



Prepared by the Region IV Head Start Association and the Tennessee Head Start Association

Head Start Impact Study – A Position Paper

With many research studies, the best place to start an analysis is the executive summary and its main conclusions. So it is with the “Head Start Impact Study,” published in January of 2010. Its “Key Findings,” located on page “iv,” note that there are: “... statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group on every measure of children’s preschool experiences ...” This central finding also answers the question the study was originally designed to answer; that is, “What difference does Head Start make to key outcomes of ... low-income children?” In short, Head Start makes a significant difference on every measure of key outcomes. This is the **central conclusion** of the report.

Of course, the study has other conclusions as well. One noted finding is that by the end of first grade, the Head Start children lost many of the test score advantages they had when they first began kindergarten. This finding has been used to argue that spending on Head Start should be discontinued “until we fix our elementary and secondary schools.” While the argument sounds logical, it actually makes little sense. It’s like saying there’s no point in feeding our children breakfast because – since they’re going to miss lunch anyhow – they won’t be that much hungrier by supper-time. Clearly, of course, it’s better to feed a child a nourishing breakfast, lunch, and supper. And so it is in this case: it would be better to make more aggressive investments in early elementary education so that all children can build upon (rather than lose) the gains they make during their pre-school years.

Happily, this study has prompted a similar response from the U. S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), which oversees Head Start programs, and from the U. S. Department of Education (DOE). HHS said that it is important to “provide the support that our children, from birth to eight, need to prepare to succeed later in school and in life.” In fact, the study has already formed part of Head Start’s “Road Map to Excellence,” a plan that details improvements that will boost school readiness and promote long-term success for children and families. Similarly, the DOE has noted the necessity for building “a more coordinated system of early care and education, and to focus on key improvements to teaching and learning in the early grades.” We also note that many improvements in Head Start have already been made since the study was done in 2003-05.

It’s also important to remember that this study is just one in a long series of studies over Head Start’s 45-year history that have pointed up the program’s strengths as it makes improvements in children’s educational outcomes and life outcomes. Many previous studies have, for example, already documented:

- Fewer grade repetitions, increased high school graduation rates & increased college attendance
- Fewer children going into special education classes
- Higher vocabulary levels
- Better emotional development
- Lower mortality rates of young children
- Fewer commissions of crimes as adults
- Families moving out of poverty and
- Significant impact on long-term cognitive abilities of adults who attended Head Start

On the reverse of this sheet, we have included a few of the major studies that have examined the impact of Head Start on the development of young children while they are in Head Start and after they have gone on to

kindergarten, elementary school, high school, college and beyond. These studies overwhelmingly support the notion that spending money on Head Start is not an expense, but an investment.

These studies, and many others, have shown that Head Start children begin kindergarten on track for success; that achievement ebbs and flows from grade to grade throughout the educational experience; and that issues of fade out at specific points in the education process are not new. Long-term studies continue to conclude that Head Start produces significant improvements in a wide variety of educational and life outcomes. A few of the studies:

(1) Zill, N. and Sorongon, A. (2004). Children's Cognitive Gains during Head Start and Kindergarten. Presentation at the National Head Start Conference Washington, DC. June 28-30, 2004.

(2) Abbott-Shim, M., Lambert, R., and McCarty, F. (2003). A Comparison of School Readiness Outcomes for Children Randomly Assigned to a Head Start Program and the Program's Wait List. *Journal of Education for Students Placed at Risk*. 8(2), pp. 210-211.

(3) Barnett, W. (2002, September 13). The Battle Over Head Start: What the Research Shows. Presentation at a Science and Public Policy Briefing Sponsored by the Federation of Behavioral, Psychological, and Cognitive Sciences; Garces, E., Thomas, D. and Currie, J. (2002, September). Longer-Term Effects of Head Start. *American Economic Review*. 92, 4: 999.

(4) McKey, R., L. Condelli, H. Ganson, B. Barrett, C. McConkey, and M. Plantz. (1985, June). The Impact of Head Start on Children, Families and Communities: Final Report of the Head Start Evaluation, Synthesis and Utilization Project. Contract Number 105-81-C-026. DHHS Publication Number (OHDS) 90-31193, IV-11.

(5) Zill, N., G. Resnick, A. Sorongon, K. Kim, K. O'Donnell, R. McKey, S. Pai-Samant, R. O'Brien, M. D'Elio, M. Vaden-Kiernan, and L. Tarullo. (2003, April 24). A Whole-Child Perspective on Head Start Reform: Findings on Children's Cognitive and Socio-Emotional Development from FACES 2000. Presented at the Biennial Meeting of the Society for Research in Child Development, 17-19.

(6) Meier, J. (2003, June 20). Interim Report. Kindergarten Readiness Study: Head Start Success. Preschool Service Department, San Bernardino County, California.

Please feel free to contact us if we can provide you with any further information.

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