

Background

No. 1701
October 29, 2003



Published by The Heritage Foundation

What Congress Can Do to Get a Better Head Start

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The Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee will soon mark up a bill to reauthorize the 38-year-old federal Head Start program. Currently funded at \$6.6 billion, the Head Start program provides health, social, educational, and mental health services to over 900,000 three- to five-year-old poor children at a cost of almost \$7,000 per pupil.¹ The 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.

Since its inception, Head Start has enrolled over 21 million children at a cost of over \$66 billion to taxpayers.² Although research shows that the program may provide short-term cognitive benefits, there is little evidence of long-term impact. It is clear, however, that poor children enter kindergarten a step behind their middle-class peers and never catch up. Congress should focus on improving Head Start programs by enacting higher standards, requiring stronger accountability, and spurring innovation.

1. Jane Koppelman, "Reauthorizing Head Start: The Future Federal Role in Preschool Programs for the Poor," National Health Policy Forum *Issue Brief* No. 789, April 11, 2003.
2. U.S. General Accounting Office, *Head Start Key Among Array of Early Childhood Programs, But National Research on Effectiveness Not Completed*, July 2003, at www.gao.gov/highlights/d03840thigh.pdf.

- Head Start was created to address the school readiness gap between poor children and their middle-class peers, but that gap remains stubbornly large despite the program's 38-year cumulative price tag of \$66 billion.
- Although research shows that Head Start may provide short-term cognitive benefits, there is little evidence of long-term impact. In general, poor children enter kindergarten a step behind their middle-class peers and never catch up.
- How Head Start students compare to similar children not in the program is unknown; data from a study mandated by Congress in 1998 will not be available until 2006.
- Currently funded at \$6.6 billion, Head Start provides health, social, educational, and mental health services to over 900,000 three- to five-year-old poor children at a cost of roughly \$7,000 per pupil.
- Congress should focus on improving Head Start programs by increasing the focus on academic preparation, requiring stronger accountability, spurring innovation through a state management pilot program, and setting responsible appropriations levels.

This paper, in its entirety, can be found at:
www.heritage.org/education/bg1701.cfm

Produced by the Domestic Policy Studies Department

Published by The Heritage Foundation
214 Massachusetts Ave., NE
Washington, DC 20002-4999
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The Questionable Efficacy of Head Start

The school readiness gap between poor children and their middle-class peers remains stubbornly large. Poor children enter first grade with a vocabulary that is a fraction of the size of their middle-class peers' vocabulary. They are less likely to know the letters of the alphabet or how to count.

This achievement gap persists into high school. On the National Assessment of Educational Progress tests in grades 4, 8, and 12, poor children score substantially lower than their middle- and upper-income peers in all three grades and in all subjects, and they are much more likely to score "below basic," the lowest level on the tests.³

Nearly four decades ago, recognition of this achievement gap resulted in the creation of Head Start. Regrettably, there is no clear evidence that Head Start has helped poor children gain any advantage that can be maintained over time. In 1969, Westinghouse Learning Corporation showed that cognitive gains among the program's participants faded away within a few grades.⁴ In 1985, the Head Start Synthesis Project, a meta-analysis of over 210 studies and reports, found that children in Head Start had

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.⁵

A few studies, however, indicated that Head Start participants were less likely to be enrolled in special education or held back a grade.⁶

More recently, the government-funded Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) of Head Start participants in 1997 and 2000 found that participants improved slightly on skills tests after one year. Despite the improvement, participants still scored below the 23rd percentile on tests of vocabulary, early mathematics, and writing.⁷ Moreover, FACES did not demonstrate that the gains of participant children were attributable to Head Start: The survey did not include a control group, and without controlling for other factors, FACES could not provide information on the net effect of Head Start.

A recent long-term impact study found that, overall, Head Start participants (1) did not complete high school at higher rates, (2) did not attend college at higher rates, (3) did not have higher earnings at ages 23–25, and (4) did not have different arrest rates. However, in this study, Head Start appears to have an effect when analyzed by the race of the participant. For African-Americans, Head Start had no effect on high school completion, college attendance, and earnings, although black Head Start participants did have lower arrest rates. For whites, Head Start participants were more likely to complete high school and attend some college, but Head Start had no effect on arrests.⁸

How Head Start students compare to similar children not in the program is unknown because there has been no large-scale experimental impact study comparing Head Start participants to non-partici-

3. NAEP assessment results provide information about what students know and can do, as well as what they should know and be able to do, on a variety of subjects. The three achievement levels for each grade (4, 8, and 12) are Basic, Proficient, and Advanced. See U.S. Department of Education, National Center for Education Statistics, "The Nation's Report Card," updated October 16, 2003, at nces.ed.gov/nationsreportcard.
4. Sharon M. McGroder, "Head Start: What Do We Know About What Works?" U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, March 29, 1990, at aspe.hhs.gov/daltcp/reports/headstar.htm.
5. R. McKey, L. Condelli, H. Ganson, B. Barrett, C. McConkey, and M. Plantz, *The Impact of Head Start on Children, Family, and Communities: Final Report of the Head Start Evaluation, Synthesis and Utilization Project*, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, OHDS 85-31193, June 1985.
6. *Ibid.*
7. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Strengthening Head Start: What the Evidence Shows*, June 2003, at aspe.hhs.gov/hsp/StrengthenHeadStart03/report.htm.
8. Eliana Garces, Duncan Thomas, and Janet Currie, "Longer-Term Effects of Head Start," *American Economic Review*, Vol. 92, No. 4 (September 2002), pp. 999–1012.

pants from similar backgrounds. A large-scale impact study mandated in the 1998 reauthorization and begun last year is in progress. It will determine whether or not the participants have improved cognitive social and emotional development, communication and motor skills, knowledge, and health when compared to non-participants. However, the impact study data will not be available until 2006.

Meanwhile, Congress has begun to reauthorize the program. In July 2003, the House of Representatives passed the School Readiness Act (H.R. 2210) by a vote of 217 to 216. The bill emphasizes cognitive development and school readiness, guarantees civil rights to faith-based providers, strengthens standards and accountability, and allows a limited state innovation plan. The House bill increases Head Start funding by \$202 million, bringing the total to \$6.87 billion per year.⁹

Two Head Start bills have also been introduced in the Senate: S. 1474, sponsored by Senator Lamar Alexander (R-TN), and S. 1483, introduced by Senator Christopher Dodd (D-CT). Neither bill contains the state pilot program, and S. 1483 does not guarantee civil rights protections for faith-based Head Start providers. S. 1483 also increases Head Start funding by more than \$10 billion.

Recommendations for Reform

There will be several opportunities to insert meaningful reform provisions into the Head Start legislation during the mark-up in the Senate Health, Education, Labor, and Pensions Committee, on the Senate floor, and in conference. Specifically, the following four reforms would strengthen the Head Start program.

- **Strengthen Head Start school readiness standards.** Building on the 1998 reauthorization, the House bill sets standards for language skills, pre-reading knowledge, counting and other pre-mathematics knowledge, cognitive abili-
- **Guarantee civil rights protections for faith-based providers.** The House bill would bring the Head Start program into conformance with Title VII of the Civil Rights Act by guaranteeing the right of faith-based organizations to hire

ties, social development, and progress in language among non-English-speaking children. The standards are meant to correct a lack of academic goals in some Head Start programs. As Nicholas Zill, vice president of the Westat research firm notes:

[W]hen you look at where Head Start has been in the last few years, they've been bending over backwards to avoid literacy skills.... The ironic thing is that most Head Start parents want their kids to learn those skills.¹⁰

H.R. 2210 would require grantees to develop annual program improvement goals and meet those goals as a condition of renewal. It would also require the Department of Health and Human Services to make unannounced inspections. Currently, the department calls ahead before a visit. Monitoring services may be contracted out to reduce conflicts of interest and enable better management of heavy caseloads. Giving states oversight, as would be the case under the House pilot program, would also improve program supervision.

These provisions will also help curtail fraud and abuse. Recently, the *Kansas City Star*, *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, *Charleston Post and Courier*, and *San Antonio Express-News* have reported alleged instances of financial misconduct and excessive salaries for administrators at some Head Start centers.¹¹

9. Committee on Education and the Workforce, U.S. House of Representatives, "The School Readiness Act of 2003," July 23, 2003, at edworkforce.house.gov/issues/108th/education/earlychildhood/billsummary.htm.

10. Koppleman, "Reauthorizing Head Start."

11. See Deann Smith and Dan Margolies, "Head Start Fallout Spreads Congress Notices KC Director's Salary," *The Kansas City Star*, October 18, 2003; Rod Antone, "Head Start Director on Leave for Audit Investigators Will Review Allegations of Financial Misconduct," *Honolulu Star-Bulletin*, October 10, 2003; Steve Reeves, "Head Start Controversy Focuses on Control Critics Seek State Oversight," *Charleston Post and Courier*, October 12, 2003; and Roddy Stinson, "Mamas, Let Your Babies Grow Up to Be Head Start Executives," *San Antonio Express-News*, September 28, 2003.

people of the same faith. At present, providers may not hire staff according to their religious principles—a right Congress has guaranteed faith-based organizations operating many other federal social service programs.

- **Encourage state innovation and improvement.** The House legislation also authorizes a pilot program that allows eight states to coordinate their Head Start programs with state-based early childhood education programs. Under current law, states have no authority to work with or improve Head Start programs. More than 40 states operate preschool programs, and eight states fund both state and Head Start programs.¹²

In fact, taxpayers are currently spending more than \$25 billion each year for state and federal early childhood care and education programs.¹³ State and federal programs such as Head Start, Title I preschool programs, Early Head Start, Even Start, Individuals with Disabilities Education Act preschool programs, Reading First, the Social Services Block Grant, Child Care and Development Fund, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families ensure that the majority of poor children in institutional day care or preschool receive some form of government subsidization.¹⁴ Poor children are also eligible for food stamps, WIC (Supplemental Nutrition Programs for Women, Infants, and Children), and Medicaid as well as other state, local, and private health and nutrition programs.

The pilot program in H.R. 2210 would allow eight states to integrate and improve Head Start programs. To be eligible to participate, states must have standards that meet or exceed the federal Head Start standards for services, teachers, financial management, and facilities, and they

are not allowed to reduce state or local spending on preschool programs.

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.¹⁵

- **Establish responsible authorization levels.** Given the questionable efficacy of the Head Start program, it is premature to increase spending. Nevertheless, both the Senate and House bills would increase Head Start funding. Some assert that more money is needed to serve more children when in fact better coordination of existing programs and funds is a better solution. A lack of coordination, according to the Department of Health and Human Services, has resulted in “overlapping programs and duplication of services at the state and local level” and “under-enrollment in Head Start programs and gaps in services.”¹⁶

The solution to duplication and underenrollment is not more money but better alignment. Moreover, exorbitant increases in authorization levels create unrealistic expectations for the

12. Koppleman, “Reauthorizing Head Start.”

13. *Ibid.*

14. Brian M. Riedl, “The Myth of a Child Care Crisis,” Heritage Foundation Backgrounder No. 1649, May 2, 2003, at www.heritage.org/Research/Welfare/bg1649.cfm.

15. Ron Haskins and Isabel Sawhill, “The Future of Head Start,” Brookings Institution *Welfare Reform and Beyond* Brief No. 27, July 2003.

16. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, *Strengthening Head Start*.

appropriations process and focus debate on funding rather than on policy.

Conclusion

Despite almost four decades and \$66 billion, it is unclear whether the Head Start program has had any long-term impact on the children it serves. Researchers are engaged in a large impact study, but the results will not be available before the program's reauthorization.

Meanwhile, Congress has the opportunity to enact commonsense improvements in the program. By emphasizing cognitive development and school readiness, Congress can ensure that all centers are

helping children learn the skills essential for starting school with a head start. By guaranteeing civil rights to faith-based providers, Congress can ensure the ability of these organizations to fulfill their mission without government interference. By enacting a state innovation pilot program, Congress can enable states to improve and integrate Head Start programs with other preschool programs.

Together with a fiscally responsible authorization, these reforms are the components of a reform-minded Head Start bill.

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