

Head Start Works

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A few active Head Start opponents have inaccurately portrayed the recent Head Start Impact Study as being negative to Head Start, and by doing so have unfairly misled a number of fair-minded observers. In actuality, the Study was yet another affirmation of the decades of rigorous peer-reviewed research showing that Head Start works.

The Head Start IS measured the school readiness of Head Start children compared to a control group, some of whom stayed home and many of whom attended other preschool programs. The result was dramatically favorable to the Head Start children. The prime conclusion of the study was that the Head Start children left Head Start better prepared "on every measure of children's preschool experiences measured in this study". The study also looked at certain measures of academic performance at the end of first grade and was unable to detect any statistically significant difference between the two groups, a fact that Head Start opponents have trumpeted loudly. What the opponents fail to mention is that the data from the control group were totally contaminated by the time children entered school.

Parents in the control group, as they should have been, were allowed to do what was best for the children—find another program not included in the study. In fact, 40 percent of the control group children were enrolled in other Head Start centers that were not a part of the study at some point before they entered kindergarten. An additional 25 percent of the control group children attended other preschool programs for an average of four hours/week more than the Head Start children spent in Head Start.

In reality, there was no longer a valid control group by the time children reached first grade. There was no attempt made by the study to compare individual children who had actually attended Head Start with those who had not.

Issues of fade-out at specific points in the education process are not new. Previous studies have shown ebbs and flows in achievement from grade to grade throughout the educational experience. In spite of the ups and downs in achievement, long-term studies continue to reach the same conclusion: Head Start results in significant improvements in a wide variety of educational outcomes and life outcomes, such as increased high school graduation rates; fewer grade repetitions; fewer kids going into special education classes; higher vocabulary levels; better emotional development; reduced mortality rates of young kids; families moving out of poverty, and a significant impact on long-term outcomes of adults 19 years or older who attended Head Start. The fact is Head Start does work for a vast majority of children. Can implementation of the program be improved? Of course. And it will be. Head Start has a 45-year history of continuous improvement. This study was conducted from 2002 to 2005. Two years ago, the Head Start reauthorization included many significant improvements to the program, some of which are in the process of taking effect and are not reflected in this

study. This study likely will only catalyze the improvements already underway in Head Start since its reauthorization in late 2007.

We also need to improve the connections between the comprehensive services children receive in Head Start and the additional supports they may need to continue their successful progress in elementary schools. Head Start looks forward to working with the Department of Education and school districts across the country to help improve post-Head Start education by sharing strategies, such as parent involvement, that have worked well in Head Start and should work well in the elementary school setting.