

Head Start: Making a Popular Program Work

Head Start, the federal government's preschool program for low-income children, is one of the nation's most popular domestic initiatives. In 1980, President Carter praised it as "a program that works." President Reagan included Head Start in the "safety net" and has presided over a substantial funding increase.

Head Start began in 1965 as a 6-week summer experiment in using child development services to improve the future prospects of disadvantaged children. It quickly became a full year program. Now, 20 years old, it serves about 450,000 children, at an annual cost of more than \$1 billion.

The program's popularity is based on the widespread impression that it lifts poor children out of poverty by improving their learning ability and school performance. Unfortunately, the actual evidence is disappointing.

According to a recent report prepared for the US Department of Health and Human Services, Head Start makes an immediate improvement in intellectual skills and emotional development. It also improves the general health of participants through nutritional, medical, and dental services. But long-term educational and social gains are another story. The Department of Health and Human Services report reviewed 1,600 documents relating to Head Start, including the research results of 210 previously funded Head Start research projects. It found that Head Start's educational impact disappears within 2 years. According to the report¹

One year after Head Start, the differences between Head Start and non-Head Start children on achievement and school readiness tests continue to be in the educationally meaningful range, but the two groups score at about the same level on intelligence tests. By the end of the second year there are no educationally meaningful differences on any of the measures.

The report did find a tendency for Head Start graduates to be "less likely to fail a grade in school or to be assigned to special education classes than children who did not attend. However, this finding is based on very few studies."^{1(p9)}

This disappointing finding reinforces the results of a 1969 evaluation—the Westinghouse study²—that found few long-term gains from Head Start participation. The Westinghouse study was widely criticized on methodological grounds and its weaknesses allowed Head Start's supporters to overlook the critical results. Some Head Start advocates

have resorted to criticizing the methodology of this new Department of Health and Human Services study to explain it away (*High Scope Resource*, Winter 1985). But the persistent finding of few long-term effects undercuts this argument. Taken together, the available research suggests that, although there are many effective individual programs, the Head Start program, in general, has a number of problems and these problems limit its ability to make a lasting impact on disadvantaged children.

The impression that Head Start "works" stems largely from a Cornell University study of the long-term effects of 11 preschool programs. It found that their graduates, after 6 to 13 years, were significantly less likely to have failed a grade in school or to have been assigned to special education classes than children who did not attend a preschool.³ Lost in the publicity was the fact that only two of the preschool programs studied were Head Start programs. The other nine were funded at significantly higher levels and (unlike Head Start) they were professionally staffed¹ (*High Scope Resource*, 1986, vol 5, p 1, 20-23). Indeed, the Cornell report specifically warned against generalizing its finding to the Head Start program.³

The absence of long-term benefits from the federal Head Start program does not mean that comprehensive and quality preschool programs for low-income children are not important. They are, as the Cornell study suggests.

An even more dramatic example comes from the Perry PreSchool Project of Ypsilanti, MI. In the early 1960s, researchers began tracking 120 3- and 4-year-old children to determine whether a 1-year, five-day a week, 2½-hour a day program, reinforced by teacher visits to the home, would make a difference in the lives of impoverished children.

They found that children who had the preschool experience fared much better than a control group without this exposure. On a test of functional competency, those who went through the program were much more likely to score at or above the national average than those who did not. More importantly, employment and postsecondary education rates were almost double, the high school graduation rate was almost one-third higher, teenage pregnancy rates were almost half, and arrest rates were 40% lower.⁴

Other preschool programs have reported similar success. The Frank Porter Graham Child Development Center at the University of North Carolina, for example, reports that, when the more than 90 children they studied completed the second grade, those who were in their program averaged almost ten IQ points higher than the children who were

not, and they experienced only half as many school failures. In addition, the program was found to have sharpened children's language skills and boosted their achievement test scores from the bottom 25% to near the national average (*Education Week*, Oct 23, 1985, p 8).

Such promising results have led to calls for expanded preschool programs. Recently, the Committee for Economic Development, a group of business executives, called for "a serious and systematic investment in enriched early childhood education for children from poor families." The research results, however, indicate that not all preschool programs are created equal. Head Start appears to achieve some of its goals, but it does not provide the long-term educational gains that are the primary reason for its popularity. What is the solution?

Clearly, the answer is not to cut the program or reduce funding. Its short-term and social benefits alone justify its continuation. And, as the poverty rate for children continues to increase, preschool programs are more important than ever. At present, only one in six eligible low-income children participates in Head Start, a proportion that is decreasing as the poverty rate for children is increasing.

But the answer is not to ignore Head Start's problems. Knowledgeable observers have a clear agenda for reform: closer ties between Head Start providers and elementary schools, more and better parental participation, more emphasis on educational activities, and more attention to building the children's school readiness skills in parents as well as children.

It is one thing to talk about reforms and another thing to enact them. Political realities intrude. Nobody wants to see the program changed. Conservatives are hesitant to propose any changes in Head Start lest they be accused of being antipoor or seeking to shred the social safety net. Indeed, the Reagan administration could not even figure out how to issue a press release about the Head Start report without getting clobbered. Liberals are unwilling to press for changes for fear of alienating an important part of their constituency. Child development and Head Start groups are afraid that acknowledging the program's weaknesses will open the door to budget cuts, especially in the wake of Gramm-Rudman. The result is an uneasy—and unstated—truce.

In the meantime, the program is popular, does some good, and, except for misplaced expectations, does no harm. The sad part is that Head Start could easily be made much more effective. The biggest losers, of course, are not the politicians (who will get reelected) or the interest groups (their funding

continues); it is disadvantaged children. They deserve better.

DOUGLAS J. BESHAROV JD, LLM
TERRY W. HARTLE, PHD
American Enterprise Institute for Public
Policy Research
Washington, DC

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Head Start: Evolution of a Successful Comprehensive Child Development Program

The commentary by Besharov and Hartle¹ concludes that disadvantaged children deserve better than what they are getting. Indeed, it is our view—along with virtually all Americans—that all of our children deserve better. The improvement of the health, education, and welfare of all children is a never ending quest.

Perhaps the frustration with the Head Start program that permeates the Besharov and Hartle commentary is due to a fundamental misconception of the goals of the Head Start program. From its inception, Head Start has been a comprehensive child development program and not a program focused solely on long-term cognitive gains. Besharov and Hartle claim that Head Start's popularity is

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