



Developing an Application to Convert Head Start Enrollment Slots to Early Head Start

Findings from the HS2EHS Case Studies

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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—delivered in accordance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. Once programs decide to convert enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start, leaders and staff must submit an application to the Office of Head Start (OHS) to request approval. We asked grant recipients' leaders and staff what resources or supports they used while developing the application and asked OHS Regional Office staff to describe how they work with grant recipients to prepare applications and how they review those applications once submitted. We also asked grant recipients' leaders and staff what was helpful during the application process and what challenges they encountered.

This brief presents select findings from the *Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS) Case Studies*,¹ six case studies of grant recipients that converted enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start in 2021. In this brief, we focus on *developing the application to convert enrollment slots* (figure 1).² The full report (Stepleton et al. 2024) includes findings pertaining to the entire conversion process from start to finish. Specifically, this brief highlights findings related to the following research questions:

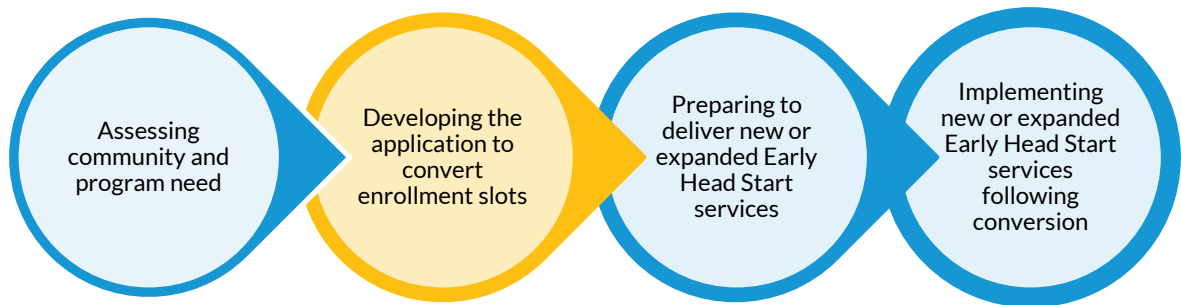
- How do grant recipients prepare requests for conversion?
- What technical assistance, resources, or other supports are available and useful for grant recipients?
- What facilitates OHS Regional Office review and approval of requests for conversion?
- What data do grant recipients leverage when preparing a request for conversion?
- What facilitates successful preparation of a conversion application?
- What are the barriers to preparing a conversion application?

¹ Kate Stepleton, Diane Schilder, Carly Morrison, Catherine Kuhns, Irma Castañeda, Jonah Norwitt, Olivia Mirek, Anna Fleming, *Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS) Case Studies* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/conversion-enrollment-slots-head-start-early-head-start-hs2ehs-case-studies>.

² This brief is one of four describing findings from the HS2EHS case studies pertaining to a particular phase of conversion of enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start. The other three briefs are (1) Carly Morrison, Diane Schilder, Kate Stepleton, Catherine Kuhns, Irma Castañeda, Jonah Norwitt, Olivia Mirek, and Anna Fleming, “Assessing the Need to Convert Head Start Enrollment Slots to Early Head Start,” OPRE Report #2024-308 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024); (2) Diane Schilder, Catherine Kuhns, Kate Stepleton, and Carly Morrison, “Implementing New or Expanded Early Head Start Services after a Conversion,” OPRE Report #2024-310 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024); and (3) Catherine Kuhns, Diane Schilder, Kate Stepleton, and Carly Morrison, “Preparing to Deliver New or Expanded Early Head Start Services after a Conversion,” OPRE Report #2024-311 (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024). Along with the full report, these briefs can be found at “Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS),” US Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation, accessed June 4, 2024, <https://www.acf.hhs.gov/opre/project/conversion-enrollment-slots-head-start-early-head-start>.

FIGURE 1

Four Phases of Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start



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Source: Authors' framework for analysis of case study data.

BOX 1

Case Study Methodology

To answer the above research questions, we conducted case studies of six Head Start programs that converted enrollment slots from Head Start to Early Head Start. 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).

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; OHS Regional Office staff; training and technical assistance providers; and experts who could provide information on the local early care and education context.^a

^a For a detailed description of the HS2EHS case studies' methodology, refer to the appendix of the full report: Kate Stepleton, Diane Schilder, Carly Morrison, Catherine Kuhns, Irma Castañeda, Jonah Norwitt, Olivia Mirek, Anna Fleming, *Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS) Case Studies* (Washington, DC: Urban Institute, 2024), <https://www.urban.org/research/publication/conversion-enrollment-slots-head-start-early-head-start-hs2ehs-case-studies>.

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 member embedded in the leadership team. For example, a single staff member 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 member 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 began the process of assembling their conversion application by reviewing materials they had previously submitted to OHS, 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. 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.³

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.

³ Office of Head Start staff interviewed by the study team did not recommend a specific formula for determining how many slots to convert. But they did note 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.

What Technical Assistance, Resources, or Other Supports Are Available and Useful for Grant Recipients? What Facilitates OHS Regional Office Review and Approval of Requests for Conversion?

To describe the factors that lead to preparation of applications that OHS approves, we asked study participants about the types of supports grant recipients use to strengthen their applications and the factors that ease or complicate OHS Regional Office review.

Technical Assistance, Resources, and Other Supports

Conversation and collaboration with OHS Regional Office staff was the most common support. Staff reported that they accessed support in the form of discussions with OHS Regional Office staff. During these conversations, grant recipient staff inquired about the type of information and the level of detail that OHS wanted to see in conversion applications.

Staff also used resources from the Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), training and technical assistance (T/TA) from Regional T/TA providers, and guidance from OHS. Staff described consulting resources on the ECLKC website to help them build out their applications and shape their approaches. For example, one participant consulted a classroom design guide posted to ECLKC.⁴ Other forms of support or assistance that participants mentioned included getting individualized T/TA from Regional T/TA providers and reviewing OHS's guidance for preparing change-in-scope applications, as many conversion applications are submitted via a change-in-scope grant amendment.⁵

Grant recipients 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.

⁴ "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>.

⁵ 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.

Facilitators and Barriers of OHS Regional Office Review and Approval of Requests for Conversion

Each of the OHS Regional Offices receive conversion applications every year.⁶ During our interviews with OHS Regional Office staff, we asked them to describe what factors facilitate or impede their review and approval of conversion requests.

FACILITATORS

Some participants from OHS Regional Offices indicated that their review was smoother when a program's application was "complete" at the time of its initial submission. However, several participants from Head Start programs told us that more detailed and comprehensive guidance about what to include in their conversion applications would be beneficial. . Several study participants from Head Start programs 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 them from including all the necessary information in the initial submission.

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

BARRIERS

Study participants noted that reviewing multiple applications from the same program simultaneously could be challenging. Some OHS Regional Office staff described how, when program leaders submitted applications for conversion and other changes concurrently, they struggled to disentangle the specifics of each application.

Some OHS Regional Office staff shared that it is more time-consuming to review conversion applications from programs that do not have a history of delivering Early Head Start services.⁷ These applications required more attention to the details of the planned Early Head Start delivery to ensure the services were properly budgeted and were likely to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards.⁸

⁶ 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).

⁷ One of the six programs participating in the case studies did not have experience delivering Early Head Start before the focal conversion. We asked OHS Regional Office staff to discuss their experience with the case studies' focal conversions and to reflect on their overall experience with conversions.

⁸ "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>.

What Data Do Grant Recipients Use to Prepare 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 they include in applications to make the case for conversion to the Office of Head Start. A separate brief (Morrison et al. 2024) in this series describes the former, drawing on interviews with program staff. This section of the current brief describes the latter and is grounded in our analysis of the conversion applications of programs participating in the case studies.

Types of Data

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. 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 cited as well. 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 2023).

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

Most programs participating in case studies noted including 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. Research from Lou, Berger, and Schilder (2023) similarly demonstrated that about half of conversion applications explicitly referenced data from the Census Bureau, which includes the American Community Survey. 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 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 2023). 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 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 developing the application for the focal conversion.

A common theme was that leaders played a central role in facilitating application preparation. 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.

Previous experience converting enrollment slots and offering Early Head Start made it easier for staff to prepare a conversion application. Three programs participating in the HS2EHS case studies had previously converted enrollment slots, and five 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 applications. 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.

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

For programs that needed support, staff reported that accessing resources and T/TA and communicating with the OHS Regional Office as needed facilitated the development of a successful conversion application. The most common support was ongoing communication with OHS Regional Office staff and program staff during the application process. In addition, some staff accessed resources from ECLKC or Regional T/TA providers.

Recommendations for Grant Recipients Developing Conversion Applications

HS2EHS case study participants shared several recommendations for grant recipients preparing conversion applications:

- Clearly articulate the need for conversion, grounded in community needs with detailed community-level data.
- Clearly articulate plans for implementing conversion.
- Use budget templates to calculate and justify costs for conversion.
- Plan the application development and submission such that there will be at least several months following approval to prepare to implement new or expanded Early Head Start services. This allows time to prepare the physical space(s), hire and train staff, and enroll families.

What Are the Barriers to Preparing a Conversion Application?

Although each participating program 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 OHS Regional Office about expectations for the application. Even though program staff relied on the OHS Regional Office for support, as described above, staff in three programs told us limited information was available 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 different OHS Regional Office staff requested varying levels of detail in conversion applications. Operating with minimal instruction, some participants reported that they received multiple requests for application revisions.⁹

⁹ OHS 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.

Submitting multiple applications at the same time complicated the process. 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 and created challenges both for program staff preparing the conversion applications and for the OHS staff who reviewed them.

Recommendations for OHS, T/TA Providers, and Others That Support Grant Recipients in Developing Conversion Applications

HS2EHS case study participants shared several recommendations for those supporting grant recipients pursuing conversion of enrollment slots:

- 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 OHS Regional Office staff reviewing conversion applications, such as a checklist for fiscal specialists reviewing budgets, to speed review and approval.
- Develop tools to standardize OHS Regional Office communication about conversion.
- Take steps so 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 OHS Regional Office.

Conclusion

Findings from the case studies illuminate how Head Start grant recipients compile the necessary information and prepare their application to convert enrollment slots. Among grant recipients participating in this study, it was commonly a single staff person embedded in the leadership team who drove the application development. Others provided information upon request or drafted sections.

Grant recipient leaders determined how many Head Start slots to eliminate and how many Early Head Start slots to create. They considered current Head Start enrollment, assessed community need for infant and toddler care and services, and examined their budgets, calculating revenues and expenditures for the Head Start slots they planned to convert. For grant recipients that had already offered Early Head Start services, staff reported being able to easily estimate costs for establishing new Early Head Start classrooms. In some cases, they sought information on Early Head Start costs from other programs or resources from the ECLKC. All participating programs accessed some assistance preparing their applications, most commonly from OHS Regional Office staff.

When presenting data to justify the need for conversion of enrollment slots, all participating grant recipients' applications drew on data included in their community assessment, along with data from other sources. Our team identified three types of data in these grant recipients' conversion applications: federal, state, and local government data or other secondary data (e.g., US Census data, data from the local Child Care Resource and Referral agency); internal data (e.g., enrollment and waitlist numbers); and perspectives and opinions. This finding is consistent with findings from Lou and colleagues (2023) based on an analysis of 202 conversion applications submitted from 2020 through 2022. The authors found that most conversion applications included government data, 70 percent presented program data, and 33 percent described the perspectives and opinions of grant recipient leaders and staff.

When asked what facilitates a successful conversion application, case study participants from Head Start programs emphasized that communication and support from program leaders supported those preparing the applications in getting what they needed. Staff from two programs noted that their leaders also initiated conversion considerations well in advance of when new Early Head Start services would be offered, creating time for planning, drafting, and revising the application. In programs that had undergone at least one prior conversion, staff we spoke to also shared that it was helpful to have that experience to draw on when preparing future applications. Several interview participants also shared that they found a dearth of guidance from OHS and its Regional Offices about what was required in an application. Those that paired a conversion request with an enrollment reduction of a program grant renewal application also indicated that this added a layer of complication.

We also spoke with staff in the OHS Regional Offices about programs' conversion applications. Typically, program leaders told us they inform their program specialists when they are considering conversion. However, we also found that, in some cases, program specialists introduced the idea. We also heard about variation in the extent to which OHS Regional Office staff and grant recipient staff worked together during the development of the conversion application.

Once submitted, a conversion application is reviewed and, after any revisions requested by the OHS Regional Office are made, it is approved either by the OHS Regional Office or, in some cases, OHS's Central Office. OHS Regional Office staff shared two factors that facilitate their review of a conversion application: (1) receiving a "complete" application and (2) establishing a positive working relationship between OHS Regional Office and grant recipient staff. Conversely, OHS Regional Office staff reported their reviews are more challenging when grant recipients bundle applications for conversion with other requests for enrollment changes. Similarly, they noted that applications from grant recipients that had not previously delivered Early Head Start took longer to review, with greater attention needed to check that the planned services were budgeted appropriately and would position programs to meet the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

The case study participants recommended several ways OHS could support programs developing applications to convert enrollment slots; for example, by providing grant recipients with clear guidance, such as a template, about what must be included in conversion applications. Since we concluded data collection, OHS has begun to act on some of these recommendations. Future research is needed to determine if newly offered supports address some of the challenges Head Start programs experience

when preparing applications. Finally, additional research from a larger sample of programs could document whether the challenges and promising approaches in developing conversion applications reported by case study 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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