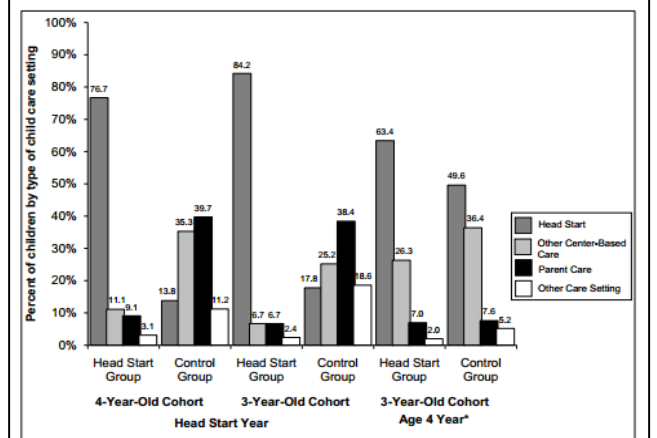


## The Head Start Impact Study in 2016

### Background and Design

The Head Start Impact Study was mandated by Congress in 1998 and overseen by the Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation. The study looked at three and four year olds applying for Head Start in 2002 and compared children who were told they could enroll with those told they couldn't. This is considered an "Intent to Treat" study, which typically has weaker findings because not all children participate in their assigned settings. Exhibit 1 of the [Head Start Impact Study Final Report](#) (see figure at right) illustrates the high rates of participation of control group children in Head Start – nearly half of the 3 year olds in the control group attended Head Start when they were 4. Yet while there was significant mixing between the two groups and children who did not attend Head Start went to a wide range of both high and low quality settings instead, at the end of the Head Start year there were significant benefits for the Head Start children in every domain measured. As Nobel Laureate Economist James Heckman has written, "The bottom line: a wide range of studies show that disadvantaged children benefit from access to quality early childhood programs—and society benefits from targeted investments in disadvantaged children. Other findings provide clarity on a number of contentious issues: **Head Start Works.**"

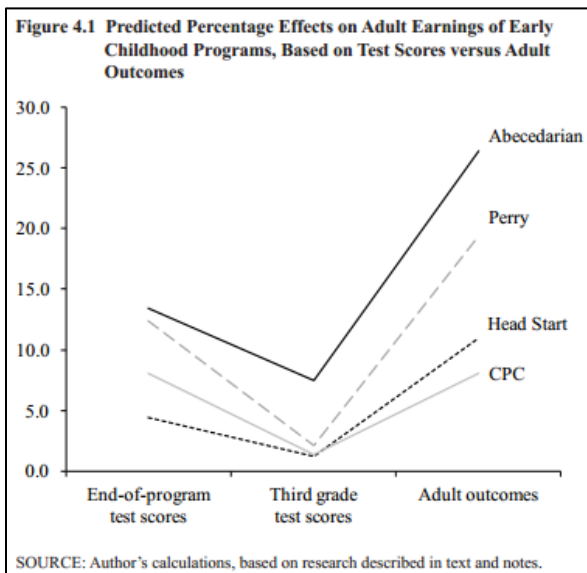
**Exhibit 1: Child Care Settings Used by Head Start and Control Groups During the Head Start Year, Spring 2003, and 3-Year-Old Cohort's Age 4 Year, Spring 2004**



\*For approximately 1 percent of respondents, setting type unknown.

### Follow-Up Studies and Long-Term Expectations

By the end of third grade, after four years in the same public school settings as their peers, the Head Start children showed few differences from the control group children on the particular assessments used. However, these findings reflect the results of the best-known longitudinal studies of early childhood programming. In *From Preschool to Prosperity*, economist Timothy Bartik lays out a comparison of familiar early childhood



studies: model programs Abecedarian and Perry Preschool, both of which included more years of more intensive services than Head Start children in the Impact Study received, follow a similar pattern of impacts. (Reproduced at left with the author's permission.) For all these programs, the benefits of early education which appear to dissipate on standardized tests in grade school reemerge in adulthood through increased adult earnings, perhaps because long-term benefits are mediated by improved family stability or social-emotional strengths that are not assessed on third grade tests. It is also likely that Head Start outcomes are stronger now, nearly 15 years after data collection for the Impact Study, because of efforts to strengthen the program. One such effort has nearly doubled the proportion of BA Head Start teachers from 38% at the time of the study to 73% in 2015.

## Lessons for Strengthening Head Start

Yet even as the broad findings of the Head Start Impact Study suggest impacts dissipate during elementary school, deeper and more targeted analyses of Head Start Impact Study data over the last few years have taught us a great deal more about how Head Start works best and for whom.

Findings include:

- Contrasts between Head Start and control group children varied considerably depending where children went besides Head Start (Zhai, Brooks-Gunn, & Waldfogel, 2014).
- Full-day Head Start centers have the strongest cognitive impacts, while frequent home visiting supports the strongest social-emotional outcomes (Walters, 2014).
- Head Start has the greatest effect on cognitive outcomes for children who begin with the weakest skills or who are dual language learners (Bloom & Weiland, 2015)
- Head Start impacts on vocabulary are strongest for children who would otherwise experience only home care (Feller, Grindal, Miratrix & Page, 2014).
- Head Start children in foster care or other non-parental care are more ready for school and have stronger relationships with their teachers than peers who did not participate in Head Start (Lipscomb et al., 2013).
- Head Start parents invest more time in learning activities with their children, and non-resident fathers spend more days per month with their children (Gelber & Isen, 2011).
- Head Start is more effective for children with less-educated mothers (Walters, 2014).
- Head Start parents are more likely to increase their educational levels during their children's early years than other at-risk parents (Sabol & Chase-Lansdale, 2014).
- Children's academic growth in Head Start varies by the level of family engagement and the content area, with clear benefits from higher family engagement in learning (Miller et al., 2014).

## An Evolving Head Start Program

Since 2002, major changes to Head Start through the 2007 reauthorization have strengthened Head Start's standards, teachers, and curriculum. As a result, today's impacts are likely stronger and more consistent across the country. Local efforts to track children's outcomes have found strong school readiness outcomes and sustained impacts.

Findings include:

- Head Start children in the Montgomery County Public Schools who had full-day services were dramatically more likely to meet reading benchmarks by the end of kindergarten than their peers who attended half-day Pre-K or no Pre-K (Zhao & Modarresi, 2010).
- AVANCE-Houston's partnership with the Houston Independent School District found Head Start graduates outperform district averages for 3<sup>rd</sup> grade reading and math scores.
- The Harrisburg Preschool Program Evaluation found Head Start graduates had higher mean scores in the 5<sup>th</sup> grade than a control group on all academic and executive function outcomes (Greenberg & Domitrovich, 2011).
- The Mississippi State Longitudinal Data System has documented sustained impacts on academic achievement for Head Start graduates through the 8<sup>th</sup> grade.

Ensuring all Head Start programs have the staff and resources necessary to reach the highest quality will enable every community to keep the window of opportunity open for all children.