



## Head Start Impact Study – Final Report

### What does it say? What does it mean?

#### Background

The Head Start Impact Study is a recent addition to decades of research on the effectiveness of Head Start. Mandated by Congress in 1998, it was conducted on a sample of children in Head Start in 2002-03, comparing them with a control group in other early childhood settings (some of which were other Head Start programs). The findings of the study, along with the changes initiated by the recent 2007 reauthorization, point to a path of continuous improvement in this national commitment to at-risk children.

#### Findings – Short-Term

The key finding of the Head Start Impact Study shows that Head Start works. The study authors state, “Providing access to Head Start has a positive impact on children’s preschool experiences. There are statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group on every measure of children’s preschool experiences measured in this study.”<sup>1</sup>

Let me be clear: The Head Start children outperformed the control group in every domain that the study measured, including positive cognitive, social-emotional, health and parenting impacts. The Head Start children left Head Start more ready for school than their peers in the control group.

However, the study goes on to show that, by the end of first grade, the Head Start children lost many of the advantages they had when they began kindergarten. Long-standing opponents of Head Start and other publicly funded early childhood programs have selectively used these losses to try to discredit such programs. Instead of weakening programs that work, the task now is to figure out how to continue the children’s progress through the early years in formal education.

One of the solutions may be to improve the connections between the comprehensive services at-risk children receive in Head Start and the additional supports they may need to continue advancing in elementary schools. The Head Start community 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 elementary school settings.

#### Findings – Long-Term

It is important to remember that the benefits of Head Start extend well beyond elementary school. Rigorous peer-reviewed studies have shown positive outcomes for Head Start children as they move through life. They are less likely to need expensive special education services in their later school years<sup>2</sup> and they are less likely to repeat grades<sup>3</sup>. In fact, they are more likely to graduate from high school<sup>4</sup>, to go to college, and to get jobs. Police chiefs support Head Start because they know that Head Start graduates are less likely to commit crimes and less likely to go to jail.<sup>5</sup> Perhaps most important of all, because of health and nutrition services, Head Start alumni are healthier as proven by their lower death rates from illness.<sup>6</sup>

#### Conclusion

The opportunity to succeed in life is a core American value and an extensive body of research indicates that Head Start does provide that opportunity to our country’s most vulnerable children.

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<sup>1</sup> US Department of Health and Human Services. (2010, January). Head Start Impact Study Final Report – Executive Summary, p. xvi. The second sentence in this quotation is technically inaccurate in that it should have read. “...There are statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group in every domain of children’s preschool experiences measured in this study.”

<sup>2</sup> 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: p. 999; Garces, E., Thomas, D. and Currie, J. (2002, September). Longer-Term Effects of Head Start. *American Economic Review*, 92 (4): 999-1012

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> Ludwig, J. and Miller, D. (2007) Does Head Start improve children’s life chances? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122 (1): 159-208

<sup>5</sup> Garces, E., Thomas, D. and Currie, J. (2002, September). Longer-Term Effects of Head Start. *American Economic Review*, 92 (4): 999-1012

<sup>6</sup> Ludwig, J. and Phillips, D. (2007). Does Head Start improve children’s life chances? Evidence from a regression discontinuity design. *The Quarterly Journal of Economics*, 122(1): 159-208