



# Implementing New or Expanded Early Head Start Services after Converting Slots

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 grant recipients receive approval to convert slots, they must implement new or expanded Early Head Start service delivery.

This brief presents select findings from the *Conversion of Enrollment Slots from Head Start to Early Head Start (HS2EHS) Case Studies*,<sup>1</sup> six case studies of grant recipients that converted enrollment slots

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<sup>1</sup> 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>.

from Head Start to Early Head Start in 2021. In this brief, we focus on *implementing new or expanded Early Head Start services following conversion* (figure 1).<sup>2</sup> 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:

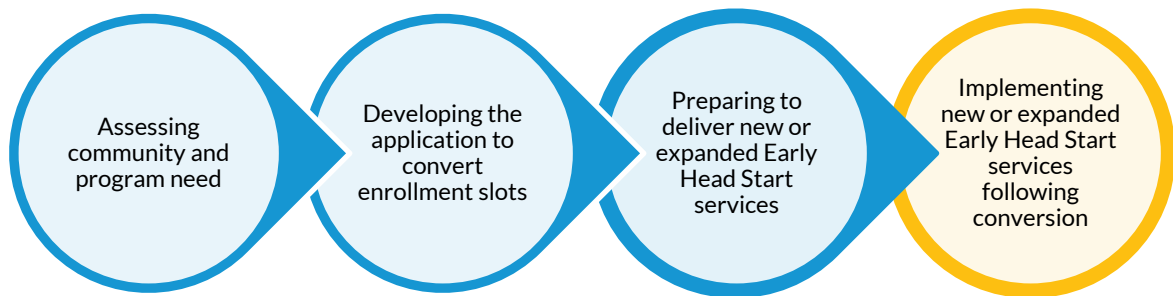
- To what extent are grant recipients successfully implementing high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion?
- What are the characteristics of grant recipients that successfully implement high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion of enrollment slots?
- What facilitates 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?

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<sup>2</sup> 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) Kate Stepleton, Carly Morrison, Diane Schilder, Catherine Kuhns, Irma Castañeda, Jonah Norwitt, Olivia Mirek, and Anna Fleming, “Developing an Application to Convert Head Start Enrollment Slots to Early Head Start,” OPRE Report #2024-309 (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; 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.<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> 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>.

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

Across sites, study participants reported they were successfully implementing high-quality Early Head Start services. Study participants also reported or implied that the services met Head Start Program Performance Standards (HSPPS).<sup>3</sup> Participating program leaders and staff also reported that providing Early Head Start services addressed a community need for high-quality infant and toddler services. Participants from many programs told us about specific ways teachers and other staff provided high-quality services specific to the needs of infants, toddlers, and their families. For example, participating programs noted the following:

- **Providing screenings and assessments designed for infants and toddlers.** Program leaders noted that required screenings and assessments for infants and toddlers are different than the screenings and assessments for preschoolers. Program leaders and staff told us they were able to provide high-quality screenings on schedule because they were given training and had adequate time to conduct the screenings.<sup>4</sup> 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.
- **Tailoring nutrition and health practices 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.<sup>5</sup> She contrasted this with scheduled snacks and meals provided in Head Start classrooms.
- **Renovating or structuring classrooms and other facilities to meet the needs of infants and toddlers.** Many participants noted that the infant and toddler classrooms were set up to support staff in following sanitary diapering practices and to support toilet learning for toddlers

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<sup>3</sup> “Head Start Program Performance Standards,” Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), accessed November 30, 2023, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii>.

<sup>4</sup> “Developmental Screening for Children Ages Birth to 5,” Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), accessed January 23, 2024, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/child-screening-assessment/article/developmental-screening-children-ages-birth-5>.

<sup>5</sup> “1302.44 Child nutrition,” Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), accessed November 30, 2023, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/policy/45-cfr-chap-xiii/1302-44-child-nutrition>.

when they are developmentally ready.<sup>6</sup> Across several 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.

- **For staff working with families, tailoring engagement activities 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.
- **Using curricula and assessments that are 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.

- **Interacting with infants and toddlers in specific, developmentally appropriate ways.** 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.

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<sup>6</sup> 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 the standards. For more details on suggested practices, see “Diapering and Toileting,” Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), last updated October 30, 2023, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/health-services-management/health-manager-orientation-guide/diapering-toileting>.

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*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*

*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 as a home visitor 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.*

*—Early Head Start program leader*

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## 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. Participants told us the following factors facilitated successful implementation of high-quality Early Head Start following conversion:

- **Many study participants thought it was advantageous to have previous experience with conversion and Early Head Start.** 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.

- **Some leaders believe larger programs can more easily implement Early Head Start after converting enrollment slots.** 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.
- **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, and study participants from sites that converted slots told us policies and procedures facilitated implementation of new services. Leaders across several sites reflected on their experiences offering Early Head Start for the first time and noted 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),<sup>7</sup> 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. Some educators who did not have experience with children in this age group felt they could have been better prepared and cited a lack of coaching and teaching supports specific to working with infants and toddlers.
  - » **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, 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 by 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.

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<sup>7</sup> 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>.

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*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*

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- » **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 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 knew how to complete required infant and toddler screenings. Study participants also told us infant and toddler developmental screenings and assessments need to occur more frequently than screenings and assessments 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.** 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 Early Childhood Learning and

Knowledge Center, like Teacher Time,<sup>8</sup> 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.

A few programs relied on advice from the Office of Head Start 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.

Finally, study participants from one program reported using coaching provided by educators at a “lab school.” This program had multiple sites and relied on 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 to successfully implement high-quality Early Head Start services following conversion of enrollment slots. Recommendations that are 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 on-site 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.

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<sup>8</sup> “Teacher Time Series,” Office of Head Start, Early Childhood Learning and Knowledge Center (ECLKC), last updated February 27, 2023, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/teaching-practices/teacher-time-series/teacher-time-series>.

## 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

The six Head Start grant recipients that participated in the case study reported successful delivery of Early Head Start services after receiving approval to convert enrollment slots. Study participants told us they were successful because of the Early Head Start need. This finding is consistent with a brief by Lou and colleagues that reported programs cite a need for infant and toddler services as a motivation for converting enrollment slots (Lou, Berger, and Schilder 2023).

Several facilitators and barriers to successful delivery of Early Head Start following conversion of enrollment slots that we identified are consistent with those described in existing research on Early Head Start–Child Care Partnerships and Head Start partnerships (Leveré et al. 2019; Schilder et al. 2009; Schilder et al. 2011; Schilder, Curenton, and Broadstone 2019). Facilitators include but are not limited to prior experience meeting performance standards. Conversely, barriers include lack of experience with as well as policies and procedures to meet performance standards (Bamdad and Lloyd 2020).

Several unanswered questions remain about the delivery of high-quality Early Head Start following conversion of 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. Analysis of data from the universe of Head Start grant recipients that converted enrollment slots before and after the pandemic reveals that staffing challenges cited by case study sites were experienced by all Early Head Start grant recipients. Nonetheless, analysis by Kuhns, Schilder, and Gedo (2023) showed that grant recipients that converted enrollment slots showed lower turnover than those that did not.

Future research is needed to determine if the other facilitators and barriers to delivery of Early Head Start cited by study participants in 2021 persist and are experienced by all programs that convert enrollment slots. In addition, findings from a study of a large sample of Early Head Start programs that is underway in 2024 could address the existing gap in our knowledge about strategies programs use to

recruit, hire, and provide professional development to early educators. Finally, additional research could be useful in documenting the actual delivery of high-quality Early Head Start following conversion of enrollment slots.

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