



Preparing to Deliver New or Expanded Early Head Start Services after a Conversion

Catherine Kuhns and Diane Schilder
URBAN INSTITUTE

Kate Stepleton and Carly Morrison
MEF ASSOCIATES

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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 and delivered in accordance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards. 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.

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 *preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start Services* (figure 1).² The full report (Stepleton et al. 2024b) includes findings pertaining to the entire conversion process from start to finish. Specifically, this brief addresses the following research questions:

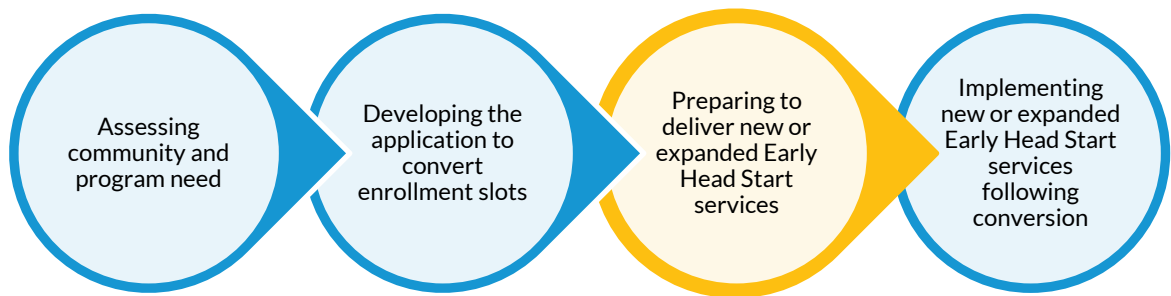
- How do grant recipients plan for Early Head Start service implementation?
- How do grant recipients plan for workforce-related changes that are needed to serve infants, toddlers, and pregnant women?
- What facilitates successful planning for conversion?
- What barriers do grant recipients face when preparing for conversion?
- What is the role of the Office of Head Start Regional Offices in supporting grant recipients preparing to implement a conversion?

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) 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) Diane Schilder, Catherine Kuhns, Kate Stepleton, and Carly Morrison, “Implementing New or Expanded Early Head Start Services After Converting Slots,” OPRE Report #2024-310 (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



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 (TTA) 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 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.³ 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.

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 2 lists examples of some of the upgrades to facilities that study

³ 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.

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 2

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 3 describes how the findings from this report compare with another analysis of staffing qualifications and competencies for programs that convert enrollment slots.

BOX 3

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,”^a prepared as part of the HS2EHS project, the project team explored staff composition, qualifications, and competencies of two cohorts of 89 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 of time it takes to train staff who do not already have the proper early childhood qualifications and competencies.

^a Kuhns, Schilder, and Gedo (2023b).

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 for 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 Staff

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 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-month schedule)
- challenges finding staff with the necessary qualifications and competencies⁴ (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

⁴ Center-based teachers that provide direct services to infants and toddlers in Early Head Start centers must have a minimum of a Child Development Associate (CDA) credential or comparable credential, and have been trained or have equivalent coursework in early childhood development with a focus on infant and toddler development.

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 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 Role of the Head Start Regional Office in Supporting Grant Recipients Preparing to Implement a Conversion?

Participants reported lower levels of communication with the Head Start Regional Office between the time they submitted the conversion application and the time it was approved, compared with other stages of the process which required more regular communication. 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 TTA 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 4 lists topics covered under this TTA request.

BOX 4

TTA 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 (QCIT) 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, TTA providers, and grant recipients preparing for conversion of enrollment slots.

Recommendations for the Office of Head Start, TTA 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.⁵
- 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.
- 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.

⁵ 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, 45 CFR Chapter XIII, Subchapter B – The Administration for Children and Families, Head Start Programs, Infants and Toddlers and Early Head Start,” December 22, 2016, <https://eclkc.ohs.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/pdf/ehs-infant-toddler-hspps-chart.pdf>.

- 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.

Conclusion

Analysis of case study data reveals grant recipients take several steps when preparing to deliver new or expanded Early Head Start services after submitting applications to convert enrollment slots, and many of these steps can begin while waiting for approval. Some case study grant recipients used an implementation plan to guide this phase, while others relied on more informal methods of tracking and planning. While waiting for approval, several grant recipients began to advertise to recruit and enroll infants and toddlers for the new Early Head Start services. Several grant recipients also reported starting the recruitment and hiring process for staffing the new EHS services as they waited for approval. Additionally, grant recipients started training staff on Early Head Start–specific standards and procedures, including documentation of curriculum and screenings. All grant recipients also noted a need to plan for physical space modifications to make classrooms and playgrounds more infant and toddler friendly, but none started renovations until after the approval was confirmed.

Grant recipients highlighted important facilitators of success as well as challenges experienced during the preparation phase. Grant recipients also reported that timing the conversion so changes could occur over the summer months eased the transition process and facilitated a smooth preparation phase. Prior experience offering Early Head Start services also streamlined the process, especially because many staff were already familiar with the requirements. Additionally, clear communication from program leaders was important. These findings about prior experience and good communication are consistent with Early Head Start–Child Care Partnership research that suggests these are foundational to being prepared to deliver high-quality services (Levere et al. 2019).

In regard to challenges, some grant recipients also highlighted higher-than-anticipated costs and timeline delays, especially around hiring and training staff on Early Head Start procedures. Moreover, some grant recipients cited challenges recruiting and retaining qualified Early Head Start teachers. They attributed this difficulty to Early Head Start–specific conditions, including the 12-month schedule, specific qualifications and competencies, and the perceived lower prestige of working with infants and toddlers. This issue is consistent with other research by Sandstrom, Kuhns and Drukker (2024) based on analysis of the National Survey of Early Care and Education finding that teacher and home-visitor vacancy rates for Early Head Start teachers and home visitors rose from slightly more than 2 percent in 2019 to nearly 9 percent in 2022. Other research from Kuhns, Schilder, and Gedo (2023a and 2023b) suggests that grant recipients that converted enrollment slots experienced fewer challenges with recruiting and retaining

qualified teachers compared with those that had not converted. Analysis of data from all case study sites reveals that nearly all participants reflected on this phase as a time when they could continue to engage in planning activities and, in some cases, begin taking action to implement the conversion before receiving official approval. Grant recipients shared their perception that it would be helpful to have more guidance from the Office of Head Start during this phase on what to expect once they receive approval, what activities they could engage in during the time they wait for approval, and sample timelines to help them understand the amount of time implementing new Early Head Start services takes. Regional office staff suggested that grant recipients could use this preparation phase to proactively reach out to government entities that need to approve facility renovations, engage with vendors to order materials, plan professional development supports, and, if need be, begin the recruitment and hiring process for new staff. Developing detailed timelines and accounting for delays in the aforementioned steps could help curtail overall delays in the implementation phase of the conversion.

The case study provides evidence about preparing to offer Early Head Start services after submitting applications to convert enrollment slots. Nonetheless, more research is needed in light of several limitations of the study. First, the findings are from a purposive sample of six grant recipients. More research is needed from a larger sample to determine if the experiences of this purposive sample are generalizable. Second, the grant recipients selected for this study had converted enrollment slots in the period after the COVID-19 pandemic. More research is needed to document if the experiences of grant recipients during that period persist.

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About the Authors

Catherine Kuhns is a senior research associate in the Center on Labor, Human Services, and Population at the Urban Institute. Her research focuses on child welfare and public programs that support the well-being of low-income children and families. For this study, she led site visit data collection and contributed to the analysis and report writing.

Diane Schilder is a senior research fellow in the Center for Labor, Human Services and Population. She leads a range of early childhood research and evaluation projects. She is principal investigator and project director of the Conversion of Enrollment from Head Start to Early Head Start project. With Kate Stepleton, Schilder co-led the design of the case studies.

Kate Stepleton is a principal associate with MEF Associates and director of the Children and Families domain. She leads and contributes to research projects related to child and family well-being in a range of policy areas. With Diane Schilder, Stepleton is coprincipal investigator and co-led the design and implementation of the case studies.

Carly Morrison is a senior research associate with MEF Associates. She researches social programs that serve children and families and often leads site identification, recruitment, and operations for descriptive and impact studies. Morrison coordinated MEF's work on the case studies and contributed to data collection, analysis, and report writing.

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SUBMITTED TO

Jenessa Malin, senior social science research analyst
Krystal Bichay-Awadalla, social science research analyst
Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation
Administration for Children and Families
US Department of Health and Human Services

Prime Contract No: HHSP233201500064I

SUBMITTED BY

Diane Schilider, principal investigator
Urban Institute
500 L'Enfant Plaza SW
Washington, DC 20024

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