

GAO Highlights

Highlights of [GAO-17-34](#), a report to congressional requesters

Why GAO Did This Study

In 2015, the Head Start child development program provided federal funds to local grantees that employed over 90,000 teachers. Some of these grantees run programs that do not run during the summer, and some teachers may, in turn, seek UI benefits to help meet expenses during that time. All states have laws generally prohibiting certain employees of educational institutions from collecting UI benefits between terms, though they have flexibility in setting specific eligibility restrictions. GAO was asked to review Head Start and other ECE teachers' eligibility for UI benefits during the summer months.

This report examines (1) the extent to which states have laws or policies that affect whether Head Start and other ECE teachers are eligible for UI benefits during summer breaks; (2) how many Head Start teachers may have been eligible for these benefits during their summer breaks in 2015; and (3) what is known about how states communicate information about eligibility for UI benefit payments to Head Start and ECE employees and the effectiveness of these efforts. GAO surveyed UI directors in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico, and the Virgin Islands (with 100 percent responding); analyzed Head Start data from program year 2015; reviewed relevant federal laws; and interviewed federal officials and stakeholders, including employer associations and teacher associations, in five states selected using criteria such as their benefit restrictions.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is not making recommendations.

View [GAO-17-34](#). For more information, contact Cindy Brown Barnes at (202) 512-7215 or brownbarnesc@gao.gov

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UNEMPLOYMENT INSURANCE

Various Factors Affect Head Start and Other Early Childhood Teachers' Eligibility for Benefits

What GAO Found

In response to GAO's survey, officials from all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and two territories reported that they have various laws or policies that may affect whether Head Start and other early childhood education (ECE) teachers are allowed to collect unemployment insurance (UI) benefits during summer breaks. Officials in three states—Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming—reported that Head Start teachers are generally not eligible for UI benefits over summer breaks. In other states, officials outlined various factors that can affect eligibility. Specifically, officials from 30 states said the type of employer—for-profit, non-profit, or municipality—can influence eligibility for Head Start teachers (officials in 28 states reported this for ECE teachers). In addition, officials in 17 states reported that eligibility for Head Start teachers can be affected by the program's relationship to a school or board of education (officials in 11 states reported this for ECE teachers). For example, West Virginia officials reported that Head Start teachers considered under the authority of the board of education are generally not eligible for UI benefits.

In 2015, about half of the 90,000 Head Start teachers (about 44,800) across the country may have been eligible for UI benefits during their summer break, according to GAO's analysis of available data and the information states reported about their laws, regulations, and policies in response to GAO's survey. The remaining teachers and assistant teachers were likely not eligible because they worked for school districts or charter schools (about 14,150); worked in programs with breaks that were too short to allow them to collect benefits (about 28,940); or were generally not eligible under state laws, regulations, or policies (about 2,510).

To communicate UI eligibility rules to both employers and employees, state UI agencies reported using a variety of methods; however, selected stakeholders identified several concerns with these efforts. According to GAO's survey, state directors reported that they use various communication channels to provide general information to both employers and employees on matters, such as how to file a claim in their states. The three most commonly cited methods used by the states included websites, hotlines, and handbooks. Even though most states reported that they are using multiple methods of communication with employers and employees, some Head Start and ECE stakeholders in five selected states told GAO that the complexity of federal and state laws and policies governing state programs continue to make UI eligibility rules difficult to understand, even with information that their states are providing. While some of this confusion can be attributed to the variability and complexities of states' eligibility policies, GAO also found that states are generally not evaluating the effectiveness of their communication approaches. Specifically, over half of the states reported that they have not evaluated the effectiveness of their communication approaches with employees, and about two-thirds reported they have not evaluated the effectiveness of their communication approaches with employers. The states that were conducting evaluations reported that the feedback allowed them to make improvements in their communication materials for both employers and employees. For example, some states reported making their claims processing applications more user friendly and understandable as a result of this feedback.