

## Point/Counterpoint

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### HEAD START: MEND IT, DON'T EXPAND IT (YET)

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For 40 years, Head Start has sought to *improve the life prospects* of low-income children. Since 1965, about 20 million children have gone through the program, at a total cost of more than \$100 billion (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005a). Head Start was supposed to be reauthorized in 2003, but for two years Congress was immobilized as the Administration and a few Republican allies pushed for what they saw as needed improvements in the program—while opponents argued that the proposals would hurt poor children.

The impasse was broken earlier this year when key Republicans essentially threw in the towel and gave up their efforts to change the program. In fact, committees in both Houses have now voted unanimously to expand eligibility for Head Start. The Senate bill would raise the income eligibility cap from the poverty line to 130 percent of poverty (a roughly 35 percent increase in eligible children), and the House bill would allow programs to enroll more 1- and 2-year-olds, rather than the traditional target group of 3- and 4-year-olds (ultimately doubling the number of eligible children).

Just weeks after these votes, however, the results of a large-scale evaluation of Head Start were released. Confirming the findings of earlier, small evaluations, this new report found disappointingly small impacts on disadvantaged children (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005b). But instead of galvanizing

action to improve the program, it looks like this new study will be ignored. Republicans, worn down by two years of battling, are reluctant to raise Head Start's problems for fear that Democrats and liberal advocates will paint them, yet again, as being against poor children. And Democrats are afraid that honesty about Head Start's weaknesses will sharpen the knives of conservative budget cutters. Meanwhile, the program's problems will likely worsen.

From its earliest days, Head Start has been extremely popular because it seemed to be one of the few Great Society programs that "worked." The idea is simple and makes great intuitive sense: a child's early learning experiences are *the basis of* later development and, given the connections between poverty and low academic achievement, a compensatory preschool program should help disadvantaged children catch up with more fortunate children. Who could be against a relatively low-cost, voluntary program that children and parents seem to love?

The public's impression that Head Start "works" largely stems from the widely trumpeted results of two small and richly-funded experimental programs from the 1960s and 1970s, the Perry Preschool and Abecedarian programs. Some advocates describe these hothouse programs as "Head Start-like," but that is an exaggeration: they cost as much as \$15,000 a year in today's dollars (50 percent more than Head Start), sometimes involved multiple years of services, served only a few hundred children, had well-trained teachers, and instructed parents on effective child rearing.

Most careful evaluations of actual Head Start programs, however, are much less rosy. They have shown either little effects or effects that "fade out" within a few years. Upon reflection, this should not come as a surprise, given the large cognitive and social deficits that Head Start children evidence, even after being in the program for two years (unless one thinks these children would be much worse off without Head Start).

Spurred by a 1997 U.S. Government Accountability Office report concluding that there was "*insufficient*" research to determine Head Start's impact (U.S. Government Accountability Office, 1997, p. 8), in 1998, Congress required the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services to conduct the first rigorous national evaluation of Head Start. To its credit, the Clinton Administration took this mandate seriously and initiated a 383-site randomized experiment (the gold-standard of evaluation) involving about 4,600 children. (In fact, throughout his presidency, Clinton and his appointees were strongly supportive of efforts to improve Head Start, even to the point of defunding especially mismanaged local programs.)

Sadly, this Head Start Impact Study (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2005b), released in June 2005, found that the program had little meaningful impact on low-income children. For 4-year-olds (half the program), statistically significant gains were detected in only 6 of 30 measures of social and cognitive development and family functioning. Results were somewhat better for 3-year-olds, with statistically significant differences on 14 of 30 measures; however, the measures that showed the most improvement tended to be superficial.

For both age groups, the actual gains were in limited areas and disappointingly small, making them unlikely to lead to later increases in school achievement. For example, even after spending about six months in Head Start, 4-year-olds could identify only two more letters than those who were not in the program, and 3-year-olds could identify one and one-half more letters. No gains were detected in much more important measures such as early math learning, oral comprehension (more indicative of later reading comprehension), motivation to learn, or social competencies, including the ability to interact with peers and teachers.

These impacts simply don't do enough to close the achievement gap between poor children (particularly minority children) and the general population. And they pale in comparison to gains made in smaller, demonstration programs. We should expect more of a program that serves over 900,000 children at a cost of almost \$7 billion a year (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, 2006).

Instead of acknowledging the troubling significance of these findings, the Head Start establishment and its allies immediately went on the offensive. The Head Start Association, for example, claimed that the study is "good news for Head Start" and warned that "those who have resolved to trash Head Start at every turn will twist this data to their ends" as part of their "continued attempts to dismantle the program" (National Head Start Association, 2005).

Whatever might be the motivations of the enemies of Head Start, many friends of low-income children find these results heartbreaking. Civilrights.org is a collaboration between the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights, the Leadership Conference on Civil Rights Education Fund, and 180 allied organizations. The best it could say about the study was that Head Start has a "modest impact" (Davis, 2005).

No single evaluation, of course, should decide the fate of an *important* program like Head Start, but this new study reinforces a developing professional consensus about Head Start's limitations. Many liberal foundations had already shifted their support away from Head Start and toward the expansion of prekindergarten services—which siphon off hundreds of thousands of children from Head Start programs. Many states have likewise begun funding expanded prekindergarten programs, again at Head Start's expense.

Perhaps the best indication of Head Start's declining reputation comes from low-income parents themselves, who often choose not to place their children in Head Start. Besides the new prekindergarten programs, which they seem to prefer, many working parents use regular child care (even if they have to help pay for it) or, instead, rely on relatives to care for their children. (This explains, by the way, why Head Start allies have pushed for an expansion of eligibility even in the absence of more funding. The program has essentially run out of eligible 4-year-olds to enroll.<sup>8</sup>)

After fighting many battles for survival over the past 40 years, the Head Start establishment is understandably wary of those who question the program's effectiveness. But this defensiveness has become counterproductive. Head Start cannot be improved without an honest appreciation of its weaknesses (as well as strengths) followed by a no-holds-barred inquiry into how it can be strengthened.

Instead of expanding eligibility, Congress should mandate a systematic research and demonstration effort to develop more effective approaches to early childhood education. Despite 40 years of operation, Head Start does not have a scientifically tested knowledge base about which approaches work—and for whom. Needed is a scientifically rigorous inquiry into the comparative effectiveness of various curricula and program elements, such as full-day versus part-day programs, one- versus two-year programs, traditional nine-month versus full-year programs, classroom size (paralleling work on class size done at the elementary level), and the training or formal education of teachers.

Distinctions among children will be crucial, for one of Head Start's key weaknesses is its one-size-fits-all approach to early education. Not all poor children need the same level of remedial assistance. Children from the most troubled families (usually

<sup>8</sup> Between 1997 and 2004, even as Head Start's funded enrollment increased by 22 percent, the number of 4-year-olds in the program increased by only 2 percent. See U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.(a); and U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, n.d.(b).

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headed by young, single mothers) surely need much more than the program currently provides. Other children need less, and many seem to do just fine in regular child care when their mothers work.

Conducting such a sustained inquiry would require substantial intellectual and political effort—because of the turf battles it would trigger, the scientific challenges involved in designing the many multi-site experiments, and the sustained monitoring and management needed. Nevertheless, without an effort on this scale and without such intellectual clarity, it is difficult to see how better approaches to child care and early childhood education can be developed.

Such a multifaceted R & D effort should be patterned after the new one for K through 12 education established under the No Child Left Behind legislation. That effort enjoys a \$400 million annual budget, compared to only \$20 million for Head Start. A doubling of Head Start's research budget would be a good start.

If no new money is available, Congress could reallocate some of the \$30 to \$111 million now designated in the pending reauthorization bills for quality improvements (especially because about half of these funds go to raise the salaries of Head Start staff, already among the highest in the early childhood education world).

Perhaps it is naive to think that Head Start can operate on the basis of careful research, rather than politics, but each year almost a million children pass through the program without getting the head start on learning they were promised. Shame on us.

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**AUTHOR QUERY**

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