



Head Start Lags Behind

Long-Overdue Head Start Evaluation Shows No Lasting Benefit for Children

By Lindsay Burke

The Obama administration released the long-overdue first-grade evaluation of the federal Head Start program. As many suspected, the results show that the \$7 billion-per-year program provides little benefit to children—and great expense to taxpayers.

Few Sustained Benefits

The evaluation, which was mandated by Congress during the 1998 reauthorization of the program, found little impact on student well-being. After collecting data on more than 5,000 three and four-year-old children randomly assigned to either a Head Start or a non-Head Start control group, the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS) found “few sustained benefits.” From the report:

In sum, this report finds that providing access to Head Start has benefits

for both 3-year-olds and 4-year-olds in the cognitive, health, and parenting domains, and for 3-year-olds in the social-emotional domain. However, the benefits of access to Head Start at age four are largely absent by 1st grade for the program population as a whole. For 3-year-olds, there are few sustained benefits, although access to the program may lead to improved parent-child relationships through 1st grade...

While these results are uninspiring, they become even less impressive when more closely examined.

Questionable Statistics

The Heritage Institute’s David Muhlenhausen calls into question the less-than-rigorous statistical methods employed by HHS:

In some cases, HHS reports statistically significant impacts based on a standard of statistical significance is $p < 0.10$ which is not the norm for most social scientists. The 0.05 level is the norm. With a sample of 4,667 children, there is no reason to use the easier 0.10 level. The larger your sample size, the easier it is to find statistically significant findings, so using 0.10 as the standard for statistical significance is unwarranted with

such a large sample size... For example, if they used the standard level of significance for the 1st grade year language and literacy measures, then the study would report no statistically measurable impact on all eleven measures. Instead, the lower standard used by HHS allows for them to report that Head Start had at least one positive impact on raised language and literacy.

In essence, had HHS not used a less-rigorous method of evaluating Head Start, the report would have shown no

impact on the language and literacy outcomes for the four-year-old cohort.

\$100 Billion

Taxpayers have been funding more than \$100 billion for the Head Start program since 1965. This federal evaluation, which effectively shows no lasting impact on children after first grade and no difference between those children who attended Head Start and those who did not, should call into question the merits of increasing funding for the program, which the Obama administration recently did as part of the so-called “stimulus” bill.

Head Start is the federal government’s largest early education program. As Congress considers expanding the federal government’s role in early childhood education, the new Head Start evaluation should clearly signal to policymakers the necessity of reforming existing programs. ■



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