



Head Start Policy

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Topic

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Introduction

With nearly \$7 billion U.S. in federal funding during fiscal year 2008 and an enrolment of about 900,000 children,¹ Head Start is by far the federal government's largest education initiative for preschoolers in poverty. Established in 1965, this federally funded program takes a comprehensive approach toward enhancing children's learning and development, offering a mix of educational, social, nutritional and health services to three- to five-year-olds and their low-income families. Through a companion initiative, Early Head Start, services are also offered to over 60,000 children under age three.

Subject

Head Start is often viewed as the nation's "laboratory" for developing effective interventions for children in poverty. As such, issues affecting this program have broad implications for early childhood education policy in general. Head Start began as a part-day, summer-only program for most children. Today, children may enroll in Head Start/Early Head Start for two or more years, and many programs operate for a full school day or integrate with other programs to offer a longer day. Yet serious questions remain about the program's coverage and effectiveness. What does research say about its outreach and outcomes? What are some of the major policy issues Head Start will face in the future?

Problems

Head Start has faced challenges in meeting the goal of offering comprehensive services to children from low-income families. Chief among these difficulties is the fact that Head Start has not received sufficient funding to serve all children in poverty. Also, given that families move in and out of poverty, it has been an ongoing challenge to target the pool of children who might be eligible at a given time. Finally, the optimal mix of services (education, social, health, etc.), teacher qualifications (much lower than public schools require for kindergarten), and the curriculum (how and what to teach) are still matters of some debate.

Research Context and Key Research Questions

Since the late 1960s, there have been a number of studies of Head Start's impact, some suggesting that the program was effective and others suggesting that its benefits were transitory. Much of this research suffers from methodological drawbacks that make it difficult to interpret the findings. However, evidence supports the general conclusion that children attending Head Start receive both short- and long-term benefits.² Recent studies have been methodologically stronger and provide better estimates of impact. A key question is: how much does attending Head Start affect children's development, compared to demographically similar children who do not attend?

Recent Research Results

Innovative studies released over the past 10 years have broadened the knowledge base on Head Start, with new implications about how the program can better serve children.

In a study of Head Start's long-term effects, Garces, Thomas, and Currie³ analyzed nationwide self-reported data on Head Start attendance to compare sibling pairs in which one sibling participated in the program and the other did not. Benefits reported in this study include increased high school graduation and college attendance rates for white participants, and reductions in criminal charges or convictions among African-American participants. Drawbacks of this research include an inability to confirm the accuracy of self-reported Head Start attendance, and use of the statistical assumption that one sibling's participation in Head Start has no effect on the non-participating sibling. Another creative approach to estimating Head Start's long-term benefits finds that Head Start increased high school completion and college attendance rates.⁴

In 1997, researchers began collecting data for a large-scale federally funded study known as the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES).⁵ FACES was designed to investigate the impact of Head Start's educational and comprehensive services using nationally representative samples. Data collection for three cohorts of children has been completed thus far, and data collection for a fourth cohort is underway. However, despite the scope of this study and its representative sample, no comparison group exists, and the study has no sound method for inferring program impact on children's learning and development.

In a small-scale study, Abbott-Shim et al.⁶ used a random assignment design to select children into a Head Start program with a waiting list. Head Start attendees were then compared to non-attendees. The researchers noted a variety of positive outcomes for Head Start attendees, including both cognitive and health domains for children, as well as in parents' health and safety habits.

The ongoing Head Start Impact Study⁷ combines the best design features of previous Head Start research, employing a rigorous experimental design with a nationally representative sample of nearly 5,000 children. Beginning in 2002, three- and four-year-olds were randomly assigned to a Head Start group or a non-Head Start group, providing a better basis for examining the effects of Head Start and eliminating concerns regarding selection bias associated with earlier studies. This experimental design, complementing

an experimental study of Early Head Start,⁸ provides the strongest test yet of Head Start's effects.

The Impact Study examines progress in cognitive, social-emotional, health and parenting domains for Head Start and non-Head Start children. Initial results show very modest outcomes for participating in a single year of Head Start. For example, the effect on receptive vocabulary was about 1/10 of a standard deviation, almost exactly what was found for Early Head Start. No significant effects were found on mathematics. Parents read to their children 2.9 to 3.0 times per week, rather than 2.8 times. The strongest impact of Head Start was found on parent reports of children's literacy skills and receiving dental care. Additional information about Head Start's longitudinal effects will become available as future rounds of data are released.

Conclusions

While Head Start has been a topic of research for 40 years, until the past 10 years few studies of the program have used rigorous methodologies. Findings from this more methodologically sound research indicate that Head Start participation yields modest positive outcomes in children. However, the magnitude of this impact suggests that the program does not reach its full potential. A likely explanation is that the educational services offered by Head Start are too weak. During the 2006-2007 school year, about forty percent of Head Start teachers were reported to have a bachelor's degree or higher.⁹ Head Start lacks the funding to hire teachers with qualifications on par with kindergarten teachers – specifically, bachelor's degrees – and to pay them comparable salaries. Head Start's 2007 reauthorization requires at least half of Head Start teachers in center-based programs to have bachelor's degrees by 2013. As a result, teacher qualifications and compensation will remain a key issue in the coming years.

Implications

Head Start represents an early opportunity to help children in poverty achieve educational success. Yet at its current level of funding, the Head Start program is not able to serve all eligible children. For many of those it does reach, Head Start does not yet provide a highly qualified teacher. Also, the benefits associated with Head Start participation are smaller in magnitude than those shown for more intensive model preschool initiatives. In setting priorities for the future of Head Start, policy-makers face several important decisions. Should Head Start programs be expanded to serve all children in poverty? How quickly will teacher qualifications and pay be improved? How intensive should the services be? What mix of service components is optimal, and what type of curriculum should be offered? As Head Start continues to evolve, research on the program will further contribute to our knowledge of how to make interventions for children in poverty more effective.

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