

Head Start in Philadelphia: An Evidence Base for Hope

Introduction

We are at a pivotal moment in the U.S. for early childhood leadership to respond to sizable mandates reflecting urgent need.

- Today, I want to share two sets of findings. These findings show the strategic role that Head Start is playing in Philadelphia as part of a network of community partners to generate empirically validated Hope for low income children.
 - The **first set** is a look at the entire population of young children entering public school in Philadelphia
 - The **second set** demonstrates Head Start's national readiness to serve as an early childhood research lab to develop and test state-of-the-art early childhood interventions.

First a Population Look from the 5th largest city in the U.S.:

- City Managers under the leadership of Mayors Rendell and Street partnered with Penn and other community agencies to study factors associated with success in first grade. This study involved an entire cohort of 19,000 students and used data available in city administrative databases.

Findings revealed:

- Children living in dense poverty were twice as likely to evidence academic and behavioral difficulties. Moreover, controlling for poverty there were a host of other risk factors, like child maltreatment, lead poisoning, and birth to a single mother, that were associated with significant school problems in first grade.
- The School District of Philadelphia and the University of Pennsylvania designed a major study to determine how different types of early childhood experiences contributed to success in kindergarten. A structured interview of early childhood experiences was used by kindergarten teachers during initial parent-teacher conferences. A representative sample of the kindergarten cohort was identified and data from over 7,000 interviews were collected. To determine the impact of types of early childhood experiences on kindergarten success, these data were compared to children's standardized performance assessments of academic areas and important learning behaviors at the beginning, middle, and end of the kindergarten year. Areas assessed include language arts, mathematics, science, motor skills, and approaches to learning.

Findings revealed:

- POVERTY WAS AGAIN FOUND TO BE A MAJOR RISK FACTOR FOR EARLY SCHOOL SUCCESS—Children living in dense poverty were at significant risk for poor educational outcomes in kindergarten across all areas.
- OVERALL, FORMAL CENTER-BASED PRESCHOOL EXPERIENCES YIELDED THE BEST OUTCOMES—Statistically controlling for poverty, children who attended formal center-based programs outperformed children with home-based and parent only childcare experiences across all areas at the beginning of kindergarten.

- SPECIFICALLY FOR LOW-INCOME CHILDREN, HEAD START WAS THE BEST – Low-income children attending Head Start outperformed their counterparts who had home-based care or parent only childcare at the beginning of kindergarten. Moreover, children who attended Head Start performed just as well in language arts, mathematics, science, and motor skills as other children whose parents paid some amount for childcare and Head Start children showed higher scores than these comparison children on approaches to learning.
- HEAD START ADVANTAGE HELD--The Head Start advantage assessed at time one was maintained for two additional assessments across the kindergarten year. Head Start children consistently evidenced higher scores in language arts, mathematics, and approaches to learning. Currently, we are conducting a longitudinal study to determine if this advantage is sustained across first and second grades.
- DIFFERENCES WITHIN HEAD START WERE FOUND-- Children who attended the School District of Philadelphia's Head Start program, a program with credentialed teachers that has been partnering with researchers and community leaders and empirically examining its methods, outperformed children in non-district Head Start programs in the critical areas of language arts, mathematics, and motor skills.

The Second Set of scientific findings document how Head Start can function as a National Research Lab for Early Childhood.

Recent National Research Council reports document the need for high quality research to inform the development of effective early childhood interventions for the whole child.

To produce quality evidence, we need a National Head Start program strategically located in our communities of greatest need to generate high quality information to enhance national readiness.

We have a decades worth of evidence that demonstrates that Head Start has the capacity to advance readiness research in substantial ways.

Over a decade ago the School District of Philadelphia's Head Start Program, which serves nearly 5,000 children and families, sought out researchers at Penn to form a research partnership. The resulting studies and evaluations have improved the lives of tens of thousands of young children in Philadelphia.

Key research areas include:

- **Family Involvement research**, which has produced measures of family involvement and has studied the impact of involvement on preschool competencies.
- **Scale development research**, which has produced reliable and valid measures of preschool competencies. These measures have been used to examine the unique contribution that these classroom competencies make to indicators of academic success.
- **Randomized field experiments of classroom-based interventions to determine what works and what doesn't to enhance competencies.**

- **Research on classroom quality and neighborhood context to improve learning environments and neighborhood conditions.**
- **Longitudinal study of the contribution of key preschool competencies to later school success to foster productive transitions to kindergarten and prevent the erosion of gains made in Head Start.**
- **Research with special populations of vulnerable children e.g., victims of child maltreatment and children with significant emotional and behavioral problems**

We have conducted all of this research in the most challenging neighborhoods of Philadelphia. Recent mapping studies indicate that **81%** of the children served by this large urban program reside in the **most impoverished neighborhoods in the city.**

This body of research evidence complements the excellent work produced by scores of other dynamic Head Start/University partnerships that exist nationally. All indicate that Head Start is ready to serve as a national research lab for early childhood to produce good intelligence and effective educational programs.

Head Start is uniquely positioned to meet this challenge because:

- Head Start is a national program whose primary directive is to enhance school readiness for the population in greatest need.
- Head Start is a national program that is grounded in developmental theory focusing on meeting the needs of the whole child.
- Head Start is a program that embraces cultural differences and is capable of negotiating researcher and community partnerships.
- Head Start has a national commitment to evaluating intervention impact using high quality standardized measures.
- Head Start is a federal program with national standards and resources that are not susceptible to the whims of local politics. This provides for programmatic stability and greater scientific control, which in turn increases the likelihood that research findings will generalize to other centers.

Summary

The partnership-based scientific studies above provide solid evidence from the City where our Nation began:

1. Head Start is doing a good job in enhancing learning and development for low-income children. Head Start programs are preparing children for school in the midst of enormous challenges and realities that threaten learning and development.
2. Head Start is demonstrating its potential to serve as a national research laboratory to help shape high quality early childhood education to advance national readiness.
3. The evidence shows that where programs are willing to partner with researchers and community leaders and empirically examine their models and methods, children make significant gains in learning and MORE IMPORTANTLY HAVE A FIRMER FOUNDATION FOR HOPE.

The founders of Head Start were challenged to build a foundation that would enable Head Start to serve millions and support decades of scientific inquiry in early development and learning. They have succeeded and we owe them a great debt of gratitude—
Thank you Dr. Zigler!

Today, the scientific community is challenged to build on this substantial foundation and forge real partnerships to make Head Start an excellent program.

The children are looking to us to see if we can meet the challenge.

The ball is in our court. As policy makers, community leaders, and researchers, we need to **extend our support for Head Start** and use our evidence and resources to work more intelligently and strategically in Head Start to ENSURE HOPE FOR THE CHILDREN—HOPE FOR A PROMISING AND PRODUCTIVE FUTURE.

BIO-BREIF

Dr. John Fantuzzo is the Diana Riklis Professor of Psychology in Education, in the Policy Research, Evaluation and Measurement Program at the University of Pennsylvania. Fantuzzo's research focuses on design, implementation, and evaluation of school- and community-based assessment and prevention strategies for young low-income children in high-risk urban environments. He has directed over a decade of funded research projects in partnership with the School District of Philadelphia's Early Childhood Education Programs, which serves over 22,000 children annually. His early work involved intensive study of reciprocal peer tutoring, peer play competencies, and the child maltreatment and family violence. Within the last five years, he has conducted longitudinal study of the impact of community & family violence on school readiness and has initiated longitudinal study of approaches to learning and emotional and behavioral adjustment of young children. He has published over 120 journal referred articles and is on the editorial boards of major archival research journals in education (e.g., the *Journal of Educational Psychology*, *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, and *School Psychology Review*). Most recently, he has been involved in population-based studies involving city-wide, integrated databases across agencies serving young children. Two such studies include: (1) School Readiness Study involved integrating 0-5yrs administrative data to examine the impact of risk factors (e.g. maltreatment, lead poisoning) on success in first grade for a population cohort of first grades and (2) the Kindergarten Entry Study involved assessing the impact of early childhood experiences upon kindergarten entry on success in kindergarten for a representative sample of 7,000 children. Success of these projects has resulted in grant support to develop with the City of Philadelphia an integrated, archival database for early childhood research—the first of its kind in the U.S.