

In Defense of Head Start

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Poverty 423

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History of Head Start

On February 1, 1964, President Lyndon Johnson called Sargent Shriver at home to notify him that he would be holding a press conference that afternoon to announce Shriver's appointment to the position of Director of the War on Poverty. As new Director, Shriver would have only 60 days to design and structure the program before he would have to present it to Congress for approval. The program's preliminary budget would be set around \$1 billion. Naturally, Shriver initially protested, to which Johnson replied, "You've got the responsibility. You've got the authority. You've got the power. You've got the money. Now, you may not have the glands." Shriver reportedly responded, "I've got plenty of glands" (sargentshriver.org). Thus began Johnson's War on Poverty, which launched many important anti-poverty programs in the late 1960s.

Head Start, a low-income preschool program, was one of the cornerstone programs of Johnson's War on Poverty. Attorney General Robert Kennedy initially suggested Head Start as a means for reducing the juvenile delinquency rate in America in 1964. Shriver took to the idea and saw it as an opportunity to overcome societal opposition to programs benefitting the poor, particularly the Black poor, by targeting young children instead of adults (Zigler 3). He soon created a Head Start planning committee, which designed Head Start with the goal of "enhanc[ing] children's overall social competence through the provision of comprehensive services" (Zigler 4). At the outset, Head Start was an eight-week summer program primarily operated by volunteer teachers; more than 561,000 low-income children participated in the first year. As demand and enrollment

increased, the summer programs were transformed into nine-month programs, and Head Start administration was moved to the Administration on Children, Youth, and Families within the Department of Health and Human Services (National Head Start Association).

The Head Start program received some legislative adjustments throughout the next four decades with the purpose of fine-tuning the program to most adequately serve underprivileged preschoolers and their families. In conjunction with the Education of All Handicapped Children Act in 1972, Head Start classrooms are required to have special needs children represent at least ten percent of their enrollment. Furthermore, legislation throughout the 1970s called for more intensive training and credentialing for Head Start teachers, a substantial improvement from the program's roots as a volunteer-operated entity. In the 1980s and 1990s, administrators experimented with adjusting the program to provide more comprehensive support to the families of its students through the funding of sixty-six Family Service Centers that provided additional parenting education meant to reduce family illiteracy, substance abuse, and unemployment. Although DHHS evaluations show that this program did have a positive effect on parent participation in education classes and parent employability, the centers could not show significant short-term gains in any other areas, and many lost funding after their initial 3 year grant (NHSA).

In 1994, Congress passed the Head Start Reauthorization Act, which approved additional funding to expand Head Start and established Early Head Start, a program that extended Head Start services to pregnant women, infants

and toddlers. As funding increased throughout the 1990s, so did accountability measures for the program; these measures included increased training and credentialing programs for teachers, revision of Program Performance Standards, and revision of the Head Start monitoring system (NHSA).

Eligibility and Funding

Today, Head Start and Early Head Start serve nearly one million children and pregnant women each year, with the mission of “[promoting] school readiness by enhancing social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services to enrolled children and families” (Office of Head Start). In accordance with federal regulations, 90% of children in a Head Start classroom must come from families that are living at or below the poverty line, and 10% must be children with disabilities (Office of Head Start). The program is federally funded, but it is not an entitlement program—estimates state that only one in every four eligible children has access to the program (ourheadstart.org).

Eligibility is determined mainly by family income, with the poverty line serving as the cutoff point. Furthermore, children who are in foster care or who live in a household that is receiving Temporary Aid to Need Families (TANF) or Supplemental Security Income (SSI) are automatically eligible for Head Start. Other factors such as history of abuse or neglect are also considered. In addition, children with disabilities may have their income requirement waived if the class has not yet reached its 10% requirement. After eligibility is determined,

admittance into the program is based on greatest perceived need; those not admitted are placed on waiting lists (Office of Head Start).

Head Start has a current budget of \$8.2 billion, with yearly costs per child estimated at over \$9000. Head Start funding is administered through federal grants to local agencies, which can be private or public and for-profit or not-for-profit agencies. Grantees receive 80% of their program costs from the federal grants, and they must raise the remaining 20% through community or state funding. Furthermore, grantees must report the types of children served and the services provided each year, and all classrooms are monitored by the federal Office of Head Start at least once every three years (Office of Head Start).

Realities Faced by Low-Income Children & Their Families

Psychological, neurological and social science literature over the last few

decades has increasingly emphasized the importance of years 0-5 in child development of social and cognitive skills. Katherine Magnuson and Elizabeth Votruba-Drzal, in their article, "Enduring Influences of Childhood Poverty," note that, "Cumulative research suggests that deep and early poverty is linked to lower levels of achievement, holding constant other family characteristics" (169). They also note that there may be causal links between early poverty and problem behavior and health later in life, although these links are harder to isolate and test (170).

Evidence shows that the amount of cognitive and emotional stimulation received during the first few years of life is positively correlated with a child's

cognitive and socio-emotional outcomes, and children who are born into adverse environments receive substantially lower amounts of cognitive and emotional stimulation. Most scholars agree that an adverse environment usually has a mix of the following factors: absence of father, low levels of financial resources, low parental education and ability, lack of cognitive and emotional stimulation, and poor parenting skills (Heckman 460). When children are born into adverse environments, they are placed at risk for social and economic failure through no fault of their own. James Heckman, a Nobel Prize winning economist who will be heavily referenced throughout this paper, further notes that, “A large body of literature... demonstrates that skill gaps open up early, before schooling begins, and that these gaps are major determinants of social and economic success” (472). Therefore, children born into adverse environments, through no fault or choice of their own, are at an extreme disadvantage to their peers who were born into positive family environments. Furthermore, the proportion of children living in low-income, single-parent families has risen over the last 60 years, meaning that more children are at risk for social and economic failure than ever before (Cancian & Reed 92).

In addition, changes in societal norms, especially in relation to work, over the last decade have made being a good parent much harder, even for two-parent families. Society has changed in that, “The cost of living often requires dual careers...Work hours and commutes are long, wages are stagnant and relatively few have generous parental leave benefits” (Heckman 5). In addition, single mothers receiving TANF are required to work or be searching for work in

order to receive benefits. Janet Waldfogel's article, "The Role of Family Policies in Antipoverty Policies," further details the obstacles that impoverished parents face trying to make ends meet as well as adequately care for their children. She notes that low-income parents are more likely to work jobs that have irregular, rigid work schedules and little to no flexibility in terms of maternity leave, family leave, and sick leave. Furthermore, even if low-income jobs have these benefits, they are rarely paid, so low-income parents face at best loss of wages and at worst loss of employment when they have to take time off to tend to their children (Waldfogel 244).

Because of the nature of low-income jobs (minimal maternity leave, no paid time off) as well as the scarce supply of childcare, low-income parents face substantial challenges finding adequate care during the early years of their children's lives when they are not yet enrolled in the public school system. Even when childcare is readily available, it is rarely affordable or of high quality. Public childcare funding (outside of Head Start funding) has been increased through voucher programs and tax credits; however, the voucher programs are not entitlement programs—they usually only cover around fifteen percent of eligible families. Furthermore, low-income parents usually cannot benefit from dependent care tax credits because they are non-refundable (Waldfogel 248). Even when parents can find adequate private care centers or preschools for their children, they often cannot meet their childcare needs due to unpredictable schedules and untraditional shifts (night/early morning) that are characteristic of low-income jobs. As a result, low-income parents usually spend a higher proportion of their

income on childcare compared to more affluent parents, and their children are more likely to receive lower-quality care (Waldfogel 249). Often, parents are forced to rely on family members, friends, or neighbors to meet their childcare needs.

The Role of Head Start

Head Start provides two important services to low-income children, their families, and society; first, Head Start seeks to mitigate effects of being born into an adverse environment by promoting social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services. In terms of educational services, Head Start seeks to educate children so that they will be prepared for kindergarten; the program uses the Creative Curriculum, which is “designed to foster the development of the whole child through teacher-led small and large group activities” (Department of Education). The program features the use of a variety of centers (i.e. blocks, a pretend kitchen, educational computer games, etc.) focuses mainly on learning through play, respecting the teacher and classmates, and giving children choices in a learning environment.

Head Start also focuses on educating parents on caring for and nurturing young children. The program standards require the teacher to make two home visits and hold two in-school conferences per year with each parent. During these interactions, the teacher talks with parents about any issues they or the child may be having and can give advice in areas such as home safety for small children,

proper nutrition, tactics for teaching good behavior, healthy habits, and at home educational activities. The program also gives the parents the resource of a family development services specialist, who works with parents when they have issues like bill paying or food insecurity and can refer them to the proper service organizations (Kristi Forren).

In terms of health and nutritional development, Head Start provides a myriad of services to ensure that students receive adequate health care and nutrition. The program requires parents to take their children in for a check up during the year and can refer parents to pediatricians. In addition, students are evaluated onsite by a mental health professional, and follow-up care is given when problems are identified. Teachers are also required to focus extensively on dental health, and children are given toothbrushes and toothpaste and brush their teeth daily in the classroom. In terms of nutrition, Head Start programs provide hot meals for breakfast and lunch as well as a snack at the end of the day. The meals are supposed to be healthy and of high nutritional quality (Kristi Forren).

The second important service that Head Start provides is free, quality childcare so that low-income parents can participate in the workforce. Although the program does not perfectly meet parent's needs for childcare (hours of operation vary and most programs do not run past two or three PM), it does provide approximately thirty to thirty-five hours a week of free childcare for nine months out of the year, which would be conservatively valued at or above \$3,500

in the private market (babycenter.com). These cost savings are significant for parents whose income falls below the poverty line.

Criticisms of Head Start

Over the past decade, the Head Start program has suffered criticism from a large group of politicians and academics. These criticisms can generally be divided into three categories: (1) criticisms due to perceived program ineffectiveness, (2) criticisms arising from Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's intelligence argument, and (3) criticisms of program implementation and administration.

First, Head Start has received severe criticism for being an ineffective program. Critics that fall into this category measure program effectiveness in terms of cognitive gains and cite a large body of evidence that Head Start children initially exhibit cognitive gains in the form of higher test scores when evaluated against comparable peers not enrolled in the program, but these gains usually fade out by the time the children leave first grade and have completely vanished by the time they enter third grade (Puma 4). Conservative public policy institutes such as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute have come down particularly hard on Head Start in light of the fade out evidence, calling for anywhere from reform, to budget cuts, to complete termination of the program.

Second, Head Start has been criticized in Richard Herrnstein and Charles Murray's book, *The Bell Curve*. Published in 1994, this book caused a huge uproar in the academic community with its claims that IQ score is the strongest

predictor of life outcomes and that genetics account for between forty and eighty percent of IQ variation among people (Herrnstein & Murray 105). This argument is essentially a nature vs. nurture one, with the authors siding heavily with nature. In measuring this described IQ effect, the authors use the parent's social class as a somewhat crude measure of the "nurture" component, and standardized test scores (purported measures of IQ) as a measure of the "nature" component (Fischer et al. 218). They assert that, because our society has become better at rewarding intelligence regardless of initial socio-economic status, the most intelligent are rising to the top to create a "cognitive elite," while those with the least intelligence are sinking to the lowest class.

In analyzing whether or not a person's inherent cognitive ability (IQ) can be raised by schooling interventions, the authors use the Head Start test score fade out as evidence that there is very little that can be done to improve genetically inherited intelligence. Like other critics, they argue that Head Start and other early intervention programs are not effective because they cannot create cognitive gains that last past elementary school (Herrnstein & Murray 404). Furthermore, they assert that in the face of disappointment in the arena of cognitive gains, Head Start actually *changed* its goals from raising intelligence to developing "sleeper effects," otherwise known as soft skills (Herrnstein & Murray 404). In response to these alleged program failures, Herrnstein and Murray recommend allocating fewer funds to helping disadvantaged children with low IQs who will never reach "a basic level of education," and allocating more funds to "supporting the gifted" (Fischer et al. 223). This argument warrants rebuttal at

this point in the paper, since any acceptance of its validity would severely change the scope and conclusions of this paper. The previous argument and the one to follow will be addressed in the analysis and recommendations sections.

The premise of *The Bell Curve's* argument as well as the author's methods for data analysis has been highly criticized by the academic community. One important thing to keep in mind about the book is that it was not submitted for peer review before publication; that in itself raises suspicion about the authors motives—were they trying to publish methodical, scholarly material, or were they trying to make a political statement, sell books, and gain media hype? In addition, the academic community has severely criticized the authors' empirical models and methods. In "The Intergenerational Transmission of Intelligence: Down the Slippery Slopes of the Bell Curve," Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas analyze the same data used in *The Bell Curve* and show that Herrnstein and Murray's finding that child test scores are not substantially predicted by socioeconomic status is very weak; it does not hold up when the data is adjusted to contain a more representative sample or when richer measures of socioeconomic status are used (298).

Finally, academics have criticized Herrnstein and Murray's methods because the test scores on which they base large portions of their findings are actually achievement test scores, not IQ test scores (Heckman 1). Since socioeconomic status is a very strong predictor of achievement, using achievement test scores seriously skews the authors' results. These criticisms cast a great deal of doubt on Herrnstein and Murrays conclusions and make their

arguments seem out of place in the realm of true academic literature on the subject of Head Start.

Finally, Head Start has been criticized as a program that is poorly implemented and administered. These critics (often conservative policy institutes) reference evidence of large variations in quality across programs as well as GAO fraud investigations. Defenders of Head Start agree with critics that something needs to be done about quality variation across programs and regions, and this paper will address improvement in this area in the recommendation section. However, despite variations in quality, research shows that Head Start centers are, on average, of higher quality than childcare that can be found in the private sector, especially on a low-income budget (Currie 2). With respect to evidence of fraud, critics often point to a GAO investigation that sent 13 fictitious families to different Head Start centers to try to enroll their children. Although all of the families were over the income requirements, the parents were encouraged to underreport their income or classify themselves as homeless in 8 of the centers. Yes, these Head Start workers were committing fraud by doing this, but it was committed in an attempt to make more children eligible for the program—not quite the scandalous fraud and abuse that critics make it out to be.

These criticisms have caused Head Start to come under fire in the debate for allocation of funding in 2011. In the face of a \$1.6 trillion budget deficit, Congress is considering cutting the Head Start budget by as much as 15.3%. The National Head Start Association (NHSA) estimates that these cuts will result in approximately 218,220 spaces lost, 55,000 jobs lost, and 16,000 classrooms

closed. These potential budget cuts raise important questions about the value of the Head Start program to its participants, their parents, and society as a whole. How does Head Start affect the socio-emotional development and cognitive skills of its participants in the short-term as well as the long-term? Furthermore, does Head Start succeed in serving low-income, working parents, both in education and the provision of childcare? In addition, does Head Start benefit society as a whole, providing taxpayers a positive return on investment in the program? And finally, does the Head Start program need to be modified or improved in order to better serve low-income families and create higher returns for taxpayers?

Analysis of Head Start Impact

The benefits that Head Start imparts to its students and to society as a whole are not always initially clear. Evidence shows that, upon entering kindergarten, Head Start students experience significant cognitive gains relative to their peers who did not attend preschool, as indicated through standardized test scores (Ludwig & Phillips 5). However, studies have consistently shown that these gains fade out for children by the time they test at the third grade level, and African-American children's scores fade out more quickly than white children's (Currie 1000, Ludwig & Phillips 6). Further research by Janet Currie indicates that this difference in fade out time between white and African-American children is most likely caused by the fact that African-American children are more likely to attend poorer quality schools after leaving Head Start when compared to white children (Currie & Thomas 757). When school quality was controlled for, the authors saw very similar results for African-Americans and whites (Currie &

Thomas 755). Yet, achieving cognitive gains is not, and has never been, the central goal of head start; these gains are only one aspect of the benefits received from attending Head Start.

In their study on the longer-term effects of Head Start, Janet Currie, Eliana Garces, and Duncan Thomas assert that Head Start is also “associated with lasting improvements in non-cognitive skills that are important for future success in life” (Garces et al. 1000). The authors attempt to control for family background characteristics by comparing data on children who participated in Head Start with their siblings who did not. Through this comparison, they find that white children who attended Head Start are at least twenty percent more likely to graduate from high school than their non-Head Start siblings. Furthermore, the study shows that African-American Head Start students are twelve percent less likely to be booked for or charged with a crime later in life than their non-Head Start siblings.

Additionally, when Ludwig and Miller adjusted this study’s data to account for increased funding in counties that showed greater need at the program’s initiation in the 1960s, they find “an increase in schooling attainment of about one-half year, and an increase in the likelihood of attending some college of about 15%” with no racial differences (Ludwig & Phillips 4). These findings show that Head Start provides significant benefits to both its students and society through non-cognitive benefits conferred.

James Heckman’s research also supports this assertion that non-cognitive gains are just as important as cognitive development in determining a child’s future success. As an expert in the field of human capital development, he

asserts that, “Cognitive abilities alone are not as powerful as the dynamic package of cognitive skills and social skills—defined as attentiveness, perseverance, impulse control and sociability” (3). Like Currie, he notes that Head Start graduates are more likely to achieve higher grade levels and practice healthy behaviors and less likely to participate in criminal activity (7). Heckman’s research attempts to determine the return on investment of preschool programs such as Perry Preschool, Carolina Abecedarian, and Head Start. He finds that both Perry Preschool and Abecedarian (both spent much more per student than Head Start) yield 16% returns, while Head Start averages around a 10% return on investment. In the graph in Exhibit 1, Heckman shows that these investments in early childhood education programs yield a much greater return on investment than later life interventions such as schooling and job training.

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Jens Ludwig and Deborah Phillips also attempt to evaluate the cost effectiveness of both short and long-term gains of Head Start in their article, “The Benefits and Costs of Head Start.” They acknowledge that long-term data is only available on students who attended the program between 1965 and 1980, so in terms of cost/benefit analysis of the long-term effects of Head Start, they are analyzing the program as it was administered back then, which may not generalize to the program today due to shifts in societal demographics and, subsequently, in the needs and challenges faced by America’s poor. However, they believe it is important to note that, “Head Start as it operated in the 1960s through the 1980s generated benefits in excess of program costs, with a benefit-cost ratio that might be at least as large as the 7-to-1 figure cited for model early

childhood programs such as Perry Preschool” (Ludwig & Phillips 4). In light of these findings, they argue that the opinion that “only very intensive, tightly controlled, and expensive early childhood programs are capable of generating lasting benefits to poor children,” is a misperception and that Head Start is capable of creating important gains at a lower cost per child (Ludwig & Phillips 5).

Ludwig and Phillips also attempt to decipher the benefits of the short-term gains Head Start students receive, since that data is more recent and relevant to Head Start as impacts children today, rather than in the 1970s. They point out that “short-term benefits of Head Start to parents in the form of high-quality child care together with medium-term benefits from reductions in special education placements and grade retention might together offset between 40 and 60 percent of the program’s costs” (4-5). In addition, they attempt to analyze the benefits incurred from the short-term cognitive gains of Head Start students. Their analysis leads them to estimate that if Head Start can positively improve child achievement test scores .1 to .2 standard deviations, the program will have paid for itself; they note that recent evidence shows that Head Start, for the most part, exceeds this threshold (Ludwig & Phillips 5-6, 16). Furthermore, this cost/benefit analysis only includes the benefits of cognitive gains, since those are the easiest to objectively measure and regress, making these estimates fairly conservative. Ludwig and Phillips conclude if the reader accepts the public economics efficiency standard which calls for investment in programs up to the point that the marginal dollar invested generates only one dollar in return, then their analysis

calls for increased spending on Head Start to generate maximum program benefits (16).

Potential Head Start Quality Improvements

Although evidence shows that Head Start as it is administered today creates benefits that exceed costs, critics point out that the quality of individual programs can vary widely. Furthermore, when over \$8 billion in federal money and an additional \$2 billion in state and local funds are being spent on the program, it is useful to determine which program characteristics generate the most positive outcomes and merit further investment and expansion, as opposed to practices that are ineffective or superfluous. A critical analysis of program effectiveness as compared to program potential is also useful in determining how to best support the well-being and future life outcomes of low-income children. However, it is important to recognize that there is a trade off between the quality of care that can be delivered and the number of children that can be reached given current resources, and Head Start must carefully navigate this trade off so that they do not lower the well-being of current students in an attempt to reach a greater number of preschoolers.

In light of the evidence on cognitive gain fade out, some critics have suggested that Head Start reallocate funds to put a greater focus on academic achievement. Ludwig and Phillips note that this refocusing would most likely be accompanied by reduced spending on the program's health, nutrition, and social services (11). Most scholars do not support this approach. Zigler and Styfco in

particular advocate for a “whole child” approach as opposed to an emphasis on academics. They evidence the ineffectiveness of Title 1 funding for schools and argue that it has failed because it is too narrow of a solution—it only addresses educational deprivation and not the environmental problems that interfere with children’s learning. They assert that, “Comprehensive services are required to put the child into the position to benefit from school” (114). Ludwig and Phillips agree with Zigler and Styfco, stating that cognitive and socio-emotional abilities are closely intertwined and shifting the focus of the program to cognitive abilities is risky (16).

Currie, in collaboration with Matthew Neidell, also attempts to discern what factors truly determine Head Start quality in her study, “Getting inside the ‘Black Box’ of Head Start Quality: What Matters and What Doesn’t.” Her analysis of data from the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth 1979 suggests that higher per capita spending on education and health does matter, as it increases child reading and vocabulary scores as well as lowers a child’s chances of having to repeat a grade or showing behavioral problems (Currie 95). Currie also analyzed how teacher qualifications affected student outcomes in light of proposed legislation to require Head Start teachers to hold bachelors and associates degrees. She finds that higher teacher qualifications have virtually no impact on student outcomes and that reallocating funding to increasing teacher degree levels will not effectively improve program quality or student outcomes (Currie 95).

Researchers have also attempted to discern what matters and what doesn't in terms of curriculum and teaching methods through the Head Start REDI (Research-based, Developmentally Informed) intervention program. The intervention was performed in 44 participating Head Start classrooms in three different counties in Pennsylvania, and classrooms were randomly assigned to either intervention or control groups. Teachers in control classrooms conducted their curriculum as they had in prior years, while teachers in intervention classrooms were given "curriculum-based lessons, center-based extension activities, and training in 'teaching strategies' to use throughout the day" (Sukhdeep Gill et al. 1806). The intervention materials focused on increasing social-emotional skills, language skills, and emergent literary skills through a research-based curriculum and were meant to be implemented as extensions and improvements to the existing Creative Curriculum (Sukhdeep Gill et al. 1807). Teachers were extensively coached and evaluated on curriculum implementation to ensure fidelity to the program and generate accurate study results.

Program results show that certain improvements to the program can have significant effects on cognitive and non-cognitive gains and provides research-based suggestions for how the program can be improved effectively. The REDI program's goal was to enhance student's language skills and social-emotional competency through an enhanced curriculum and increased teacher support and mentoring. The program targeted mainly language skills and social-emotional competency because these skills "provide fundamental support for effective

school engagement; they facilitate the child's ability to follow classroom rules, cope actively with learning challenges, and relate to teachers and peers" (Sukhdeep Gill et al. 1812).

With respect to language skills, the study found that REDI students scored significantly higher on vocabulary and parents' reports of communication and language use in the home (1813). With respect to social-emotional competency, REDI students scored significantly higher on assessments of emotional understanding and social problem solving as well as teacher reported aggression and observer reported task orientation. These results suggest that greater investments in teacher training in research-based teaching methods and teacher support in implementing that training can help Head Start programs more effectively achieve cognitive and non-cognitive student gains.

In addition to implementing research-based teaching methods, the Head Start program needs to reevaluate its compliance monitoring procedures to address concerns about quality variation across programs. Haskins and Barnett observe that, "Head Start's existing performance standards [are] not producing [the] desired results" (17). The authors suggest that Head Start needs to take a hard stand and terminate programs that are found to be defective or of poor quality (Haskins & Barnett 18). However, this can only work if the Office of Head Start makes a concerted effort to find more effective local agencies in the regions of terminated programs to apply for grants, so as not to remove access to Head Start for children in those areas. Finally, Head Start centers should be subject to more continuous evaluation (instead of one every three years), in order to pick up

on problems and rectify them before they develop into more serious issues and program termination (Haskins & Barnett 18).

Finally, in order to increase the effectiveness of Head Start and shield the cognitive gains made by children while in the program, Head Start needs to implement a follow-up program that assists low-income children and their families within the public school system. From 1991-1998, the Administration on Children, Youth, and Family funded 31 local Transition Demonstration Programs in 30 states. These programs were created to work in collaboration with public schools to make the transition from Head Start into public school easier for Head Start students and to provide continued support to low-income families. The programs were required to provide ongoing parental involvement activities, educational enhancement, family support services, and health and nutrition services to Head Start families through the end of third grade. Because the control group was allowed to (and most did) create programs of their own in the control schools and Head Start programs and because some programs did not successfully implement a strong program, the study could not provide an appropriate comparison between a treatment group and a control group. However, an analysis of the gains made by both groups shows that the program was a tremendous success (Office of Planning, Research, and Evaluation ii).

Children who participated in the program were scoring better than their non-Head Start peers but still substantially below the national average in reading and math when they entered kindergarten. However, by the time they left the third grade, they were scoring well within the national average range, far from the

typical fade out witnessed in other studies (Office on Planning, Research, and Evaluation v-vi). Furthermore, in the area of social skills, their teachers rated them as within the national averages during all four years of the study (viii). This data suggests that Head Start prepares children to perform academically as well as behaviorally in their elementary school classrooms. It also shows that, with proper follow-up, low-income children can retain their cognitive gains from Head Start. Unfortunately, these programs lost their funding when the study ended in 1999.

Recommendations for Funding

Although the national budget deficit has skyrocketed in the past decade, the evidence in this paper suggests that it is not cost-effective to cut Head Start's budget from its current level. The loss of classrooms and resources would be devastating to low-income children and families who need those services.

Furthermore, Head Start's budget represents only .2 percent of the national budget; cutting Head Start funding by fifteen percent is an extremely insignificant cost saving for the government. Although the government is trimming back anywhere it can, cutting programs like Head Start that actually provide a substantial return on investment will create greater costs for the government in the future.

Second, Congress should commit to a plan to expand Head Start into an entitlement program within the next ten years. Although this would constitute between a 200-300% budget increase, the returns reaped by Congress would

only create cost savings in the future. As the program operates now, only a quarter of eligible children and their families have access to the vital resources offered by Head Start, which is hardly creating equal opportunity for low-income children. Expanding Head Start to an entitlement program would ensure equal opportunity for all low-income preschoolers, allowing them to start kindergarten on the same footing as their more affluent peers.

Finally, Congress should consider funding a follow-up program for Head Start graduates. Although families are provided with a support system while their children are in Head Start, they lose all those benefits when their child moves on to the elementary school systems, many of which are of poor quality. Currie's study as well as the evidence gleaned from the Transition Demonstration Project indicates that the cognitive fade out has less to do with Head Start quality and more to do with the quality of schools attended after completion of Head Start. A follow-up program would help ensure that the cognitive and socio-emotional gains made in Head Start are fostered and built upon in elementary school instead of diminished and eventually lost.

Conclusion

Despite heavy criticism and scrutiny, Head Start remains as the most important education and anti-poverty programs for preschool aged children. The program works create better childcare and home environments for three to four year-olds to ensure that all children have equality of opportunity, no matter what socioeconomic class they are born into. Furthermore, the program benefits

taxpayers too in that it creates long term gains in soft skills that result in cost savings for the government later in a child's life. Although the program is not perfect and could definitely use some adjustments, it is an essential part of the fight to diminish cyclical poverty.

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Exhibit 1 – Heckman Returns to Human Capital Inputs

Figure 19: Returns to a Unit Dollar Invested



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