

## Lower Columbia College Head Start Faces Lack of Staff, Funding Cuts

Minka Atkinson

*The Daily News – December 12, 2023*



*Head Start Teachers Stephanie Jones, left, and Kiana Strahan help students with their afternoon activities at the preschool on Thursday, Nov. 30 in Longview. The preschool is understaffed and has about 50 fewer children enrolled this year compared to past years as a result.*

Like many Head Start programs nationwide, **Lower Columbia College Head Start, Early Head Start and ECEAP** (Early Childhood Education and Assistance Program) is struggling to find enough staff to function at full capacity.

In September, the center was missing six classrooms worth of staff, leaving almost a quarter of their student enrollment for the year unable to be filled, LCC Head Start Director Mindy Leasure said. Now, several months into the school year, the center is still recruiting for about 20 positions needed to open three classrooms, which would have space for a total of 51 students.

The classrooms will open for enrollment when they are fully staffed, so families are encouraged to apply for the waitlist in the meantime, Leasure said. Applications are accepted year-round.

**Head Start is a free federal program** to prepare low-income children up to 5 years old for school. Lower Columbia College manages the eight Head Start centers in Cowlitz County.

The biggest need is for support staff such as teaching assistants, center aides, food service workers and bus drivers, Leasure said. She said they are starting to see an uptick in applications since rebranding the center aide position, which was previously listed as substitute teacher, to make the position's responsibilities clearer.

Last school year, limited staffing led to multiple temporary classroom closures every month, according to the program's end of month report for June. This is not in line with what parents should be able to expect from Head Start, Leasure said.

“We need to be dependable and consistent for families, and we have always been that way since 1972,” she said.

Even when classrooms were open, less support staff meant teachers were not able to spend as much one-on-one time with students who needed extra support, especially with the increasing number of students with behavioral issues or developmental delays following the COVID-19 pandemic, said Cathy Young, lead teacher at LCC Head Start’s Barnes Center.

“Teaching is a profession where we know we’re going to put in extra time,” Young said. “That’s what we do as teachers. But there are just not enough hours in the day to support all these kiddos.”

A lack of substitutes also made it difficult for teachers to get time off when they need it, she said.

Between the 2022-23 and 2023-24 school years, LCC Head Start returned 114 student slots to the state because there were not enough teachers, bringing their enrollment from 524 to 410 students, Leasure said. They are not the only Head Start program to downsize; the National Head Start Association reported in October that 55% of Head Start and Early Head Start programs surveyed had submitted a change of scope application to the Office of Head Start in the last three years, most of which resulted in a reduction in enrollment.

The National Head Start Association conducted a series of surveys between May 2022 and October 2023 documenting the number of vacancies at Head Start programs around the country, why staff are leaving and how centers are affected. In each survey, respondents cited **compensation as the main reason for staffing issues.**

According to the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP, the average annual salary for a lead teacher at Head Start is about \$35,000, while a kindergarten teacher makes \$63,700. The average salary for an assistant teacher is even lower, at just over \$26,000 annually.

“We’re not making enough to live and sustain paying our bills,” LCC West Center lead teacher Treva Strahan said.

With the cost of living rising, many Head Start employees are transferring to school districts and other jobs where pay is closer to a living wage. Young said that several teachers she mentored have moved on to nearby elementary schools, and that she was only able to continue working for Head Start because of her husband’s higher salary.

As a Head Start graduate herself, she said that working for the program has always been a goal of hers and she does not want to leave despite the low pay.

“Leaving Head Start would be a last resort, just because it means so much to me,” she said.

The Office of Head Start submitted a notice of proposed rulemaking to the Federal Register Nov. 20 that included suggestions such as a significant wage increase to bring Head Start salaries closer to those in elementary schools, improved staff benefits including health insurance and free mental health services, and streamlining program services to lower burdens on both staff and families.

LCC Head Start currently offers most of these supports, with the exception of matching pay to local public schools, Leasure said.

Increasing pay for teachers would require increasing funding to Head Start, but an appropriations bill introduced to the U.S. House of Representatives Oct. 6 would instead reduce Head Start funding by \$750 million, or 6% of its current funding, according to the National Head Start Association. This would result in a loss of Head Start services for an estimated 1,400 children in Washington state, Joel Ryan, executive director of the Washington State Association of Head Start and ECEAP, said in an email to Head Start employees.

The bill is estimated to remove 17 children from LCC Head Start and would reduce available jobs, Leasure said. She said that any necessary job cuts would come through natural attrition such as retirements and cutting already vacant positions.

“It’s a time when our workforce needs more support, not less, and our children need more help than ever,” she said. “Less resources in the field is not going to help those children close the learning gap.”