

A report to congressional requesters

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What GAO Found

The Office of Head Start (OHS) provides funding and technical assistance to support Tribal Head Start programs in teaching Native languages and culture. In fiscal year 2024, OHS provided \$345 million for Tribal Head Start programs. OHS also provided training to 141 Tribal Head Start programs related to incorporating Native language, culture, and traditions in recent years. Each of the 10 selected Tribal Head Start programs GAO interviewed used immersion, dual language classrooms, or short language lessons to teach Native languages, as allowed by the Head Start Program Performance Standards.

Indigenous Cultural Themes Incorporated into a Tribal Head Start Playground



Source: GAO (photo). | GAO-26-107775

OHS offers Tribal Head Start programs flexibilities, training, and technical assistance to help address enrollment concerns. Officials from selected Tribal Head Start programs spoke positively of support from OHS but reported communication challenges with OHS involving timeliness that impacted their use of the flexibilities. For example, to address challenges with hiring or retaining qualified staff, Head Start programs can apply for approval to reduce the number of program seats they are required to fill and may use funds from leftover seats to raise staff wages. In fiscal year 2024, OHS took an average of 199 days to communicate approval decisions to Tribal Head Start programs.

OHS reported a new intake process in August 2024. This reduced the average time to 91 days for the nine requests that were submitted after the new process began and were completed as of July 2025. However, 35 requests that were also submitted after the new process began were pending as of September 2025, with time frames ranging from 15 to 308 days. Five of 10 selected Tribal Head Start programs GAO interviewed in 2025 also said they did not receive timely communication from OHS about such requests, and one reported the lack of communication limited its ability to increase teacher compensation. OHS has not identified and addressed the causes of timeliness challenges, reported by selected Tribal Head Start programs, in its communication with the programs related to increasing enrollment. By doing so, OHS could help tribal programs avoid delays in their efforts to improve their enrollment numbers.

Why GAO Did This Study

According to OHS, Tribal Head Start programs are key to preserving and promoting Native language, culture, and traditions. They also help fulfill the federal government's trust responsibility to protect the interests of Tribal Nations. Yet, enrollment in Tribal Head Start programs has declined in recent years, from about 26,000 in school year 2018-2019, to about 18,000 children in school year 2023-2024.

GAO was asked to review the role of Tribal Head Start programs in promoting Native language and culture as well as their declining enrollment. Among other things, this report examines OHS's support for tribal programs in teaching Native language and culture and the extent to which OHS helps programs address their enrollment challenges.

GAO interviewed a nongeneralizable sample of 10 Tribal Head Start programs. Tribal programs were selected to reflect a variety of regions, experience operating Head Start programs, and enrollment. GAO conducted site visits to eight of the selected programs. GAO also analyzed the most recent OHS data, reviewed relevant federal laws, regulations, and guidance, and interviewed OHS officials.

What GAO Recommends

GAO is recommending that OHS identify and address the causes of timeliness challenges in its communication with Tribal Head Start programs related to improving enrollment. OHS concurred with our recommendation.