

***Head Start Helps Mississippi Top State Pre-K Quality Rankings:  
Ongoing partnerships critical to facilitate summer learning, coordinate family enrollment,  
and address rising mental health concerns due to COVID-19***



**NEWS RELEASE**

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**Jackson, MS** – According to the 2019 State of Preschool Yearbook released yesterday by the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER), Mississippi ranks among the top four states in the country for high-quality pre-K. The Mississippi Head Start Association congratulates the entire Early Childhood Education Community on this achievement.

“Head Start programs are proud partners and contributors to Mississippi’s commitment to high-quality early learning opportunities for young children across the state, and we applaud our early care and education partners as well as our state’s leadership and legislature for this well-deserved recognition,” Nita Thompson, Executive Director of the Mississippi Head Start Association said. “This recognition from the National Institute for Early Education Research is further confirmation that the collaboration between Mississippi’s Head Start programs, state pre-K program, childcare and parents is working. These partnerships help to maximize federal, state, and community resources to ensure children and families get the comprehensive services they need to succeed in school and in life.”

The 10 quality benchmarks NIEER uses when evaluating state pre-K quality align with Head Start’s rigorous standards. Head Start’s long-standing focus on credentialing and professional development of the early childhood workforce (four of the 10 benchmarks), health screenings and referrals for children, and continuous quality improvement are all represented in the NIEER benchmarks, helping to bring consistency and high-quality standards across early learning programs.

The seventeen (17) Head Start programs in Mississippi collectively serve approximately 24,000 children. Head Start programs provide pre-K services, collaborate to ensure children with complex needs get the comprehensive services they need, offer strong parental engagement, work across systems to coordinate enrollment, and are leading drivers of strong kindergarten readiness and transition activities.

The eighteen (18) pre-k collaboratives, which are comprised of public school, Head Start, childcare and other members of the early childhood community have done a phenomenal job of incorporating best practices and diverse approaches to teaching and learning from all of the partners. Thompson, further states it's the collaboration, all of us working together that leads to success.

Thompson added, "The COVID-19 pandemic has made this partnership more important than ever. Thousands more young children in our state are feeling the impacts of social isolation and are threatened by economic instability and traumatic experiences. As Head Start has always done in times of crisis, we are on the frontline helping our children, families, and communities weather this storm and find new opportunities to achieve their goals."

Amid the COVID-19 pandemic, Mississippi's Head Start staff remain employed to maximize remote services for families: expanding at-home learning opportunities for young children, and facilitating meal services for children, checking in with stressed families to provide coping strategies, and sharing information about new resources and tools to help families stay healthy.

In the coming months, Head Start is committed to providing further support to children in Mississippi. In addition to strengthening health, safety, and sanitation practices in classrooms and buildings, the Mississippi Head Start community will focus on three critical priorities:

1. Expanding summer learning programming, with a priority on serving at-risk four year olds making the transition to kindergarten in the fall and children with disabilities who need extra support;
2. Enhancing coordinated recruitment and enrollment of families with other early childhood providers and community-based organizations to ensure that isolated and vulnerable families are reached and that their child(ren) are enrolled in the program that best meets their needs; and
3. Integrating better trauma-informed care and mental health services into programs to better support Head Start staff as they respond to economic repercussions, insecurity, and fear that COVID-19 has brought to many families who were already struggling to make ends meet.

[Learn more](#) about Head Start's national leadership agenda for responding, innovating, and advocating for community needs in the wake of the COVID-19 pandemic.