

# Backgrounder

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## A Head Start for Poor Children?

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As the 39-year-old federal Head Start program once again comes before Congress for reauthorization, several unanswered questions that have dogged the program since its inception should be considered. First, does it work?

Twenty-two years after the creation of the pre-school program for low-income children, its cofounder, Edward Zigler, acknowledged, "We simply cannot inoculate children in one year against the ravages of a life of deprivation." Nevertheless, Zigler remains confident that Head Start brings some benefits to the children it serves.

On average, poor children enter school with far fewer vocabulary, literacy, math, and social skills than their middle-class peers. They start off a step behind and never catch up; the gap in academic proficiency follows them to the end of their schooling.

Since 1965, taxpayers have spent more than \$66 billion on Head Start to provide comprehensive health, social, educational, and mental health services to poor children. Currently, the \$6.6 billion program enrolls more than 900,000 three- and four-year-olds at a cost of roughly \$7,000 per pupil. The federal Department of Health and Human Services directly funds the program's 19,000 centers, which are operated by community and faith-based organizations and local public schools. Evidence suggests that the program provides short-term cognitive benefits for poor children who might otherwise enter school even further behind.

But a second question remains: Does Head Start make

### Talking Points

- Since 1965, taxpayers have spent more than \$66 billion on Head Start to provide comprehensive health, social, educational, and mental health services to 21 million poor children.
- Currently, the \$6.6 billion program enrolls more than 900,000 three- and four-year-olds at a cost of roughly \$7,000 per pupil. Evidence suggests that the program provides short-term cognitive benefits but has little long-term impact.
- Taxpayers are currently spending more than \$25 billion each year for state and federal early childhood day care and education programs. States, however, have no legal authority to work with or improve Head Start programs.
- A recent report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services documents a lack of coordination between Head Start and state-based preschool programs, which has resulted in duplication of services, service gaps, and lack of communication and information sharing.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:  
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any difference in the long run? Although a large-scale impact study is under way, Congress is likely to reauthorize the act before the results are available.

Now a third question has emerged: Will modest changes supported by the Bush Administration gain traction? The introduction of a proposal in the House of Representatives to allow eight eligible states to manage Head Start programs touched off a firestorm of opposition from the National Head Start Association. Characterizing the legislation as “radical” and “destructive,” the advocacy group fought its narrow passage on the House floor.

### **Achievement Gap Persists**

Since 1965, Head Start has enrolled over 21 million children. Recommended by a panel of child development experts in 1964, the program was initially an eight-week summer program run by the Office of Economic Opportunity with a goal of meeting the social, educational, emotional, health, and nutritional needs of preschool children. Four years after its inception, the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare (now the Department of Health and Human Services) took over the implementation of the program. Most programs now serve children for a half-day or school day eight or nine months of the year. A quarter of the programs operate full-day, year-round programs.

Today, nearly four decades since Head Start was launched, the school readiness gap between poor children and their middle-class peers remains stubbornly large. On average, low-income children enter kindergarten with a vocabulary a fraction of the size of their middle-class peers'. They are also less likely to know the letters of the alphabet or even how to follow words left to right across the printed page. Nicholas Zill, vice president of Westat, a research firm, notes, “Poor kids make gains in most of the elementary schools that they go to. The gains are parallel to those of more advantaged kids, but the gap still remains.”

This achievement gap persists into high school. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress (known as the “nation’s report card”), poor students score substantially lower than their middle- and upper-income peers, at all three grades—4th, 8th, and 12th—in all subjects. In

math, science, and history, three to four times as many middle- and upper-income students receive “proficient” scores when compared with poor students, who are much more likely to be rated as “below basic,” the lowest level on the tests.

Throughout the past three and a half decades, the federal government has attempted to address this achievement gap through Head Start, Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act, and other programs. Yet there is no clear evidence that these programs have helped poor children gain any advantage that can be maintained over time.

Since its inception, there has been controversy over Head Start’s effectiveness. Early research from the Westinghouse Learning Corporation in 1969 showed cognitive gains of the program’s participants faded away within a few grades, at which point the cognitive abilities of Head Start participants are indistinguishable from their nonparticipating peers.

In 1985, the Head Start Synthesis Project, a meta-analysis of over 210 studies and reports, found:

Children enrolled in Head Start enjoy significant, immediate gains in cognitive test scores, socioemotional test scores, and health status. In the long run, cognitive and socioemotional test scores of former Head Start students do not remain superior to those of disadvantaged children who did not attend Head Start.

A few studies indicated that Head Start participants were less likely to be enrolled in special education or to be held back a grade. Head Start students also received more dental and health screenings.

### **The Studies’ Shortcomings**

More recently, the government-funded Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) of children participating in Head Start in 1997 and 2000 found that four-year-olds improved slightly on certain skills tests after one year. Nevertheless, on average, the participants still scored below the 23rd percentile on tests of vocabulary, early mathematics, and writing.

How these students compare to similar children not in the program is unknown. There has been no

large-scale impact study comparing Head Start participants to nonparticipants from similar backgrounds. In a report to Congress, the General Accounting Office described the inadequacy of existing research, saying that this

body of research is inadequate for use in drawing conclusions about the impact of the national program in any area in which Head Start provides services, such as school readiness or health-related services. Individually, the studies suffer to some extent from methodological and design weaknesses, such as noncomparability of comparison groups, which call into question the usefulness of their individual findings. In addition, no single study used a nationally representative sample so that findings could be generalized to the national program.

In response to this critique, Congress included a requirement in the 1998 Head Start reauthorization act for an impact study. The National Head Start Impact Study, which began in 2002 and will end in 2006, will determine whether or not the participants have improved cognitive, social, and emotional development; communication and motor skills; knowledge; and health when compared to nonparticipants. Researchers will also examine Head Start's impact on families and will identify best practices.

In the meantime, Congress has begun the work of reauthorizing the program. In July 2003, by a vote of 217–216, the House of Representatives passed House Resolution 2210, the School Readiness Act. Building on the 1998 reauthorization, this bill emphasizes cognitive development and school readiness, including preliteracy and pre-math skills. Some have criticized Head Start for failing to teach children the alphabet. On the FACES survey, participants' grasp of letters did not improve, despite improvements in other skills. Other research found Head Start graduates could identify only one or two letters of the alphabet.

### To Learn or to Play?

Westat's Zill points out:

When you look at where Head Start has been in the last few years, they've been bending over backwards to avoid literacy skills. The

Piagetian slant has been very strong. The ironic thing is that most Head Start parents want their kids to learn those skills.

Jean Piaget, a Swiss psychologist, theorized that humans naturally progress through four stages of cognitive development, starting at birth and ending in adulthood. Piagetians favor play activities for preschoolers over instruction and mastery of skills, which they believe children are not developmentally ready to learn.

Head Start remains at the center of an age-old academic debate over whether it is appropriate to teach young children academic skills. While some academics believe that it is harmful to a child's development to teach preliteracy, premath, and other school readiness skills, others believe that children are ready and eager to learn. They believe ensuring poor kids have these skills before entering kindergarten is particularly important, given that middle-class children usually possess these skills before their first day of kindergarten. Critics say that Head Start centers that neglect school readiness skills leave poor students a step behind their peers when it comes time to enter school.

The House bill establishes standards for language skills, prereading knowledge, counting and other premathematics knowledge, cognitive abilities, social development, and progress in language among non-English-speaking children. The bill also increases Head Start funding by \$202 million, bringing the total to \$6.87 billion a year, and requires all new Head Start teachers to have associate's degrees within three years and half nationwide to have at least a bachelor's degree by 2008.

The new legislation would also bring the program into conformance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act by granting civil rights protections for faith-based organizations. Currently, such Head Start providers do not have the latitude to hire staff according to their religious principles. The bill would extend the right of these organizations to hire people of the same faith—a right that faith-based organizations operating many other federal social service programs currently enjoy.

In addition, H.R. 2210 authorizes a pilot program that allows eight states to coordinate their Head Start programs with state-based early child-

hood education programs. Currently, states have no legal authority to work with or improve Head Start programs, which are administered at the local level. A recent report by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services documents a lack of coordination between Head Start and state-based preschool programs, which has resulted in duplication of services, service gaps, and lack of communication and information sharing.

Taxpayers are currently spending more than \$25 billion each year for state and federal early childhood day care and education programs. The main federal programs include such programs as Head Start, Title I preschool programs, Early Head Start, Even Start, the Individuals With Disabilities Education Act, Reading First, the Social Services Block Grant, the Child Care and Development Block Grant, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families. The majority of poor children in institutional day care or preschool receive some form of government subsidization.

### **Pilot Program a Lightning Rod**

Although more than 40 states operate preschool programs, 75 percent of the funding is spent in 11 states; eight states fund both state and Head Start programs. Most state programs meet or exceed Head Start standards for academics but are less likely to offer the same degree of family, health, and nutrition standards. Other federal and state health and nutrition programs serve this population of children. For example, most Head Start participants are eligible for food stamps, WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Programs for Women, Infants, and Children), and Medicaid, as well as other state, local, and private programs.

The new legislation's eight-state pilot program has many stipulations regarding funding and the quality of programs. Participants must have standards that meet or exceed the federal Head Start standards for services, teachers, financial management, and facilities; they are not allowed to reduce state or local spending on preschool programs.

Despite the restrictions, the pilot program is strongly opposed by Head Start advocacy groups. Sarah Greene, president and CEO of the National Head Start Association, describes the pilot as a "radical proposal that dismantles the federal government's nearly four-decades-long commitment to getting at-risk children ready to learn."

Others are more optimistic. According to Brookings Institution Senior Fellow Ron Haskins:

This demonstration plan represents a reasonable compromise between those who are concerned that the quality and even existence of Head Start would be jeopardized by turning responsibility for the program over to states, and those who believe that states can improve preparation for school through increased coordination and accountability. Given the immensity of the task and the modest success achieved thus far, new ideas are worth trying.

The Senate version, which unanimously passed out of the Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee on October 22, 2003, does not include the pilot program or civil rights protections for faith based providers. The bill includes academic standards and increases the authorization level of the program to \$7.2 billion in fiscal year 2005.

### **Conclusion**

The final outcome of the recent legislation is anyone's guess. In the meantime, the academic gap between poor and middle-class students remains a stubborn blight on the American education system. Perhaps no government program can ever sufficiently make up for what a hard life takes away. After the publication of the National Head Start Impact Study, we will know whether Head Start is better than nothing.

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