

Survey Finds ICE Actions Cause Fear, Trauma, and Disruption for Head Start Children and Families

Madison (May 19, 2026) – A new survey of 277 Head Start providers across seven states — Washington, Pennsylvania, California, Virginia, Wisconsin, Florida, and West Virginia — found that ICE actions are causing significant fear, stress, and disruption for preschool-aged children and their families.

Head Start teachers and staff report that children are increasingly afraid to attend school, families are missing critical early learning services, and both children and parents are experiencing heightened anxiety and emotional distress.

The findings also suggest these impacts extend beyond undocumented families, contributing to fear and instability across entire communities and affecting attendance, parent engagement, and children’s sense of safety.

“Aggressive ICE actions are hurting children, plain and simple.”

said Jennie Mauer, Executive Director of the Wisconsin Head Start Association.

“Every child deserves a safe place to learn and grow. Head Start programs should never become places associated with fear and uncertainty for children and families.”

ACCORDING TO THE SURVEY:

- **47%** of respondents reported noticeable changes in children’s behavior. Staff described behaviors consistent with anxiety, fear, and stress, including children becoming quieter and more withdrawn, especially around unfamiliar adults. Some children were reported to have more frequent tantrums, while others expressed fear that a parent could be taken away or showed reluctance to go outside. Teachers also described increased vigilance, sadness, nervousness, and signs of developmental regression.
- **78%** of Head Start staff reported some level of impact on attendance due to ICE actions.
- **52%** of Head Start leadership respondents reported at least one instance of ICE activity near their program within the past 12 months. Most activity was reported in surrounding neighborhoods and nearby community spaces.
- **6.3%** reported ICE activity occurring during child drop-off or pickup times, while 3.1% reported ICE activity occurring at the Head Start site itself. Providers say that any enforcement activity at or near early learning settings can create significant fear and uncertainty for young children and families.
- **33%** of Head Start parents reported feeling afraid to travel to their child’s Head Start program or to be in public spaces.
- **28%** of parents and caregivers reported avoiding in-person events or family engagement activities because of safety concerns.

Many parents have also asked Head Start staff whether they would care for their child if a parent were detained.

Head Start staff described young children exhibiting fear and anxiety in ways that deeply concern early childhood educators and child development experts. **Two teachers shared:**

“Children are afraid to leave their homes thinking that they won’t see their parents again.”

“One child didn’t want to go to the playground.”

Teachers also reported troubling incidents inside classrooms as children absorb fear and rhetoric from the broader environment. **One teacher shared:**

“I have had four separate instances where white children told Latino children in the classroom that the police were coming to shoot them or that they were going to report them and have them sent away.”

Providers say the findings raise serious concerns about the impact immigration actions are having on the emotional well-being, mental health, and early childhood development of young children.

Staff also reported significant declines in family engagement and participation:

“Family engagement has decreased due to there being multiple raids within the community. Parents are scared to step out of their house and are in fear of being detained.”

“We have seen a decrease in playgroups and socialization. Families are not as willing to stay during drop-off and pickup to speak with teaching teams. More families are requesting transportation for their child to limit exposure at the center.”

As Congress and the Federal Administration consider additional funding for ICE actions, the Wisconsin Head Start Association and its partners are calling on lawmakers to address the documented harm these practices are causing to young children, families, and early learning programs across Wisconsin and the country.

The Association is also urging Congress and the Administration to reinstate Head Start and other early learning settings as protected sensitive locations to help ensure children and families can safely access critical educational and support services.

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About Wisconsin Head Start Association

WHSA is a non-profit membership association that supports the state’s Federally funded grantees, their staff, their parents, and supporters. WHSA offers professional development, advocacy, outreach, and networking services to member organizations.

