Research Blast
October 2016:
The #HeadStartAdvantage

Background

When the first round of findings from the Head Start Impact Study was released, it showed significant positive effects in all domains for young children. However, later research suggested a fade out effect in early grades, which critics of Head Start continue to cite, despite arguably mischaracterized conclusions.

Since August of this year, three independent research reports have come out documenting a Head Start advantage. They show that not only does Head Start give students better outcomes at the end of their year in the program, but these results persist through life. The advantages last through high school, college, and even into parenthood for some groups of students. These outcomes include higher test scores, less chronic absenteeism, higher graduation rates, and better parenting skills.

Head Start children receive an excellent intervention that affords them what can rightly be seen as The Head Start Advantage.

With these reports proving the long-lasting, positive impacts of Head Start, the next questions are: What aspects of Head Start work best? And for whom do they work best?

These three reports, detailed below, identify subgroups and program components that need more research. Some groups that particularly benefitted from Head Start were Hispanic and African-American children, children who qualify for free lunch, and children whose mothers did not finish high school. Some program features—such as paying teachers on a scale comparable to the public schools, offering full-day services, and using data to inform continuous quality improvement—can also be tied to better outcomes.

Research

The Long-Term Impact of the Head Start Program

By Lauren Bauer and Diane Whitmore Schanzenbach

A team at the Hamilton Project (an initiative of the Brookings Institute) used data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLSY) to compare children who had attended Head Start to their siblings who hadn’t. They examined outcomes such as high school graduation rates, attempting and completing higher education, and self-reported parenting skills. The siblings who attended Head Start had better outcomes on all of these measures. These results, particularly those regarding parenting skills, suggest that Head Start doesn’t just improve attendees’ outcomes, but it can even impact the next generation. Some results were shown to be even stronger for particular subgroups, such as Hispanic or African-American children or those whose mothers didn’t graduate high school.

The Effects of Tulsa’s CAP Head Start Program on Middle-School Academic Outcomes and Progress

By Deborah Phillips, William Gormley, and Sara Anderson
Phillips et al. focused on children in Tulsa’s CAP Head Start program in the 2006-2007 school year, a modern sample compared to most longitudinal studies. They checked in on these students in the 2014-2015 school year, when they should have been in 8th grade, and compared them to students who had not attended Head Start or Oklahoma’s state pre-k program. The Head Start students had higher math scores on the state test, were less chronically absent, and were less likely to have been held back a grade. CAP Tulsa is known nationwide to be high-quality and certain program features—such as their teacher salaries, full-day programming, and use of data—are representative of what the Head Start field is working towards providing universally.

**Revisiting the impact of Head Start**

By Claire Montialoux

In her policy brief, Montialoux pulls together the findings from multiple papers re-using data from the Head Start Impact Study. She concludes that when the HSIS data is understood and interpreted correctly, the long-term positive impacts of Head Start on both cognitive and non-cognitive skills are clear. She also identifies a concrete return on investment of $2 for every dollar invested in Head Start, with this return being even higher among certain subgroups of children.

**Resources**

National Head Start Association

**NHSA Twitter Chats About the #HeadStartAdvantage**

On **October 25th at 4pm ET**, NHSA will be hosting a Twitter chat about this research. Please join us to discuss the research findings, hear from the researchers themselves, and ask questions! Find us at: @NatlHeadStart

New America

**Head Start Works. And It’s About to Get Even Better.**


Two of the three reports above are discussed by New America. Authors Abbie Lieberman and Lara Burt also connect the importance of this research to the new Head Start Program Performance Standards. The new Standards were released on September 6, 2016, and will increase the quality of Head Start programming and further improve outcomes for children above and beyond what these studies show.

**Discussion Questions**

1. What subgroups do you think Head Start is serving well? Which subgroups could we focus on improving outcomes for?
2. What struck you about each of these studies? Were there results you found particularly surprising or enlightening?
3. Will any of your practices change as a result of these findings?

*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? Email Victoria Jones (vjones@nhsa.org).*