Head Start changes generate pushback

Some in GOP oppose deregulation push

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USA TODAY

WASHINGTON – The Trump administration's drastic deregulation of Head Start, a preschool and child care program that's helped tens of millions of low-income kids, is generating bipartisan pushback in Congress – including from members within the president's own party.

Health and Human Services Secretary Robert F. Kennedy Jr. announced Aug. 5 that his agency is pursuing a sweeping rollback of much of the more than 100 pages of federal rules governing the multibillion-dollar program. Among the items on the chopping block are requirements to conduct screenings for kids with disabilities, keep class sizes small, help children brush their teeth daily and mandate monitors on school buses.

Senate Republicans have expressed wariness in recent days about the prospect of slashing those standards, which advocates say help keep kids safe and healthy.

'We've been hearing from our Head Start folks back home that are concerned about what they're seeing,' Sen. Lisa Murkowski, R-Alaska, told USA TODAY. 'That's something that we're monitoring.'

Sen. Thom Tillis, R-North Carolina, said he explored reforms to Head Start at the state level when he was speaker of his state's legislature years ago. But he appeared skeptical of the merits of making deregulation too broad.

'Just walking away and turning a blind eye toward it, I don't think that'd be a good idea,' he told USA TODAY.

Sen. Jim Justice, R-West Virginia, cautioned that though he supports modifying the program, it's already helping 'a lot, a lot, a lot of kids' who 'benefit phenomenally.'

'When we start tweaking with stuff, a lot of times we can make it better,' he said in an interview. 'But there are ways we can make it worse, too.'

In Kennedy's eyes, the new effort will streamline Head Start, which serves hundreds of thousands of low-income families annually, and cut red tape – all while expanding the number of enrolled kids.

Alex Adams, one of Kennedy's deputies who runs an HHS division called the Administration for Children and Families, said on a recent call with reporters that Head Start providers will still be subject to state and local regulations. Just because they'll have fewer federal rules to follow doesn't mean they should ignore what works for them, he said.

'Flexibility is permission. It's not a mandate,' Adams said.

Democrats bristled at that notion.

'They're saying they might be able to serve more children by promising each child less,' said Sen. Patty Murray, D-Washington. 'President Trump has all but declared war on Head Start.'

Sen. Bill Cassidy, the chairman of the Senate's health and education committee, which has jurisdiction over Head Start, said he's been talking with his staff about the major proposed regulatory changes.

'I'd like to see what they actually put out,' he told USA TODAY.

The 75-page proposed rule, officially published Aug. 7 in the Federal Register, isn't all deregulation. It includes new rules, too. English would become the main language of instruction, and children with a different first language would need to learn it while enrolled. There are also new dietary guidelines and an exercise directive: 30 minutes of physical activity for every 3.5 hours of classroom instruction.

The regulatory process is still in its early stages, though. And the proposal may get tied up in court. Khari Garvin, who ran the Office of Head Start in the Biden administration, said there will be a 60-day public comment period.



Kennedy

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