



Falling behind: Are taxpayers getting their money's worth with Head Start?

By M.D. Kittle February 13, 2013

MADISON — Forged out of The War on Poverty nearly a half century ago, Head Start has long been regarded as the great education leveler.

But the early childhood development program has failed to deliver sustained academic and behavioral impact, according to a recent study federal report.

Many of the people on the ground, administrators and teachers of Head Start programs, charge the report is flawed, that the core areas don't measure the many successes of the federally funded program. Not contained in the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation report, they argue, are the young girls who avoided abusive relationships later in their lives and the little boys who grew up out of jail, thanks to Head Start.

Still, the findings, the latest in a series of reports questioning Head Start's effectiveness, beg two critical questions: Are taxpayers getting their money's worth? Are children being well served?

“Few gains”

The final report commissioned by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, following others in recent years that have measured Head Start's impact, found the program has “improved children's preschool outcomes,” but it has had “few impacts on children in kindergarten through 3rd grade.”

In essence, any cognitive, behavioral, or health gains during the program “rapidly dissipated in elementary school” for many of the children the study followed. While parents in the program may have noticed differences in areas like social-emotional development, elementary school teachers did not.

As for children's well-being, “there is also no clear evidence that access to Head Start had an impact on children's language and literacy development while children were in Head Start,” the report found.

“In summary, there were initial positive impacts from having access to Head Start, but by the end of 3rd grade there were very few impacts found for (three-year-olds or four-year-olds in Head Start) in any of the four domains of cognitive, social-emotional, health and parenting practices,” the report summarized.

“The few impacts that were found did not show a clear pattern of favorable or unfavorable impacts for children.”

‘Head Start works’

Head Start proponents have raised concerns about the study, questioning its methodology and its control group.

Dan Stickler, interim director of Wisconsin Head Start Association, which represents the 63 head start grantees in the state, said the “fade-out effect,” or diminishing learning returns, is not only a myth, it’s a lie.

“That’s akin to saying I took a shower last Friday and today I’m dirty again so obviously my shower didn’t work,” he said. “The data is possibly flawed, it’s certainly old and it doesn’t reflect what’s happening in 2013.”

“The bottom line is Head Start works.”

Head Start and Early Head Start — for families of children prenatal through age 3 — serves 16,000 low-income children in Wisconsin and their families through a variety of programs.

Rock-Walworth Comprehensive Family Services Inc. coordinates a Head Start program serving more than 500 children.

Connie Robers has served as the agency’s Head Start director since 2000. She said she has seen a lot of changes over the past dozen years, driven by an ever-increasing demand for services. In Beloit alone, more than 100 children are on a Head Start waiting list.

Robers said the findings of the federal study concern Head Start administrators and teachers and they do take seriously the long-term examination of the program.

But there's more to impact than numbers, Robers said. The early childhood program is facing considerable challenges, serving a growing number of families facing an array of mental health issues — with children living in the shadow of poverty, drug-addicted households, parents in prison.

“What concerns me is we are considered to be the immunization against all the other challenges our children will face,” Robers said. “They will continue to have challenges around poverty and other risk factor. We aren't always able to change that arc for children.”

What the studies don't account for, Robers said, is the sustained effects of poverty on children's lives long after they leave Head Start.

“I think we do pretty amazing things for children when they're with us,” she said.

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But what is the ultimate return on the Head Start investment?

Rock-Walworth's Head Start program's budget is north of \$4 million this year.

The federal government – a.k.a. the taxpayer – spends about \$8 billion a year on early childhood development services to low-income children and their families, according to a report by the Cato Institute, a Washington, D.C.-based free-market think tank.

The program received a \$2.33 billion jolt under the American Recovery and Reinvestment Act, otherwise known as the federal stimulus.

About 900,000 children were enrolled in Head Start in 2011, with annual spending at almost \$9,000 per child, according to Cato.

Head Start has enrolled more than 25 million since it started as a summer school program in 1965, according to Health and Human Services. Taxpayers have spent more than \$166 billion funding Head Start and its support services since then, says CATO, no fan of the taxpayer-subsidized program.

“... (I)t’s remarkable that taxpayers are still funding Head Start even though it isn’t providing any sustained benefits to participants,” A Cato paper titled, “Downsizing the Federal Government,” asserts.

A host of studies, according to CATO, have found myriad problems with the administration of Head Start, from wasteful and deceitful spending to special interest feeding at the funding trough.

In 2007, the HHS inspector general’s office found that 5 percent of Head Start slots were funded but not filled, which it said “equals Federal dollars that are inefficiently used,” according to the CATO report. “Only 11 percent of grantees reported enrollment levels that matched actual enrollment as determined by the inspector general. For example, an Ohio state audit found that a Head Start program received \$7.5 million for children it didn’t serve. A previous audit of the program found that it had wrongly received \$3.8 million.”

Several HHS audits in 2005 found Head Start grantee executives at three programs received excessive compensation, and an Atlanta Journal-Constitution investigation reported that Head Start programs nationwide spent stimulus money on employee raises, some as high as 8.5 percent.

Stickler, interim director of the Wisconsin Head Start Association, said he can’t think of a federal program that is reviewed or monitored more, pointing to Head Start’s 1,600 different performance standards. In Wisconsin, Stickler said, 98 percent of Head Start teachers have bachelor’s degrees in early childhood education.

He said taxpayers are getting their money’s worth, well beyond academic achievement. He points to studies showing Head Start graduates are less likely to be in abusive relationships, get pregnant or be incarcerated.

Roberts said she has seen the impact first-hand.

“Last night I heard a young mom say when she was in Head Start she discovered that she was a good parent,” the administrator said of a mother who returned to college and became a person of “pretty significant standing” in the community.

Studying Head Start

So what’s next for Head Start in light of the latest academic findings?

U.S. Rep. Tom Petri, R-Wisconsin, a senior member of the House’s Committee on Education and the Workforce, said he plans to further scrutinize the matter.

“There is certainly an investment to be made in our children’s education, but just like any federal program, Head Start should be examined to make sure it’s doing what it’s supposed to do and to ensure that it’s cost-effective,” Petri wrote in an email response to Wisconsin Reporter. “I’ll be reviewing the HHS report with the Committee to determine the best way forward.”