



**December 2012:  
The Impact of Head Start**

**Background**

The National Head Start Impact Study (HSIS) began as part of the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start with a call from Congress for research on the effects of the program. The plan was to take about 5,000 children (half three-year-olds and half four-year-olds) from 75 Head Start programs in areas where there weren't enough slots to serve all the children and randomly assign the children into two groups: Head Start and not Head Start. The researchers would then follow the children and test to see whether Head Start children showed better academic or social/emotional outcomes.

The first round of data, at the end of their 9 months in Head Start, showed Head Start children did make larger gains than other kids in all areas - and that was even after a significant number in the "Head Start" group didn't attend and some of the "no Head Start" group went to other Head Start programs. However the results were not as large as some model preschool programs had found (these programs often provided multiple years of full-day full-year services). The 2010 release of results showed the gains had decreased by the end of first grade, what is commonly called "fade out." Important to note that fade out has been shown by the model early learning programs and many other interventions. Enemies of Head Start took this opportunity to loudly announce that because of fade out, Head Start should be shut down. Ever since, the Head Start field has been countering this misinterpretation of the research.

Third grade follow up data showed continued flattening of children's scores. But what does that mean for these children when they grow up? The studies below explore how Head Start graduates who are adults today still show benefits - even though they also showed fade-out in school. We encourage you to review and discuss the real findings about Head Start's impact.

**Resources**

**[Head Start Impact Study](#)**

Want to read the full Executive Summary of the original Impact Study? Go to

<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/head-start-impact-study-final-report-executive-s>

[ummary](#). You may also want to check out briefs on the first grade study from

- the [Center on the Developing Child](#) at Harvard
- and one of Head Start's founders, [Ed Zigler](#).

### [Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation Final Report](#)

We shared this with you last month, but if you didn't have time to read it you may want to check out the second chapter, *Understanding the Impacts of Head Start and EHS*. The committee offers a wonderful analysis of the Impact Study and other research, summarizing by saying, "The appropriate interpretation of the studies' findings in context is that Head Start and EHS are improving family well-being and improving school readiness of children at or below the poverty line in the U.S. today."

(<http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/research/project/advisory-committee-on-head-start-research-and-evaluation>)

## **Research**

### [Early Childhood Education Programs](#)

*by Janet Currie for the Journal of Economic Perspectives*

In this broad overview on the findings of impact for Head Start and other early childhood education programs, Currie explains the reasoning behind investing early for greatest results; the evidence that early childhood programs have short and long-term effects; and what makes a quality preschool program. Notably, Currie describes that Head Start quality has been shown to be higher than other child care options and that starting during this early period of development is critical. She also outlines how short and medium term benefits from Head Start (child care, special education reductions, grade repetition reductions) repay a significant portion of the funds invested in the program. Her conclusions support expansion of the program both to serve more children and to extend the services provided to all children. If you're not too familiar with the research on Head Start's impact, this is a great place to start!

(<http://www.givewell.org/files/methods/Currie%202001.pdf>)

### [School Quality & the Long-Run Effects of Head Start](#)

*by Rucker Johnson*

Johnson addresses the question of whether Head Start graduates show different long-term effects based on the quality of their neighborhood schools. He analyzes data from the Panel Study of Income Dynamics, which tracked individuals from 1968 to 2007, and compares the experiences of children with and without Head Start within the same county. He also analyzes the amount spent per child both in Head Start and in later education. Finally, Johnson compares differences in outcomes for siblings where one attended Head Start and one did not.

Overall, Johnson's results show that Head Start improved educational achievement, adult health status, and men's wages and decreased grade repetition and incarceration rates for black males. Importantly, educational and wage benefits were higher where Head Start and schools were funded at higher rates. In communities where Head Start was funded at below average rates or children attended poorly funded schools, impacts were smaller or insignificant.

These findings add to the research documenting that Head Start contributes to long-term outcomes regardless of early fade out in test scores, as well as the body of research showing that on-going investment supports higher outcomes.

([http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ruckerj/RJabstract\\_LRHeadStartSchoolQuality.pdf](http://socrates.berkeley.edu/~ruckerj/RJabstract_LRHeadStartSchoolQuality.pdf))

### **Does Head Start Do Any Lasting Good?**

*A Working Paper for the National Bureau of Economic Research by Chloe Gibbs, Jens Ludwig and Doug Miller*

This paper by researchers from the University of Chicago and the University of California, Davis, reviews previous Head Start research and discusses why some research studies show a fade out and whether we're measuring the right thing in the first place. The authors begin by discussing research on Head Start that has shown that students' academic scores fade over time. They respond in two ways.

First, they point out that in the long-term, social/emotional benefits of Head Start may be far more important than academic benefits, and research isn't measuring those. The authors recommend: (1) We need to find tools and conduct research to measure students' social/emotional gains from Head Start. (2) We need to be cautious in reforming Head Start to make it more academic when it's possible that social/emotional goals are the real benefit of the program. (3) Any accountability system should include social/emotional measures.

Second, the authors note that the reason Head Start students' scores get closer to other students' after a few years may not be fade out but catch up--elementary school teachers may be devoting more time to non-Head Start students and bringing them up to the level of the Head Start kids. They conclude that if we're seeing fade out, we need better elementary schools--but if we're seeing catch up, we need higher Head Start enrollment. Their point, in essence, is that we shouldn't be rushing to change Head Start until we know more.

([http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract\\_id=1932582](http://papers.ssrn.com/sol3/papers.cfm?abstract_id=1932582))

### **Long-Term Effects of Head Start on Low-Income Children**

*by Jens Ludwig and Deborah Phillips for Annals of the New York Academy of Sciences*

In this article, Ludwig and Phillips reflect on recent long-term findings for Head Start graduates from the early years. They find that the adults now showing long-term outcomes had similar

short-term benefits to the children in the Impact Study, and use benefit-cost analysis to suggest that the Impact Study itself, when data is analyzed carefully, indicates Head Start is generating benefits beyond what is invested in the program. While the economic calculations are complex, their conclusions are clear: the research provides support for expansion of Head Start and for only the most thoughtful modifications to program design.

(<http://home.uchicago.edu/~ludwigj/papers/NYAS-LudwigPhillips-HeadStart-2008.pdf>)

## **Discussion Questions**

1. If you serve multiple school districts, do you agree with Johnson's findings about the relationship between school funding and quality and children's outcomes? What has your experience been?
2. Which of these studies or resources made it clearest to you what Head Start's impact really is? How would you explain it to someone in your community who'd only heard negative things about Head Start?
3. Gibbs, Ludwig and Miller make an interesting point about the benefits of both academic and social/emotional development. What signs indicate social/emotional development in the children you work with? How do you measure them?

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Do you know of other recent research that may be of interest to the Head Start field? Do you have other questions, comments or concerns? E-mail Emmalie Dropkin ([edropkin@nhsa.org](mailto:edropkin@nhsa.org)).