

What Works Clearinghouse



July 2010

WWC Quick Review of the Report “Head Start Impact Study: Final Report”^{1,2}

What is this study about?

This study examined the effects of offering Head Start to preschoolers. Head Start is a federal program aimed at boosting the school readiness of low-income children by providing preschool education and health and nutrition services.

The study analyzed data on about 4,700 preschool-aged children who applied for enrollment for the 2002–03 program year at one of about 380 Head Start centers randomly selected for the study. The study followed the students through first grade.

The study compared the outcomes of children who were offered enrollment in Head Start to the outcomes of children who were not offered enrollment.

School-readiness outcomes, which are the focus of this quick review, were measured using standardized cognitive assessments of language and literacy, pre-writing, and math skills administered at the end of each year through first grade.³

What Groups of Children Were Contrasted?

Students were selected from a nationally representative sample of Head Start centers.

The number of applicants exceeded the number of available slots, so enrollment offers were granted randomly to a cohort of 3-year-olds and a cohort of 4-year-olds.

Families of children not offered enrollment could seek services from other center-based care providers or neighboring Head Start centers not involved with the study (about 43% of 3-year-olds and 49% of 4-year-olds did this).

Among 3-year-olds, all study children were eligible to apply for Head Start as 4-year-olds the following year.

Although some students offered enrollment did not attend Head Start (about 15% of 3-year-olds and 20% of 4-year-olds), and some students in the control group received either Head Start or other similar services, all were included in the analysis as members of the group to which they were randomly assigned.

(continued)

¹ Puma, M. et al. (2010). *Head Start impact study: Final report*. Washington, DC: Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

² Absence of conflict of interest: This study was conducted in part by staff from Chesapeake Research Associates, Abt Associates, and American Institutes for Research, which are subcontractors to Mathematica on the WWC. For this reason, no staff from these organizations participated in the review of the study or development of this quick review.

³ The study also examined children’s childcare experiences, socio-emotional development, health status and access to health services, and parenting practices. These outcomes fall outside the scope of the quick review protocol, and program effectiveness on these outcomes is not evaluated in this quick review.

Quick reviews assess whether a study’s design is consistent with WWC evidence standards. They are based on the evidence published in the report cited and rely on effect sizes and significance levels as reported by study authors. The WWC rating refers only to the results summarized above and not necessarily to all results presented in the study. The WWC does not confirm study authors’ findings or contact authors for additional information about the study.

What did the study authors report?

The study found that, for 3-year-olds, children offered enrollment in Head Start had higher scores on four of eight measures of language and literacy, the single measure of pre-writing, and one of two measures of math skills at the end of the Head Start year than children not offered enrollment. However, none of these effects were statistically significant when measured at the end of the following year, kindergarten, or first grade.

For 4-year-olds, the study authors found that children offered enrollment in Head Start had higher scores on six of eight measures of language and literacy at the end of the Head Start year than children not offered enrollment. However, none of these effects were statistically significant when measured at the end of kindergarten or first grade. There were no significant effects for the measures of pre-writing or math skills.

WWC Rating

The research described in this report is consistent with WWC evidence standards

Strengths: The groups of students contrasted in the study were formed by random assignment.

Cautions: The report contains conflicting information about the sample sizes used in the main analyses of 3-year-olds at the end of their first-grade year and 4-year-olds at the end of their Head Start year, making it difficult to determine the attrition rates for these samples. For this reason, findings from these rounds of data collection should be interpreted with caution.