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Put Politics Aside and Help the “Head Start” Program

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Everybody likes Head Start, the Federal Government's preschool program for low-income children. In 1980, President Jimmy Carter praised it as "a program that works." President Reagan included Head Start in the "safety net" and presided over a 30 percent increase in funding. Now 20 years old, it serves about 450,000 children, at an annual cost of more than \$1 billion.

Head Start's popularity is based on the widespread impression that it lifts disadvantaged children out of poverty by improving their school performance and future prospects. But if Head Start is judged by its ability to boost the educational achievement of disadvantaged children, the evidence is disappointing.

We should put aside political considerations that prevent us from admitting to the program's shortcomings and work to correct them. According to a recent report prepared for the Department of Health and Human Services by C.S.R. Inc., a consulting firm, Head Start can help a child make rapid improvement in intellectual skills, emotional development and general health. But long-term educational and social gains are elusive. The report, which reviewed 210 Head Start research projects, found that this initial impact disappears within two years. According to the report, two years after a child leaves the Head Start program, "there are no educationally meaningful differences" between children who were in Head Start and those that were not.

This conclusion reinforces the findings of a 1969 evaluation - a study by the Westinghouse Corporation - that found few long-term educational gains. The Westinghouse study was criticized for the method by which it reached its conclusions, and Head Start supporters therefore ignored the critical results. Now some Head Start advocates are trying to find fault with the research techniques of the most recent study. But the persistent finding of a lack of beneficial long-term effects weakens their counterattack.

The impression that Head Start works stems largely from a report in 1980 on a Cornell University study that examined the effects of 11 preschool programs. It found that children enrolled in the programs were less likely to have failed a grade in school or to have been assigned to special education than a similar group of children who were not in the programs.

Lost in the publicity, however, 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 had a highly trained staff. In fact, the Cornell report specifically warned.

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