Enrollment

Creating Systems for Filling Every Seat

ERSEA Insights

Explore how ERSEA systems can help programs enroll children and families with the greatest need in a timely manner. These strategies and guiding questions will help programs reach and maintain full enrollment.

Building from a Strong Foundation

Head Start programs promote young children's school readiness and foster the self-sufficiency of low-income families. Achieving and maintaining full enrollment is the primary goal of ERSEA services. Full enrollment requires targeted strategies for identifying and addressing the needs of current and future children, families, and communities.

A strong community assessment with regular updates provides information to understand family needs and shifting demographics. Recruitment strategies and selection criteria can then be adapted to meet those needs. Fluid fiscal resources can adjust to changes in program options, locations, and staffing needs. Internal technology, recordkeeping, and professional development systems support the enrollment process. Thoughtful planning allows programs to fill vacancies as soon as possible with children and families who can benefit most from Head Start services. Program leadership lays the foundation for a culture of acceptance based on trust and strong relationships.

Did you Know?

Program design modifications are often necessary to meet the changing needs of families and maintain full enrollment. Changes in scope include enrollment reductions, conversion of slots, and locally designed options. These changes have fiscal implications and should be based on data, knowledge of community needs, and compliance with the Head Start Program Performance Standards.
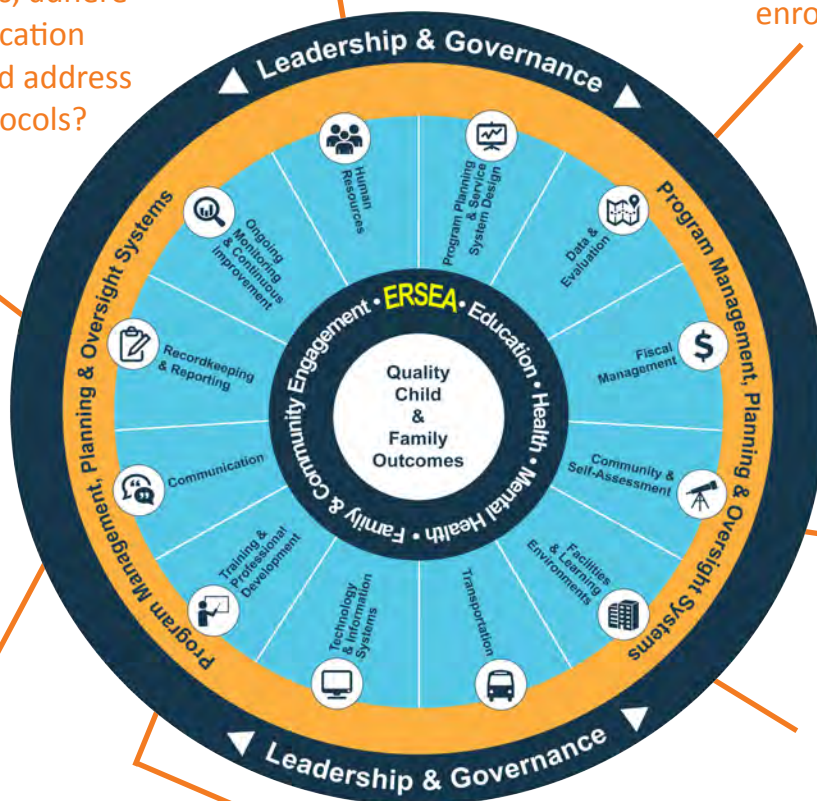
Head Start programs can support access to services by offering multiple options to complete the enrollment process, like flexible locations, times of day, and virtual or in-person interactions. Staff provide a safe, welcoming environment, and can meet the language needs of families enrolling. The enrollment process is the first step in learning about families, cultures, experiences, expectations, and child-rearing beliefs and practices. Staff must begin this relationship-building process in a respectful, accepting, and nonjudgmental manner.

A Systems Perspective: *Questions to consider*

How does your program's **recordkeeping and reporting** system help staff fill vacancies, prioritize wait lists, adhere to eligibility verification requirements, and address over-income protocols?

How does your program's **human resources** system support a culture where all staff know they have a role to play in maintaining full enrollment?

How does your program's **data and evaluation** system make sure the community's strengths and needs inform full enrollment goals?

How is your program's **community assessment** updated and used to monitor changing demographics and family needs?

How does the appearance of your program's **facilities and learning environments** make families feel welcome, comfortable, and physically and emotionally safe?

How does your program's **communication** system help staff have strengths-based conversations about enrollment? Are processes in place to enroll families that speak another language?

How does your program's **training and professional development** system help staff self-monitor their biases and effectively work with families from other cultures and lifestyles?

Planning for Continuous Improvement

Maintaining full enrollment may mean making programmatic changes to address shifting demographics. Ongoing monitoring of program services, effective self-assessment, and updates to the community assessment provide data that informs thoughtful adaptations to ensure responsive programs. Managers examine enrollment and vacancy patterns and consider reasons for vacancies and time required to fill them. They use the data to identify and implement improvements to the enrollment process. Recruitment strategies are monitored to make sure they reach diverse and vulnerable populations. Leadership recognizes the importance of planning for and implementing programmatic changes. Leaders also engage in data-informed, strategic conversations about program planning and service system design.

Resource Spotlight

Community Assessment: The Foundation for Program Planning in Head Start
Is your community assessment process generating the data that you need to monitor changing demographics and family needs? This data is crucial for designing the responsive program services that allow your program to achieve its full enrollment goals. Use this resource to better understand community assessment requirements and best practice.

Equity Considerations for ERSEA
Equity is foundational to the Head Start mission and to securing fair and just access for all children and families. It also requires ongoing action. Programs must be intentional in developing equitable systems and individualizing services to meet the unique needs and strengths of the children, families, and community they serve. Explore these considerations to support your program as you reflect, plan, and implement ERSEA activities that are grounded in equity.

Decision-making Tool to Determine a Family's Homeless Situation
Children from families experiencing homelessness are categorically eligible for Head Start. Use this tool to determine a child and family's homeless status using the McKinney-Vento Homeless Assistance Act definition.