Head Start programs shutter during government shutdown, despite infusion of state funds

By Sadaf Tokhi Globe Correspondent, Updated November 3, 2025, 7:03 p.m.



Kimberly Tavares reads to her students at the PACE Head Start in New Bedford. SUZANNE KREITER/GLOBE STAFF

Four Head Start centers in Massachusetts serving hundreds of children have closed their doors, and five other programs are running on emergency state funds after the

federal government shutdown halted their grants on Saturday.

Last week, Governor Maura Healey announced the state would advance $20 million to help affected programs stay afloat through November, but that money hasn't been enough to prevent cuts.

"We don't have the resources to make up for what the federal government owes," Healey said in a statement.

On Monday, four Self Help Inc. Head Start centers in Brockton and Norwood closed, leaving about 550 children without care and more than 150 staff members furloughed, according to a statement from the Massachusetts Head Start Association. The association said five other programs are using nonfederal or emergency state funds "as long as possible" to remain open.

Those programs are located across Chicopee, Holyoke, Springfield, New Bedford, and Lowell. While each program prepared for the possibility of funding disruptions, none of the administrators expected the shutdown to drag on this long. All said their contingency plans were meant to buy time, not to operate indefinitely.

Launched nearly 60 years ago, Head Start provides free early education and support for low-income families nationwide. More than classrooms, the programs connect parents with meals, disability services, and other resources — from SNAP benefits to fuel assistance. In Massachusetts, the network serves more than 11,000 children across 28 agencies that follow staggered federal award cycles starting in September of each year.

Three received their annual grant awards on Sept. 1 and were not affected by the shutdown. But six with Nov. 1 recipient dates now face uncertainty. Michelle Haimowitz, executive director of the Head Start Association, said the group is also monitoring three Dec. 1 programs, which she declined to identify.

At Community Teamwork Inc. in Lowell, which runs five Head Start and Early Head Start centers and serves about 550 children, administrators have been scrambling to stretch emergency state dollars while waiting for Congress to act. About 135 staff positions — including teachers, bus drivers, kitchen workers, and behavioral health specialists — are funded directly through the federal Head Start program, representing roughly $12 million in annual federal support for the Greater Lowell community.

Chief executive Carl Howell said the organization began contingency planning early this fall. He confirmed that his centers will remain open through November thanks to the emergency release of state funds, but warned that “those resources are not ongoing”. If the shutdown keeps going, he anticipates impacts beyond the classroom.

Already, they have suspended behavioral and mental health services for children, consolidated bus routes, and shortened the hours of some programs, he said.

“Head Start is an economic mobilizer and stabilizer of our communities,” he said. “It allows families to go to work and keeps local economies running. When classrooms close, parents can’t go to work — that impacts small businesses and local industry, and people don’t always understand the trickle-down effects when child care goes away.”

Howell worries teachers and staff will leave for more stability elsewhere — a scenario that has played out at other centers.

In New Bedford, PACE Head Start has lost a staff member and is tightening budgets to stay open through November, said program director Jill Fox.

The New Bedford agency operates 15 classrooms that serve roughly 300 children. To conserve resources, PACE paused contracts with its bus service, cleaning crew, and marketing consultants. Staff salaries and food costs have become the sole priority.

“As of Monday, none of our children will have busing,” Fox said in an interview last week. “We’re asking families to make plans, set up carpools — anything they can do. Our priority is to stay open as long as we can.”

On Monday morning. Fox told The Boston Globe that Bristol District Attorney Thomas M. Quinn 3d’s office gave PACE Head Start $15,000 to resume its bus contracts starting Wednesday morning, a sum that will get them through the month of November.

About 90 percent of PACE's budget is federally funded, leaving little room to maneuver. Fox said the shutdown has added stress for her 63 employees, many of whom have spent decades working for Head Start.

"My staff are worried," she said. "They're wondering if they'll have a job next week. But they're still showing up."

Among those staff is lead teacher Kimberly Tavares, who has worked at PACE Head Start for 27 years and is also a former Head Start parent. She said the program has been a lifeline for her family — helping her move from public assistance to college and homeownership. She worries about the future of Head Start.

"Head Starts are already short-staffed," she said. "We've been looking for teachers and staff — even before this shutdown — and now this just makes it worse."

Tavares said she hopes to stay, but if paychecks stopped, she'd have to weigh her own situation.

"Everyone needs stability," she said. "This is hard on the teachers, and it's hard on the kids, too."

Nicole Blais, executive director of HCS Head Start, serving Holyoke, Chicopee, and Springfield, has had to cut cleaning and maintenance services to help keep her schools open through the end of November.

"We'll have to figure out how to do that work internally," she said.

At the state level, Haimowitz praised the administration's quick action but emphasized the funds are not new money.

"These are dollars that programs would have received later in the year," she said. "The state is just being flexible with how programs can use them. Once they're spent, they're

gone.”

Massachusetts is one of only a handful of states that supplement federal Head Start funding with state dollars, a distinction Haimowitz called “a lifeline right now.” Other states, she added, “don’t have this kind of cushion.” Even so, she warned, the Commonwealth cannot replace federal funds indefinitely.

As programs brace for another month without federal funding, administrators say contingency planning is already shifting toward December. Some are drafting furlough scenarios; others are preparing letters to parents in case closures become unavoidable. For now, they are hoping Washington resolves the stalemate before those plans take effect.

The holidays, said Fox, are when Head Start matters most.

“We get them Thanksgiving turkey baskets, jackets, and pajamas for the winter,” she said. “We really want to be open during that time to make sure our families are getting all the good things that we can get to them during the season of giving and when money’s tight.”

Sadaf Tokhi can be reached at sadaf.tokhi@globe.com.

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