enrollment slots. Although the circumstances of each conversion are unique to the grant recipient, the Regional Offices' engagement follows a typical trajectory that begins when program

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[11] Note that Office of Head Start staff reported to the study team that a number of efforts are now underway to address these types of concerns: to improve clarity about the conversion process, provide additional supports for grant recipients, and support a streamlined and timely conversion process.

[12] According to data from the Head Start Enterprise System, 104 grant recipients in Regions 1 through 10 received approval to convert enrollment slots between 2019 and 2021. The distribution of grant recipients converting enrollment slots is described in Schilder et al. (2022).

leaders notify their program specialist—usually during a regular monthly meeting—that they are preparing a conversion application. Either program leaders or the program specialist may initiate the conversation, depending on who identifies the utility of conversion first. The program specialist may provide guidance on development of the conversion application during the early stages of drafting. Staff in four programs participating in the HS2EHS case studies indicated that they received guidance from the Regional Office at this point in the process.

Once program staff have submitted a conversion application, Regional Office staff, including the relevant program specialist and fiscal specialist, may ask program leaders to respond to follow-up questions, if necessary; all six grant recipients in this study received follow-up questions from the Regional Office. Regional Office staff may pass a subset of conversion applications along to the Office of Head Start's Central Office for further review depending on scope of the changes and the complexity of the intended program design or approach to conversion. This review may lead to additional Office of Head Start follow-up to programs.

Having received any requested clarifications, the Office of Head Start approves the conversion application. The program specialist will recommend approval to the regional program manager, who provides the final sign-off of the application. The Office of Head Start sends a Notice of Award to the grant recipient via the Head Start Enterprise System, officially signaling to program leadership that they may move forward with implementation of the conversion. Of note, this specific approval process has evolved since the grant recipients highlighted in these case studies received approval to convert enrollment slots in 2021. It is important to note the report findings reflect the specific experiences converting enrollment slots in 2021.

Facilitators and Barriers for the Regional Offices in Supporting, Reviewing, and Approving Conversion Applications

Just as we asked program staff what supports them in preparing a successful application, we asked Regional Office staff what facilitates their review. Concretely, **some participants indicated that their review is smoother when a program's application is "complete" at the time of its initial submission.** However, it should be noted that several participants from Head Start programs found that guidance on what should be included in their conversion applications would be more beneficial if it were more detailed and comprehensive. Several study participants suggested that such guidance could have been helpful in developing complete applications for the first submission. One participant from a Head Start

program also noted that the five-page limit on conversion applications kept her from including all of the necessary information in the initial submission.

All of the other facilitators that Regional Office staff mentioned were interpersonal. They described how a positive working relationship between the program specialist and program leaders, characterized by open and frequent communication, supports the conversion process, surfacing concerns early and promoting collaborative problem-solving. Regional Office staff also explained that they benefit from the support of supervisors, peers, or other staff who have experience working with programs converting enrollment slots.

Study participants from Regional Offices also noted two barriers they face as they support grant recipients undertaking conversion. First, some Regional Office staff described how, when program leaders submit applications for conversion and other changes concurrently, they struggle to disentangle the specifics of each application. Second, we heard from some Regional Office staff that it is more time consuming to review conversion applications from programs that do not have a history of delivering Early Head Start services. These applications require more attention to the details of the planned Early Head Start delivery to ensure the services are properly budgeted and are likely to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Participant Recommendations

HS2EHS case study participants shared several recommendations for those supporting grant recipients pursuing conversion of enrollment slots and for grant recipients preparing conversion applications.

Recommendations for the Office of Head Start, Training and Technical Assistance Providers, and Others That Support Grant Recipients in Developing Conversion Applications

- Provide grant recipients with clear guidance, such as a template, about what must be included in conversion applications.

- Provide grant recipients with information and tips for undertaking conversion, such as guidance on calculating the costs of conversion and a recommended timeline for the conversion process.

- Create checklists for Regional Office staff reviewing conversion applications, such as a checklist for fiscal specialists reviewing budgets, to speed review and approval.

- Develop tools to standardize Regional Office communication about conversion.

- Ensure that grant recipients receive approval in a timely fashion with enough lead time to undertake necessary preparations to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services.

- Increase the page limit for the conversion application to reduce requests for more detail from the Regional Office.

Recommendations for Grant Recipients Developing Conversion Applications

- Include a clear articulation of the need for conversion, grounded in community needs, in the application.

- Clearly articulate plans for implementing conversion in the application.

- Use budget templates to calculate and justify costs for conversion.

- Plan to implement new or expanded Early Head Start services at least several months after receiving approval to convert enrollment slots. This allows time to prepare the physical space(s), hire and train staff, and enroll families.

Preparing to Deliver New or Expanded Early Head Start Services

Once grant recipients receive or expect to receive approval to convert slots, they must prepare to implement the proposed modifications to their programs. Preparation to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services may entail readying facilities, hiring or reassigning staff, arranging and conducting staff training, recruiting and enrolling families, purchasing curricula, and more, depending on the program's experience providing Early Head Start before conversion.

How Do Grant Recipients Plan for Early Head Start Service Implementation?

The programs in our study submitted requests for conversion between March and June 2021. Participants reported variation in the time it took to receive approval—it took one program about one month to receive approval, but for most programs approval took three to four months.[13] In the time between submitting the request and receiving approval, staff began to plan for conversion. Preparations continued after approval, particularly for resource-intensive activities like updating facilities.

Some program staff developed implementation plans, while others took a less formalized approach. In some programs, staff developed and used an implementation plan to map out how they would prepare to deliver Early Head Start once they received approval to convert slots. Participants from other programs discussed to-do lists with program leaders, but they had no formal implementation plan. For programs that already offered Early Head Start services, participants noted that opening a newly converted Early Head Start classroom was not notably different from opening any other Early Head Start classroom—staff followed the same general model for classroom setup, preparation of materials, and enrollment. Some programs planned to open the new classrooms at the start of the school year, allowing them to fold the preparations into their regular cycle of summer planning.

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[13] Note that Schilder et al. (2022) found that the average length of time from submission to approval of applications to convert enrollment slots was four months but ranged from about one day to more than a year.

A formal implementation plan is something that we—to some people's frustration, we don't have a tendency to formalize those things. We just sit down in a meeting and say, "Okay," but it's part of the bigger planning for the school year, right? We were converting this in preparation for the 2021–22 school year. Every year we are planning for the next school year and getting approval from the board and the policy council.
—Head Start program leader

Participants described three areas of focus as they prepared for conversion:

- **Planning for the physical space.** To convert classrooms from Head Start to Early Head Start, programs needed to order new infant- and toddler-appropriate furniture; most updated outdoor spaces and playgrounds to make these spaces appropriate for infants and toddlers; and most prepared indoor spaces and classrooms to meet health, safety, and licensing standards for infants and toddlers. Box 3 lists examples of some of the upgrades to facilities that study participants mentioned. All grant recipients waited until after the conversion was approved to begin renovating facilities or ordering furnishings. Staff in one program shared that this was because renovations require significant spending, and they could not spend funds until they knew the conversion would happen.

BOX 3

Examples of Renovations to Facilities That Are Required to Offer Infant and Toddler Education and Child Development Services

- adding square footage to classrooms
- adding changing tables with steps for toddlers
- moving or adding sinks
- updating flooring
- installing half-doors or widening doorframes to allow for evacuation of cribs
- rearranging walls and partitions to create separate spaces for napping and play
- constructing and renovating outdoor space
    - » purchasing age-appropriate playground equipment

- » adding square footage to outdoor playgrounds

- » adding shade structures to outdoor areas

- » resurfacing playground spaces

- » adding gates and fencing

Sources: Data from authors' interviews conducted with participants and reviews of applications in the Head Start Enterprise System.

- ▪ **Recruiting and enrolling infants and toddlers to fill the new Early Head Start slots.** Programs began advertising the new Early Head Start slots in the community and accepting applications from current families (i.e., families with a child enrolled in Head Start who were interested in services for a younger sibling) and new families. Recruitment efforts included staff sending emails to families with children in Head Start, hosting recruitment events in the community, and posting in the local newspaper. One participant noted that it was important to begin enrollment before getting formal approval to open the new classroom at the beginning of the school year. Two programs had existing waitlists for Early Head Start and thus did not need to do extensive outreach to fill the new Early Head Start slots.

- ▪ **Staffing and training for new Early Head Start classrooms.** As part of preparation for conversion, all programs began to identify staff for the new Early Head Start classrooms and plan for training of those staff. Most programs offered current staff the opportunity to switch from Head Start to Early Head Start before recruiting for external candidates if hiring was necessary. The next section describes workforce-related changes in more detail.

How Do Grant Recipients Plan for Workforce-Related Changes That Are Needed to Serve Infants, Toddlers, and Pregnant Women?

Before programs opened the new Early Head Start classrooms, staff received training specific to Early Head Start. Box 4 describes how the findings from this report compare with another analysis of staffing qualifications and competencies for programs that convert enrollment slots.

The Broader Context: Findings from Other Analyses

In a separate brief, "Qualifications and Competencies of Staff in Head Start Programs That Are Converting Enrollment Slots to Early Head Start," prepared as part of the HS2EHS project, the project team explored staff composition, qualifications, and competencies of two cohorts of grant recipients that converted slots in 2018 and in 2020, respectively. The findings echo what was reported by participants from the six programs described in this report:

- Nearly all grant recipients planned to offer postconversion roles to existing staff before hiring externally.

- However, 70 percent of grant recipients across both cohorts needed to hire externally to meet staffing needs.

About a quarter of grant recipients anticipated challenges related to staffing, such as a lack of qualified applicants and a shortage of qualified teachers in their area; the high cost of hiring; and the length time it takes to train staff who do not already have the proper early childhood qualifications and competencies.

Source: Kuhns, Schilder, and Gedo (2023).

Staffing the New Early Head Start Classrooms

Leaders in most programs offered staff the opportunity to switch from Head Start to Early Head Start before posting the new positions externally. Before the conversion was officially approved, they surveyed staff to see which teachers might be interested in moving into an Early Head Start classroom. Some programs offered incentives such as paid vacation or a one-time monetary bonus to move to the Early Head Start classrooms.

There was variability in how difficult it was to staff the new Early Head Start classrooms in participating programs. A leader from one of the programs noted they had no problem hiring two new staff members for the new Early Head Start classroom, but both new hires did not have their required Child Development Associate (CDA) credential and needed to enroll in a program immediately. Thanks to the timing of the conversion, they could enroll in this program before the Early Head Start classroom opened. Leaders in another program asked staff to volunteer to take the new Early Head Start classroom position and did not need to hire new classroom staff. Meanwhile, one program had so much difficulty hiring new staff that the new Early Head Start classrooms could not be opened because

qualified staff could not be found. Of note, at the time of data collection, more than a year after the conversion was approved, these classrooms were still closed because of staffing issues.

Training for Early Head Start

Before opening new Early Head Start classrooms, participants reported that they trained staff on Early Head Start–specific standards and procedures. All programs had new and existing staff train on Early Head Start–relevant topics ahead of the Early Head Start classroom(s) opening, though the way this was carried out varied across programs. In most cases, leaders submitted the conversion application over the summer, and staff trainings coincided with preservice programming before the start of the new school year in the fall. For programs that already provided Early Head Start, teachers in the converted classrooms followed the same training plan as would any teacher new to Early Head Start. In one program, existing staff wished to participate in more training specific to Early Head Start (as opposed to combined training for Head Start and Early Head Start) and suggested this might help staff transition from Head Start to Early Head Start roles.

Common training topics and activities for Early Head Start teachers included curriculum and assessments (e.g., Teaching Strategies GOLD®, Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale); Early Head Start documentation and screenings (e.g., health and developmental screening); CDA credentialing for staff who did not have it at the time of hiring; and observations of Early Head Start classrooms within the program or in another program. In addition, some program staff who worked outside the classroom required training to support new Early Head Start services. For example, in the program that had not previously offered Early Head Start, the cook had to be trained on how to prepare food that was appropriate for infants and toddlers.

What Facilitates Successful Planning for Conversion?

Participants shared several strategies that supported smooth preparation for conversion. They also described characteristics of their programs and contexts that facilitated their planning and preparation. Strategies and characteristics include the following:

- **Prior experience delivering Early Head Start services and converting slots.** Among participating programs, those with leaders and staff who had experience converting slots and with delivering Early Head Start services were better prepared for the process, could anticipate potential barriers, and were able to proactively address challenges. In addition, having experience

delivering Early Head Start services allowed program leaders to use existing processes for opening new classrooms, training staff, and providing Early Head Start services. In the program that did not have prior experience with Early Head Start, leaders reached out to other programs that had converted to gather ideas and understand Early Head Start service delivery.

- **Consistent and clear communication.** Clear messaging from program leaders supported successful planning, keeping program staff and governance looped into the process. Regular communication throughout the preparation process also helped leaders build buy-in from staff at different levels.

- **Using summer months to plan for required changes.** The leaders of several grant recipients used the summer to prepare to offer infant and toddler education and child development services. This included hiring and training staff for the new classroom(s). These leaders reported that summer was also a natural time to recruit families to fill the new Early Head Start slots. Even for programs that opened the new Early Head Start classrooms at different times of year, many participants reported that summer is a good time to prepare facilities and hire teaching staff.

What Barriers Do Grant Recipients Face When Preparing for Conversion?

Participants also described a few challenges related to preparation for conversion.

Staff reported difficulty recruiting and retaining qualified Early Head Start teachers. Conversions took place in the context of sectorwide staffing challenges, and leaders in many participating programs noted that hiring was more difficult for Early Head Start than for Head Start. They pointed to several differences in these programs that contributed to hiring challenges in Early Head Start:

- Early Head Start's 12-month schedule (compared with Head Start's 9 months)

- challenges finding staff with the necessary qualifications and competencies (i.e., programs struggled to find teachers with the appropriate qualifications and competencies and had to support hired staff with additional training and professional development)

- children's different developmental needs and skills (for mixed-age Early Head Start classrooms, programs often hired teachers with either infant *or* toddler experience, and for programs who moved Head Start staff into Early Head Start classrooms, training was needed on developmental expectations for infants *and* toddlers).

We had to also make sure they were willing to not only step into something new and learn it all, but they also had to work on their credentials. Because the Office of Head Start requires that an Early Head Start teacher have a CDA or an associate degree, and it's really hard to obtain anybody with that because of the cost. That was something we had to put on them—like, okay, if you're willing to accept this position, not only are you going to be teaching and learning all these new things, but you're also going to have to work on obtaining your CDA.
—Head Start manager

In two programs, participants told us that **staff perceived providing infant and toddler services as less prestigious than being a Head Start educator**. Staff at a couple programs also reported seeing a decrease in the number of qualified applicants for the advertised positions. Participants noted that candidates with the requisite skills and certifications were taking positions offering higher pay, such as jobs with local school districts or even jobs outside of education, like cashier positions.

Program staff encountered higher-than-anticipated costs and timeline delays. Staff reported that they faced higher costs for facilities' modifications and furnishings than anticipated, as well as supply chain delays affecting their ability to outfit new classrooms (see box 3 for examples). In some cases, Head Start Regional Office review of the conversion application took longer than staff anticipated, which made it difficult to plan for conversion. As noted earlier in this report, program leaders told us that they did not want to begin implementing a conversion before they were sure it would be approved by the Office of Head Start.

Developing and training staff on new procedures required time and resources. For the program that had not provided Early Head Start services before the conversion, staff developed plans and procedures from scratch, which was time consuming for management staff. Staff from this program noted that the guidelines they had to consult were numerous and dispersed, so knowing where to find information on a specific topic was challenging. Another program had not delivered Early Head Start services at the specific site where the conversion took place, so staff (including the cook and site supervisor) needed to transition to a full-year work schedule and train on Early Head Start processes. This required a mindset shift for staff, as well as additional training on infant- and toddler-specific practices, assessment tools, curriculum, and health and nutrition standards.

What Is the Regional Office's Role in Supporting Grant Recipients Preparing to Implement a Conversion?

Participants reported lower levels of communication with the Regional Office between the time they submitted the conversion application and the time it was approved, compared with other stages of the process. However, across all grant recipients, leaders reported that they had access to Regional Office staff as they prepared to implement Early Head Start services. Leaders communicated with Regional Office staff during regular monthly meetings and as needed outside of that time, via phone or email, if they had questions or concerns about implementing Early Head Start services. The Regional Office allowed all grant recipients to begin recruiting and developing a waitlist for the new Early Head Start slots while approval was pending. Having this reasonable certainty of approval and permission to move forward allowed staff to make necessary preparations for a successful launch.

The Regional Office program specialists we interviewed reported requesting training and technical assistance support for only one participating program during the preparation phase. The program specialist made this request because the program did not have prior experience implementing Early Head Start services and thus had to make many program adaptations. Box 5 lists topics covered under this training and technical assistance request.

BOX 5

Training and Technical Assistance Topics to Support Delivery of New Early Head Start Services

- developmentally appropriate expectations for infants and toddlers

- routines and social emotional support in Early Head Start

- classroom setup

- strategies for implementing mixed-age classrooms

- Quality of Care for Infants and Toddlers observational measure

- feedback on Early Head Start policies and procedures

Sources: Authors' analysis of data from interviews conducted with participants and applications in the Head Start Enterprise System.

Participant Recommendations

Participants shared recommendations for the Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and grant recipients preparing for conversion of enrollment slots.

Recommendations for the Office of Head Start, Training and Technical Assistance Providers, and Others That Support Grant Recipients in Preparing to Convert Enrollment Slots

- Provide grant recipients with guidance and supports so all program staff know what to expect after requests to convert enrollment slots have been approved.

- Provide grant recipients with detailed guidance about activities that can occur while the program is awaiting approval and activities that require prior approval.

- Provide grant recipients with sample timelines that describe the amount of time specific planning activities can take.

- Develop and disseminate checklists and materials for programs to clearly see differences in each Head Start Program Performance Standard for Early Head Start compared with Head Start.[14]

- Share lists of resources and technical assistance that are available to grant recipients to plan to meet each of the Head Start Program Performance Standards that are pertinent to Early Head Start.

Recommendations for Grant Recipients Preparing to Convert Enrollment Slots

- Reach out to Regional Office staff early and often to seek support and guidance about resources that could be available to programs preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services through conversion.

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[14] The Office of Head Start currently offers the following resource for programs, which highlights how the Head Start Program Performance Standards address services specifically for infants and toddlers: "Head Start Program Performance Standards Excerpts, Subchapter B – The Administration for Children And Families, Head Start Programs, Infants and Toddlers and Early Head Start, 45 CFR Chapter XIII (Dec. 22, 2016), https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ehs-infant-toddler-hspps-chart.pdf.

- Develop detailed timelines with activities needed to meet each of the relevant Head Start Program Performance Standards.

- Account for possible delays in facility renovation and construction and anticipate possible cost overruns.

- Proactively reach out to all local government entities that need to approve any renovations before facilities can be operational. In some communities, contacting the child care licensing office is necessary, and in other communities checking with zoning and the fire marshal may be important. Learning about the requirements before finalizing construction can save costs and time.

- Engage vendors to order curriculum materials and supplies early to account for potential delays so Early Head Start services can be provided as soon as facilities are available.

- Plan to provide professional development supports to any existing staff who are new to Early Head Start so all have the required qualifications and competencies before working in Early Head Start classrooms.

- If it is necessary to hire new staff to deliver Early Head Start services, begin recruitment early in the preparation phase.

Implementation of New or Expanded Early Head Start Services Following Conversion

At the time of the interviews, study participants from all six participating programs reported that their program had successfully implemented high-quality Early Head Start. Grant recipients that previously offered Early Head Start said they believed prior experience made it easier to implement Early Head Start as planned for the focal conversion. Participants from a few programs reported some delays opening classrooms or opening fewer classrooms than anticipated, but all eventually offered infant and toddler services. Study participants reported specific factors that facilitated implementation of high-quality Early Head Start services and described some barriers. Study participants from a few programs reported facilitators and barriers specific to their program that they believed would be transferrable to other programs. As noted elsewhere in this report, many programs experienced a unique set of challenges related to the COVID-19 pandemic.

To What Extent Are Grant Recipients Successfully Implementing High-Quality Early Head Start Services following Conversion?

Across sites, study participants told us they were successfully implementing high-quality Early Head Start services because their programs offered Early Head Start slots that met community need. Study participants also reported or implied that the services met Head Start Program Performance Standards.[15]

Program leaders and staff reported that providing Early Head Start services addressed a community need for high-quality infant and toddler services. However, across programs, those interviewed said that the need for more infant and toddler slots persisted, with many reporting a very high need. For example, study participants from one grant recipient reported that converting new slots

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[15] "Head Start Program Performance Standards," Office of Head Start, ECLKC, accessed November 30, 2023, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii.

helped address need but that the program had a waiting list of more than 200 families for Early Head Start, even after the conversion.

Participants from many programs told us about specific ways teachers and other staff provided infant and toddler screenings and assessments, engaged families in Early Head Start, and met standards for health and nutrition services. Here are examples illustrating these Early Head Start practices that differ from Head Start practices:

- **Required screenings and assessments for infants and toddlers differ from the screenings and assessments for preschoolers.** Program leaders and staff told us they were able to provide high-quality screening on schedule because they were given training and had adequate time to conduct the screenings.[16] Participants from one site told us the program had purchased technology (including tablets with the screening tools preloaded) and provided support and training on using the tablets so teachers had an easier time completing all of the required infant and toddler screenings.

- **Nutrition and health practices must be tailored to children's age and developmental needs.** We heard from some health and nutrition staff and educators about specific ways their program was tailoring nutrition and health practices to meet the needs of infants and toddlers. Several told us that teachers must learn about bottle feeding and the nutrition needs of children growing from early infancy through age 2. A health manager told us she had to work with educators who had been preschool teachers to support "on demand" access to food for infants. She noted offering food "on demand" is important for infants and toddlers and is a requirement of Early Head Start.[17] She contrasted this with scheduled snacks and meals provided in Head Start classrooms. Many noted that the classrooms were set up to support staff in following sanitary diapering practices and to support toilet learning for toddlers when they are developmentally ready.[18] Across several

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[16] "Developmental Screening for Children Ages Birth to 5," Office of Head Start ECLKC, accessed January 23, 2024. https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/child-screening-assessment/article/developmental-screening-children-ages-birth-5.

[17] "1302.44 Child nutrition," Office of Head Start ECLKC, accessed November 30, 2023, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-44-child-nutrition.

[18] None of the staff or educators explicitly cited the Head Start Program Performance Standards, but several told us about specific practices that are consistent with standards. For more details on suggested practices, see "Diapering and Toileting," Head Start ECLKC, last updated October 30, 2023, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/health-manager-orientation-guide/diapering-toileting.

programs, staff reported that the classrooms had been renovated to include changing tables with steps so toddlers could climb to the table instead of being lifted.

▪ **Family engagement activities with families of infants and toddlers differ from family engagement for preschool-age children**. Program staff told us they tailor family engagement to meet the needs of families with infants and toddlers. For example, programs are required to have staff who communicate with families about their children's health and support access to well-child visits. For family engagement staff working with families enrolled in Early Head Start, this means supporting recommended, more frequent well-child visits for infants and toddlers than for preschool-age children.

▪ **Curricula and assessments must be developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers.** Administrators and educators reported using assessments to tailor curricula such as Teaching Strategies GOLD® to inform implementation of The Creative Curriculum© for Infants, Toddlers, and Twos. Early Head Start educators are also using other curricula specifically designed for infants and toddlers, including Frog Street Curriculum® for Infants and Toddlers and High Scope® Infant-Toddler Curriculum. Leaders from one program that offers services to pregnant women reported that the program uses the March of Dimes® Becoming a Mom Program® and Partners for a Healthy Baby© materials to guide this work but noted that the converted slots for the focal conversion were not for pregnant women.

Across most sites, administrators and educators provided specific examples of learning about and using evidence-based infant and toddler curricula. Often, educators mentioned the curriculum to us when we asked them to describe the classroom routines. One lead Early Head Start teacher of a two-year-old classroom told us she uses an evidence-based curriculum and gave us an example of her teaching practice:

We observe and see what they're interested in. Then based on their interest, then we plan the activities. It's hands-on. For example…I will model, and then they have the freedom to choose how to use the materials…It's the process, not the product that counts with us. We just present the materials. For example, we're going to be fingerpainting. They decide if they're going to do fingerpainting or use their whole hands or if they're going to go use the brush instead. It's their choice.

▪ **There are specific, developmentally appropriate ways that educators interact with infants and toddlers.** In one program, an educator described a typical day in the Early Head Start classroom by noting that they would spend time on the floor interacting with infants and toddlers. Some noted the importance of talking continually throughout the day, noting it is very different from working with older children who have verbal skills and are more likely to engage in a conversation or speak with one another.

Definitely, the most important work that we did every day was talking to the kids and encouraging social-emotional skills. We were constantly, constantly, constantly talking, which can feel really weird, especially at the beginning, because they cannot really have that conversation back with you. You and I are—I'll say something, and you'll say something. Well, they just look at you, especially the one-year-olds. It's constantly just talking the whole time and giving them that language exposure all day long and then talking through big feelings when they have a meltdown or things like that.
—Early Head Start teacher

- **Early Head Start is valuable in supporting the development of the youngest children.** Several administrators and educators noted that after providing high-quality Early Head Start they observed a shift in teachers' and the community members' understanding of the value of supporting infant and toddler development. In two programs, educators with infant and toddler credentials reported that, before working in Early Head Start, they thought working with younger children would be less rewarding; they volunteered to move to Early Head Start because they believed their program was ultimately moving toward primarily delivering Early Head Start. These two educators said they were surprised at the growth and development they saw. One commented that she observed rapid gains in children's social-emotional regulation and verbal skills, which she found to be rewarding.

Program administrators also reported growth among some of the Early Head Start lead teachers. For example, one program leader reflected on home visitors who had taken on lead teaching roles in an Early Head Start classroom:

> We've had a couple of home educators who've transitioned into working in the EHS classroom...I can tell you that now—what we've seen is this particular teacher [who had worked in a home-based position and wanted to become a center teacher] has grown tremendously in their ability to lead in a classroom, and talking to parents, and focusing on the children, and their development, and their individualizing for them, and helping to have a comfortable and fluid classroom environment while implementing the curriculum. So much so that they've been looked at, and sort of a model classroom in the sense of some of the strategies they're using....That was something that really made me proud to see a teacher sort of emerging from one position to the next, and something so different, so vastly different.

What Are the Characteristics of Grant Recipients That Successfully Implement High-Quality Early Head Start Services following Conversion of Enrollment Slots?

Across the six sites, no specific grant recipient characteristics emerged as being especially salient in programs' success implementing high-quality Early Head Start. The six programs that participated in the case studies varied in terms of region, size of enrollment, previous experiences offering Early Head Start, and previous experience with conversion. Despite the variation, all six programs reported some success implementing high-quality Early Head Start following approval to convert. Although implementation of Early Head Start varied across the six programs, a few characteristics appear related to successful implementation when comparing the programs:

- **Previous experiences converting enrollment slots and offering Early Head Start** were noted as valuable by many study participants. That is, leaders and staff who had multiple experiences converting or a history of offering Early Head Start reported they had learned from these experiences. Still, leaders from the one site that had not previously offered Early Head Start reported that lack of previous experience was not a barrier to successful implementation of high-quality Early Head Start.

- Leaders from one large grant recipient said they believed that the **program's size and associated large budget gave them flexibility that facilitated implementation of high-quality Early Head Start**. For example, the program used grant funds that had been unspent because the program experienced lower Head Start enrollment than anticipated to pay for renovations for a new classroom. These study participants reported that the program was able to reallocate funds that had been budgeted for salaries of a teacher and assistant teacher and use these funds to improve the facility. They speculated that smaller programs might have more difficulty managing costs of renovations. Participants from this program also reported that the program's size and high number of educators made it easy to find teachers who were interested in shifting from Head Start to Early Head Start. Nonetheless, participants from other programs in the study did not report that small size was a barrier to successful implementation of high-quality Early Head Start.

What Facilitates Successful Implementation of Early Head Start Services following Conversion of Slots?

Across programs, study participants reported that existing systems and procedures, along with high demand for infant and toddler services, facilitated successful implementation of high-quality Early Head Start services. Other factors that facilitated successful implementation included strong working relationships among administrators, site leaders, and educators; prior experience delivering infant and toddler services, associated knowledge of the relevant performance standards, and awareness of developmentally appropriate practice; and, in some instances, organizational capacity. Participants told us the following factors facilitated successful implementation of high-quality Early Head Start following conversion:

- **Relying on existing systems and procedures.** Study participants told us they relied on existing systems and procedures but refined some after converting slots. Leaders from programs that had previously offered Early Head Start shared that they did not need to initiate new trainings, partnerships, practices, or programming to support the focal conversion. For example, several site leaders reported that existing human resource policies made it relatively easy to reassign existing educators to new Early Head Start teaching positions and to make sure educators had required credentials. Similarly, leaders from programs with existing community partners that offer services for pregnant women, early intervention, and other required Early Head Start services told us they relied on existing partnerships to support the new slots.

- **Creating some new policies and procedures and refining existing ones.** Administrators from the site that had not previously offered Early Head Start described establishing some new policies and procedures. Other leaders from this program reflected on the experience offering Early Head Start for the first time, also noting the importance of these new procedures. Specific procedures that participants told us facilitated success included changes in the following:

  » **Human resources policies and procedures.** This included updating systems to reflect the Early Head Start full-year work schedules compared with part-year schedules for Head Start teachers. Another change was updating job descriptions to reflect Early Head Start to include requirements such as diapering policies and classroom setup expectations.

  » **Procedures for tracking well-child visits to meet the requirements for physicals and vaccinations that are required more frequently for infants and toddlers than for preschool-age children.** For example, an administrator at one site told us the program had

invested in computers and tablets to make it easier for educators to conduct required screenings, track well-child visits, and report the data in a timely way.

» **Procedures related to facilities and working with all decisionmakers whose buy-in is needed for renovations.** Leaders at one site that had many years of experience converting enrollment slots told us that, over time, they updated procedures to support the preparation of facilities for Early Head Start classrooms specifically. At this program, the schedule for opening the new classrooms accounted for possible delays in renovating facilities and obtaining equipment. A program leader told us she learned from prior experience renovating facilities that construction projects are typically more costly and take longer than anticipated. Similarly, she told us the program engages with the licensing department, fire department, and key local decisionmakers responsible for facilities up front, as she had learned that failure to engage all of these parties earlier can cause major delays in implementing high-quality Early Head Start. Specifically, she reflected that, previously, the program remodeled a classroom in a building only to learn later that the entire building needed to be renovated because of the fire code. She noted that the program now has clear policies and checklists to account for all key decisions to prevent such problems.

» **Transition policies and procedures.** Administrators and educators from one site reported the need to update and be attentive to transition policies and procedures for classrooms with only two-year-olds. This program offered both mixed-age Early Head Start classrooms and classrooms for two-year-olds. Administrators and educators from one program told us they have procedures in place to support transition planning that needs to occur within six months of beginning to offer Early Head Start in two-year-old classrooms.

▪ **High demand for high-quality infant and toddler services made it easier to recruit for and fill slots.** As noted in other sections, leaders reported that the high demand for infant and toddler education and child development services made it easy to enroll families in Early Head Start.

▪ **Good working relationships among staff at the program.** In half of the programs, study participants reported that established, positive relationships among staff and leaders resulted in site directors and teachers feeling supported in the implementation of Early Head Start services. Staff told us these strong relationships led to regular communication between administrators and educators, resulting in feedback that improved practice.

- **Stable leadership.** Many study participants reported that low turnover among directors, site directors, family services coordinators, disability coordinators, and the like was important to be able to offer high-quality Early Head Start.

What Are the Barriers to Implementation of Early Head Start Services following Conversion of Slots?

Nearly all programs faced challenges in two areas: facilities and staffing. Aspects of these challenges reflected long-standing issues in the child care and early education field; however, staff from several sites noted that the barriers they encountered to implementing Early Head Start were specific to the time frame. Staff in some programs reported challenges related to a lack of knowledge about developmentally appropriate practice with very young children, but participants from other grant recipients reported strengths in this area.

- **Facilities' issues created challenges for many programs.** As noted in the previous section, across several programs, supply chain issues delayed the arrival of necessary supplies for new Early Head Start classrooms. Although this may have been specific to the time in which focal conversions were carried out (2021, after the start of the COVID-19 pandemic when supply chain issues were well documented),[19] staff from one program with extensive experience converting enrollment slots reported that they had experienced shipping delays before the pandemic and took this into account when developing their implementation timelines.

   Administrators from several sites reported that some renovations were more extensive, took longer, and cost more than anticipated. Further, staff in several programs reported delays opening Early Head Start classrooms because of the time needed to get required inspections from licensing officials and zoning inspectors.

- **Staffing challenges created delays providing high-quality Early Head Start for multiple programs.**

   » **The need to hire qualified staff created challenges for many programs.** Half of the programs experienced challenges hiring qualified staff and difficulties providing necessary professional development and credentialing for Early Head Start educators. Lacking coaching and teaching supports specific to working with infants and toddlers, some

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[19] Anusha Siripurapu, "What Happened to Supply Chains in 2021?" Council on Foreign Relations, December 13, 2021, https://www.cfr.org/article/what-happened-supply-chains-2021.

educators who did not have experience with children in this age group felt that they could have been better prepared.

» **The need to understand what is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers.** Although the study team was not able to formally assess the appropriateness of teaching practices in newly converted Early Head Start classrooms, several educators described typical scenarios that reflected practices that were not appropriate for younger children. Some said they asked children to wash hands independently, mentioned being initially surprised that the children cried so much, and reported that their classroom practices were mostly the same as those they used with preschool-age children. We asked these educators to elaborate on their differences educating infants and toddlers versus preschool-age children. Some told us they had infant and toddler credentials but were still surprised at the differences in development between the children in the Early Head Start classrooms and Head Start classrooms. Several said they had anticipated less work in Early Head Start and were surprised about the physically demanding aspect of supporting infant and toddler development. Two teachers also told us they were surprised by the administrative work reporting on infant and toddler growth and development and the time they needed to devote to screening.

I don't know if people didn't realize that they'd have to be on the ground with kids and up and down and moving around. One- to three-year-olds do not just stay stagnant. They are constantly moving around.
—family advocate

» **Retaining Early Head Start educators.** Administrators and educators from several programs that hired new teachers told us the program had no problem hiring teachers or coteachers but struggled to retain staff. For example, one educator told us the program hired six staff and substitute teachers over a period of about six months, but each only stayed for a short time. This educator and others we interviewed attributed the turnover to expectations that educating infants and toddlers would be the same as educating preschool-age children.

» **Addressing differences in knowledge of and time for screenings and assessments.** Leaders and educators from a few sites reported that Early Head Start teachers needed more time to learn the new screenings and assessments and to conduct required infant and toddler screenings and assessments. Several leaders told us they needed to devote time and resources to train Early Head start teachers so they would know how to complete required infant and toddler screenings. Study participants also told us infant and toddler screenings and assessments need to occur more frequently than screenings for older children and are more time-consuming than those required of Head Start children.

What Technical Assistance, Resources, or Other Supports Are Available and Useful to Grant Recipients Implementing New or Expanded Early Head Start Services?

Most grant recipients did not access technical assistance to support implementation of high-quality Early Head Start, but a few programs did. A few programs relied on advice from Regional Office staff to support implementation. For example, administrators from a few sites reported that, because they had strong working relationships with their program specialists, they would ask clarifying questions to resolve any challenges specific to Early Head Start implementation with the focal conversion.

Leaders from a few programs reported accessing formal technical assistance to support implementation of high-quality Early Head Start. The director of the program that was newly operating Early Head Start services requested and received technical assistance soon after the conversion application was approved. The technical assistance was designed to support staff and educators in understanding regulations and classroom setup. This director also reported that the education coordinator used resources posted to the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center website, like Teacher Time,[20] and curricula such as The Creative Curriculum© for Infants, Toddlers, and Twos and Teaching Strategies GOLD® to train educators on developmentally appropriate expectations for infants and toddlers; classroom and behavior management; and strategies for managing mixed-age classrooms.

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[20] "Teacher Time Series," Head Start ECLKC, last updated February 27, 2023, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/teacher-time-series/teacher-time-series.

Finally, study participants from one site reported using coaching provided by educators at a "lab school." This program had multiple sites and relied on experienced Early Head Start teachers who would model best practices and offer coaching to new Early Head Start teachers at the newly opened classroom. Administrators and educators reported that this practice was beneficial.

Participant Recommendations

Participants shared recommendations for the Office of Head Start and other grant recipients to successfully implement high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion of enrollment slots. They gave several recommendations to the Office of Head Start, training and technical assistance providers, and grant recipients that were consistent with other phases of conversion. These include providing guidance about the schedule of planning and implementing services and considering the amount of time it would take to prepare and implement services. Recommendations specific to providing high-quality Early Head Start services are presented below.

Recommendations for the Office of Head Start, Training and Technical Assistance Providers, and Others That Support Grant Recipients Implementing High-Quality Early Head Start following Conversion

- Provide tailored technical assistance, supports, and coaching to programs and staff new to Early Head Start about what is developmentally appropriate for infants and toddlers and how this differs from what is developmentally appropriate for three-year-olds. Several study participants noted that, once educators began working with infants and toddlers, program administrators and the educators themselves recognized a need for onsite coaching and support.

- Develop and disseminate a conversion toolkit that is tailored to programs that have never converted enrollment slots, those that have had some experience, and those that have converted slots multiple times. The toolkit should describe barriers to successful implementation of Early Head Start and promising approaches.

- Disseminate materials and resources to grant recipients to support Early Head Start educators in providing high-quality, developmentally appropriate practices.

Recommendations for Grant Recipients to Implement High-Quality Early Head Start following Conversion

- Access training and technical assistance to support implementation of Early Head Start; useful topics include appropriate staff-child interactions in infant and toddler classrooms, curriculum requirements, and assessments. For certain programs, other topics may also be relevant, such as managing mixed-age Early Head Start classrooms.

- Consider investing in technology to support screening and reporting to reduce the amount of time Early Head Start staff spend on paperwork.

- For those new to offering Early Head Start: consider providing opportunities for site leaders and teaching staff to observe other Early Head Start classrooms and take steps to have the management team on site when new or expanded Early Head Start services launch to support new Early Head Start educators and other staff.

Conclusion: Contextualizing Study Findings and Identifying Opportunities for Policy, Practice, and Future Research

Existing research provides context for some of the findings from this case study research. Additionally, several unanswered questions remain about each stage of the conversion process that future research could address.

Motivations to Convert Enrollment Slots

Existing published research suggests that the motivations cited by the participating programs also drove other grant recipients to convert enrollment slots. A study from 2016 showed that an increase in publicly funded preschool was associated with underenrollment for some Head Start programs (Derrick-Mills et al. 2016). Moreover, a recently published brief by Lou, Berger, and Schilder (2023a) showed that Head Start grant recipients that converted enrollment slots between 2020 and 2022 cited a lack of infant and toddler education and child development services and an adequate supply of preschool as primary motivation. That brief showed that nearly all grant recipients (98 percent) cited data about early care and education demand, and most (89 percent) cited data about early care and education use and supply.

Several unanswered questions remain about what motivates programs to convert enrollment slots. First, questions exist about whether the motivations cited by grant recipients that converted enrollment slots in 2021 are the same reasons that motivate grant recipients currently seeking to convert enrollment slots. The study team heard that the year following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic was unique, as many programs had closed in 2020 and some were experiencing ongoing programmatic challenges in 2021. Future research is needed to determine if the motivations cited by study participants in 2021 persist. Second, questions exist about whether motivations to convert enrollment slots vary by Head Start program characteristics, state contexts (such as policies related to public preschool expansion), or other factors. Additional research is needed to better understand whether the motivations cited have persisted over time or changed.

Applying to Convert Enrollment Slots

Participants in the site visits told us the steps they followed in applying to convert enrollment slots are consistent with federal guidance.[21] In 2022, the Office of Head Start posted new guidance for programs seeking to convert enrollment slots that outlines questions and data to consider that are consistent with the steps in the application process noted by site visit participants. Few programs in this study reported using training and technical assistance to prepare conversion applications. Policymakers and program administrators could explore ways of providing information and including training and technical assistance to Head Start grant recipients developing conversion applications. Future research could explore what types of information are most useful to grant recipients seeking to convert enrollment slots and what communication strategies are most effective in meeting programs' needs when creating conversion applications.

Facilitators and Barriers to Conversion

The facilitators and barriers to successful conversion of enrollment slots that we identified are mostly consistent with those described in existing research on implementing Early Head Start–Child Care partnerships and Head Start partnerships (Levere et al. 2019; Schilder 2014; Schilder et al. 2009; Schilder et al. 2011; Schilder, Curenton, and Broadstone 2019). Participants in this study reported that Head Start Program Performance Standards are facilitators to successful conversion, consistent with partnership research. The site visit findings also found facilitators and barriers that were unique to conversion. Specifically, renovating facilities to meet performance standards and experiences hiring, recruiting, and providing professional development to the Early Head Start workforce are unique to programs converting enrollment slots.

Information in this report can inform supports or preparation for converting enrollment slots. Specifically, programs that plan to renovate facilities could benefit from the finding that the time and cost of renovations exceeds expectations. Programs could create plans and schedules to account for this.

Recent research by Kuhns, Schilder, and Gedo (2023) reveals that for grant recipients that converted enrollment slots in 2020 and 2021 workforce challenges were consistent with those reported by case study participants. They also saw greater turnover among grant recipients that did not

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[21] "Enrollment Reduction and Conversion Considerations," Office of Head Start, ECLKC, last updated November 7, 2022, https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/program-planning/article/enrollment-reduction-conversion-considerations.

convert enrollment slots. Thus, case study participants' reports of hiring and recruitment challenges appear to be issues broadly affecting Head Start programs rather than specific to programs seeking to convert enrollment slots.

Future research from a large sample of Early Head Start programs could address the existing gap in our knowledge about strategies programs use to recruit, hire, and provide professional development to early educators. Moreover, additional research could be useful in identifying whether the facility challenges reported by site visit participants are experienced by other programs converting enrollment slots or are unique to the programs that participated in the site visits.

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