

## Does Head Start live up to name?

*Backers defend program after new report cites shortcomings*

By: Dana Nichols – March 3, 2013

---

Head Start's name suggests that schooling is like a foot race.

The idea is that offering free, high-quality preschool to millions of children living in poverty would give those children a chance to sprint ahead before the race starts, or at least arrive on time at the starting line already occupied by more fortunate middle- and upper-class peers.

The name also implies that once children get a "head start" they'll stay ahead, or at least keep up with children with access to books, summer camps, trips to museums and the other basics of middle-class child rearing.

But a recently published federal government study finds that isn't true at all, and that academically at least, Head Start students fade back into the middle of the pack in the first few years of elementary school.

A long-term study published in December by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services found that by the end of third grade, there were "very few impacts" evident in the students who had attended Head Start compared with those who did not.

The December publication updated an earlier report issued in 2010 that found the same pattern occurring by first grade for former Head Start students.

Both reports have been used as ammunition by critics of Head Start, such as the conservative Cato Institute.

Other scholars and preschool advocates, as well as a top San Joaquin County Head Start official, say the study misses the mark. They say the study did find huge benefits to children's emotional well-being, health and cognitive development. What's more, they say the poor outcomes for children after entering elementary school show what's wrong with the elementary schools rather than with Head Start.

"The idea of blaming the medicine because someone got sick by not taking it ... is a mistake," said Lynn Beck, dean of the Benerd School of Education at University of the Pacific.

Lani Schiff-Ross, executive director of First 5 San Joaquin, said that even if preschool children do rejoin the pack during the early years of elementary school, many probably would trail the pack had they not attended early childhood education programs.

"In first and second grade, you learn to read, and starting in third grade you read to learn," said Schiff-Ross, head of an organization that serves 1,700 San Joaquin County families and children ages 0-5. "We don't need kids to be ahead of other kids in third grade. We need them reading proficiently in third grade."

Beck said if schools are not sustaining the successes of Head Start, it suggests they should be transformed to offer more of the family engagement and support that Head Start offers.

"This is not about Head Start. This is about schooling," Beck said.

It is also about money. In 1998, when the recently published study was ordered by Congress, Rep. John Mica (R-Fla.) and others were pushing the idea of replacing Head Start with a system of vouchers.

Such a plan would allow low-income parents to choose the preschool they want and would create a lucrative new business similar to the charter schools now popular in California and other states.

"There's competition out there, people who would like to grab some of the Head Start dollars that exist," said Tony Colon, program director for Head Start Child Development Council Inc., the entity that operates Head Start schools for 3,000 children in San Joaquin County.

Colon and other defenders of Head Start note the program is based on meticulous research to support the success of children and families. Offerings include home visits, social workers, and teachers who speak the same languages as the children.

Regular K-12 schools, in contrast, have recently cut such offerings if they ever had them.

"One of the problems with the school districts is they are not family focused," Colon said.

When Mom and Dad are less connected to the classroom, children do not learn as well, Colon said.

While the recent federal study found that academic benefits of Head Start faded after children entered elementary school, other long-term studies have found lasting benefits.

A 2009 study by Harvard Graduate School of Education researcher David Deming, for example, used national youth census data to compare the fate of siblings who did and did not attend Head Start.

Deming found that while test score differences may have faded in elementary grades, there were large benefits to Head Start. Those benefits included that Head Start participants were healthier as adults, were more likely to have attended college, and had better jobs.

By that measure, Head Start did help children sprint ahead in the race through life, although the finish line was many decades down the road.

Colon said such powerful benefits are clear to those who work every day with children and families.

"I'm totally committed to the vision of Head Start," he said. "I've seen the impact it's had in the community."