



How America's Head Start Program Improves the Lives of Children and Families

Anne Day Leong, U.S. Fund for UNICEF

With President Obama's push to expand government subsidized preschool, an old debate on the effectiveness of Head Start has found its way back into the spot light. Launched in 1965, Head Start is a federally funded preschool program serving low-income families and those with foster children. The program has a unique "two-generation" approach, in that it provides individually tailored social services to families while offering educational child care and preschool programming for their children. Since the program was launched decades ago, debate has centered on how effective the program is at producing desired outcomes for children. Are the program's results worth the price? For fiscal year 2016, President Obama called for \$10.1 billion to be allocated to pay for Head Start services across the country, at a time when overall public funding for social services is limited. Because social service funding is limited and finite, Head Start must be subject to honest evaluations of its efficacy.

The debate so far tends to focus on one central question: how do we define success in Head Start? Should a successful preschool program produce purely academic benefits, or do behavioral benefits also matter? What about the impact on families that would otherwise be unable to afford child care or might become less stable without extra support? Both sides in the debates have cherry picked criteria and facts to paint oversimplified pictures. To sort out the debate, we must examine both the evidence for and against the efficacy of Head Start.

Academic Fade – the Case against Head Start

One of the earliest critical studies of the Head Start program established a phenomenon now known as the "Head Start Fade." Published in the late 1960s, the Westinghouse Report examined the academic success of children as they moved from Head Start preschools through kindergarten and grade school. The report found that, on average, children graduated from Head Start academically ahead of their similarly situated peers who did not attend Head Start programs. But, over time, the academic advantages of Head Start graduates faded. By third grade, the report found no academic differences between Head Start graduates and children that did not attend Head Start. Subsequent studies have confirmed that Head Start produces short-term gains in children's standardized test and intelligence scores, but all gains "wash out" by the time youngsters reach third grade.

Debate over the methodological issues has raged for decades, but given the sheer number and variety of methods used to study the long-term academic impacts of Head Start, it is fair to say the academic attainment "fade" is a very real phenomenon. We do not know, however, whether the fade is caused by the rapid learning and development of children entering school for the first time and catching up to their more advanced Head Start peers, or if it happens because Head Start graduates stagnate after they enter public schools with many

low-income pupils and with poor resources. Regardless, given Head Start's cost, many would like to see lasting, measurable academic results.

Less Troubled Lives and Reduced Public Costs – the Case for Head Start

Despite academic fade, measurable humanitarian and economic gains have been found by researchers. Countless studies have examined the lifetime impacts of Head Start and have consistently documented that children from the program are more likely to graduate from high school and stay out of jail, and less likely to become dependent on the social welfare system. These results produce exceptional economic returns for American society. An often cited statistic claims for every \$1 invested in Head Start, the program produces a \$7 to \$9 return by reducing public expenditures on criminal justice, welfare, and other remedial services.

How could a program that doesn't produce academic benefits produce such results? The answer may lie in the often-overlooked human side of social services. Head Start children mostly come from disadvantaged families and communities. The program provides enrolled children with a safe and stable learning environment during the most critical developmental stage of early life, and it offers their families intensive social services to stabilize their lives before children enter school. More stable family lives, combined with safe learning environments for small children, may help those children stick it out later when school or life situations become difficult. After all, it is not always straight A students who graduate from high school; the young people who stick with it are the ones who graduate.

Moving Forward

Defining success in Head Start has certainly proved challenging. If success is defined by test scores, then Head Start is only temporarily effective. But if success means higher high school graduation rates and lower crime and welfare rates, then Head Start is a great success.

It is possible that the key issues have little to do with Head Start itself. Without a doubt, Head Start students enter kindergarten academically ahead of their peers. Perhaps the subsequent Head Start fade happens because of the under-resourced, badly performing public schools so typical in low-income communities. Similar to a diabetes patient with diabetes who finds that exercise and diet can control the illness, if the positive interventions are removed, the malady returns.

Head Start exemplifies an effective two-generation approach that works closely with families while providing valuable schooling to children. As public schools in low-income communities face budget cuts, they often cut funding for school social workers and counselors. Some districts end up with an estimated 400 students for every one social worker still employed. Clearly, no one person can provide adequate services to help stabilize 400 families in need.

Debates around Head Start highlight the valuable and lasting impact of stabilizing families for children's outcomes. Public schools that fail to work with families are bound to serve children poorly. The greatest teacher in the world cannot help a homeless student who sleeps in a subway station every night. Head Start has shown that the key to increasing graduation rates and decreasing social problems may lie in the two-generation approach to education. Especially for low-income communities, policymakers must offer social services for families through public schools, if they truly want every student to graduate and succeed in life.

