

ISSUE BRIEF

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Head Start Impact Evaluation Report Finally Released

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In 2008, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) completed data collection for its third-grade follow-up study of Head Start, a federal preschool program designed to improve the kindergarten readiness of low-income children. Four years later, just before Christmas, the agency finally published the results of the congressionally mandated evaluation. The report's publication date reads October 2012, meaning the final product sat at HHS for two months before being released.

Since 1965, taxpayers have spent more than \$180 billion on Head Start.¹ Yet, over the decades, this Great Society relic has failed to improve academic outcomes for the children it was designed to help. The third-grade follow-up evaluation is the latest in a growing body of evidence that should urge policymakers

to seriously consider Head Start's future.

Head Start and Performance.

The timing of the release raises questions about whether HHS was trying to bury the findings in the report, which shows, among other outcomes, that by third grade, the \$8 billion Head Start program had little to no impact on cognitive, social-emotional, health, or parenting practices of participants. On a few measures, access to Head Start had harmful effects on children.

Now that the report has finally been published, the findings of the scientifically rigorous evaluation that tracked 5,000 three- and four-year-old children through third grade should inform federal policymakers who allocate billions of dollars annually to Head Start. Moreover, Congress will soon vote on a supplemental aid package to Hurricane Sandy victims that includes \$100 million in additional Head Start funding. The Senate Appropriations Committee notes that 265 Head Start centers will receive the funding, which equates to more than \$377,000 per center.²

2010 Head Start Impact Study.

In 2010, HHS released the findings of the *Head Start Impact Study*, which tracked the progress of three- and

four-year-olds entering Head Start through kindergarten and first grade. Overall, Head Start had little to no positive effects for children who were granted access.³

For the four-year-old group, compared to similarly situated children not allowed access to Head Start, access to the program failed to raise the cognitive abilities of participants on 41 measures.⁴ 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.

Head Start also had little to no effect on the other socio-emotional, health, or parenting outcomes of children participating in the program. For the four-year-old group, access to Head Start failed to have an effect for 69 out of 71 socio-emotional, health, and parenting outcomes. For example, "Teachers reported that Head Start group children were more shy or socially reticent than the control group children."⁵ The three-year-old

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group did slightly better; access to Head Start failed to have an effect for 66 of the 71 socio-emotional, health, and parenting outcomes.

The Long-Delayed Third-Grade Impact Study. The third-grade follow-up to the *Head Start Impact Study* followed students' performance through the end of third grade. The results shed further light on the ineffectiveness of Head Start. By third grade, Head Start had little to no effect on cognitive, social-emotional, health, or parenting outcomes of participating children.

Impacts on Cognitive Development. For cognitive development, the third-grade study assessed 11 outcomes for the original three- and four-year-old cohorts. Access to Head Start for each group had no statistically measurable effects on all measures of cognitive ability, including numerous measures of reading, language, and math ability.⁶

Impacts on Social-Emotional Development. For social-emotional

development, the third-grade study assessed 19 outcomes for each cohort. For measures of parent-reported social-emotional outcomes, access to Head Start for the three-year-old cohort failed to affect four of the five measures.⁷ For this cohort, Head Start failed to affect four measures of parental-reported problem behaviors. However, access to Head Start yielded a slight beneficial impact on children in the areas of social skills and positive approaches to learning.

For the four-year-old cohort, access to Head Start failed to affect four of the five parent-reported social-emotional outcomes.⁸ For the four-year-old cohort, access to Head Start is associated with a small decrease in aggressive behavior. However, access to Head Start for this cohort failed to affect parental reports of hyperactive, withdrawn, and total problem behaviors. In contrast to the finding for the three-year-old cohort, access to Head Start failed to affect children displaying

better social skills and positive approaches to learning.

For third grade, access to Head Start had no statistically measurable effect on the 10 teacher-reported measures of social-emotional development for the three-year-old cohort.⁹ However, for the four-year-old cohort, out of 10 measures, access to Head Start is associated with one harmful impact.¹⁰ Teachers reported "strong evidence of an unfavorable impact on the incidence of children's emotional symptoms."¹¹ Access to Head Start for this cohort had no beneficial or harmful impacts on the remaining nine teacher-reported measures.

For child-reported measures of social-emotional outcomes, access to Head Start had no statistically measurable effect on the four outcomes for the three-year-old cohort.¹² On the other hand, access to Head Start for the four-year-old cohort appears to have had one harmful impact—children in the third grade

1. Inflation adjusted to 2009 dollars. David B. Muhlhausen and Dan Lips, "Head Start Earns an F: No Lasting Impact for Children by First Grade," Heritage Foundation *Backgrounders* No. 2363, January 21, 2010, http://www.heritage.org/research/reports/2010/01/head-start-earns-an-f-no-lasting-impact-for-children-by-first-grade#_ftn2.
2. U.S. Senate Committee on Appropriations, "Summary: FY13 Disaster Assistance Supplemental," December 12, 2012, <http://www.appropriations.senate.gov/news.cfm?method=news.view&id=fa7aebb6-62d5-49fc-8e78-6ad7f69261d5> (accessed January 10, 2013).
3. U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Head Start Impact Study: Final Report*, January 2010, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/hs_impact_study_final.pdf (accessed January 7, 2013). For a review of the kindergarten and first-grade findings, see Muhlhausen and Lips, "Head Start Earns an F."
4. For the *Head Start Impact Study* findings, all impacts that reach the 5 percent confidence level are considered to be statistically significant. When findings are statistically significant, social scientists can conclude with a high degree of confidence that the result was caused by the program, not by chance.
5. HHS, *Head Start Impact Study*, p. 5-3.
6. Michael Puma, Stephen Bell, Ronna Cook, Camilla Held, Pam Broene, Frank Jenkins, Andrew Mashburn, and Jason Downer, "Third Grade Follow-up to the Head Start Impact Study Final Report," U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, October 2012), Exhibit 4.2, p. 78 and Exhibit 4.1, p. 77, http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/head_start_report.pdf (accessed December 21, 2012).
7. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 4.4, pp. 83-84.
8. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 4.3, pp. 81-82.
9. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 4.4, pp. 83-84.
10. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 4.3, pp. 81-82.
11. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 4.4, p. 84.
12. *Ibid.*, Exhibit 4.4, pp. 83-84.

with access to Head Start reported worse peer relations than their counterparts.¹³

Impacts on Child Health Outcomes. For parent-reported child health, the study assessed five third-grade outcomes for each cohort. Access to Head Start had no statistically measurable effect on all five health measures for each cohort, including receipt of dental care, health insurance coverage, and overall child health status being excellent or good.¹⁴

Impacts on Parenting Outcomes. For parenting outcomes, the third-grade study assessed 10 measures for both cohorts. Access to Head Start had no statistically measurable effect on nine of the 10 measures reported by parents and the two measures reported by teachers for the three-year-old cohort.¹⁵ However, parents

of children in the three-year-old cohort with access to Head Start self-reported an improved authoritative parenting style (i.e., high control and high warmth) compared to their counterparts.

Similarly, access to Head Start had no statistically measurable effect on nine of the 10 measures reported by parents and the two measures reported by teachers for the four-year-old cohort.¹⁶ Differing from the three-year-old cohort, parents of children in the four-year-old cohort reported to have spent more time with their children than their counterparts in the control group.

Conclusion. President Obama has pledged to use only one test when determining which education programs to fund: “It’s not whether an idea is liberal or conservative,” Obama stated, “but whether it

works.”¹⁷ HHS’s third-grade follow-up evaluation makes it unequivocally clear that Head Start fails that test.

HHS has released definitive evidence that the federal government’s 48-year experiment with Head Start has failed children and left taxpayers a tab of more than \$180 billion. In the interest of children and taxpayers, it’s time for this nearly half-century experiment to come to an end. *If* the federal government continues to fund Head Start, policymakers should allow states to make their Head Start dollars portable, following children to a private preschool provider of choice.

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13. Ibid., Exhibit 4.3, pp. 81-82.

14. Ibid., Exhibit 4.5, p. 85 and Exhibit 4.6, p. 86.

15. Ibid., Exhibit 4.8, p. 88.

16. Ibid., Exhibit 4.7, p. 87.

17. President Barack Obama, speech before the U.S. Hispanic Chamber of Commerce, March 10, 2009, http://www.nytimes.com/2009/03/10/us/politics/10text-obama.html?_r=4&pagewanted=1& (accessed January 10, 2013).