

WebMemo



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Head Start Program: Fraudulent and Ineffective

David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D.

The year 2010 will surely go down as a bad year for Head Start—a “Great Society” pre-school program intended to provide a boost to disadvantaged children before they enter elementary school. First, a scientifically rigorous experimental evaluation of Head Start found that the program largely failed to improve the cognitive, socio-emotional, health, and parenting outcomes compared to the outcomes of similar children.¹ Second, the U.S. Government Accountability Office (GAO) found that Head Start centers located in California, Maryland, New Jersey, Pennsylvania, Texas, Wisconsin, and the Washington, D.C., metropolitan area were actively enrolling children from families not qualified to participate in the early education program.²

But before Members of Congress get too worried about such fraud denying eligible children access to Head Start, they should understand that, according to scientific studies, the program is ineffective to begin with.

Evidence of Fraud. The GAO performed 13 undercover eligibility tests based on fictitious families to determine the prevalence of Head Start grantees enrolling children not qualified to attend the program. The fictitious families were over income limits and had other disqualifying characteristics set by the Office of Head Start. The GAO found:

- In eight of the 13 eligibility tests, the fictitious families were told by Head Start staff that they were eligible for the program and encouraged to attend class;
- In all of these eight cases, Head Start staff instructed the fictitious families to misrepresent their eligibility for the program;

- In seven of these cases, Head Start staff deliberately disregarded part of the fictitious families’ income to make these families eligible for participation;
- In at least four of the cases, the GAO later received doctored documents that excluded income information originally provided to the Head Start staff;
- In two cases, Head Start staff designated on application forms that one parent was unemployed, even though the GAO presented documentation of both parents’ income; and
- In one case, Head Start staff assured the fictitious family that no one would validate that the income information submitted was correct.³

According to the GAO, their undercover investigations “highlight the ease with which unscrupulous parents could fabricate documentation designed to make it appear as though their children were under-income or otherwise eligible for the program.”⁴ The GAO further added, “At no point during our registrations was any of the information contained in fictitious documentation submitted by our parents verified, which indicates that the program is vulnerable to beneficiary fraud in addition to grantee fraud.”⁵

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<http://report.heritage.org/wm2919>

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214 Massachusetts Avenue, NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
(202) 546-4400 • heritage.org

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Unintended Consequences. Head Start grantees found by the GAO to have committed fraud should be denied further access to Head Start funding. In addition, those individuals responsible for committing the fraud should be prosecuted to the fullest extent of the law.

However, the notion that the participation of ineligible children somehow harms eligible children not allowed access to the program needs to be dispelled. The GAO lamented the fact that the presence of fraud means that some low-income children “do not receive necessary services” due to higher-income children filling their slots.⁶ But scientifically rigorous evidence of Head Start’s effectiveness does not support this assertion.

Using random assignment, the national Head Start Impact Study placed almost 5,000 children eligible for Head Start into two treatment conditions based on a lottery.⁷ The children *who won the lottery were awarded “free” (taxpayer-paid) access to pre-kindergarten Head Start services*, while the others either did not attend preschool or sought out alternatives to Head Start.

The national evaluation tracked the progress of three- and four-year-olds entering Head Start through the first grade. Overall, the program had little to no positive effects for children granted access to Head Start. For example, compared to

similarly situated children not allowed access to Head Start, access to the program failed to raise the cognitive abilities of Head Start participants on 41 measures.⁸ Specifically, the language skills, literacy, math skills, and school performance of the participating children failed to improve.

Alarming, access to Head Start for the three-year-old group actually had a *harmful* effect on the teacher-assessed math ability of these children once they entered kindergarten. Teachers reported that non-participating children were more prepared in math skills than those children who participated in Head Start.⁹

Don’t Mislead the Public. Even if some eligible children are being denied access to Head Start, the best available scientific evidence suggests that they are very likely to be no worse off than if they had attended the program. And they may eventually possess better kindergarten math skills than those children participating in Head Start. While Congress is correct to be concerned about cases of fraud committed by Head Start grantees, Congress should not mislead the public about the effectiveness of Head Start.

—David B. Muhlhausen, Ph.D., is Senior Policy Analyst in the Center for Data Analysis at The Heritage Foundation.

1. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, “Head Start Impact Study: Final Report,” at http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/hs/impact_study/reports/impact_study/hs_impact_study_final.pdf (May 19, 2010). For a review of the evaluation’s findings, see David B. Muhlhausen and Dan Lips, “Head Start Earns an F: No Lasting Impact for Children by First Grade,” Heritage Foundation *Backgrounder* No. 2363, January 21, 2010, at <http://www.heritage.org/Research/Reports/2010/01/Head-Start-Earns-an-F-No-Lasting-Impact-for-Children-by-First-Grade>.
2. Gregory D. Kutz, “Head Start: Undercover Testing Finds Fraud and Abuse at Selected Head Start Centers,” testimony before the Committee on Education and Labor, U.S. House of Representatives, May 18, 2010, at <http://www.gao.gov/new.items/d10733t.pdf> (May 18, 2010).
3. *Ibid.*, pp. 6–7.
4. *Ibid.*, p. 7.
5. *Ibid.*
6. Kutz, “Head Start,” p. 12.
7. Department of Health and Human Services, “Head Start Impact Study: Final Report.”
8. *Ibid.*, pp. 4-10–4-13, Exhibit 4.2, and pp. 4-21–4-25, Exhibit 4.5.
9. *Ibid.*, p. 4-26.