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EDITORIAL

Posted on Thu. Jan. 21, 2010 - 10:14 am EDT

EDITORIAL

Is Head Start worth \$10 billion investment?

We should find out before pouring more into pre-K programs.

Head Start is one of those programs so universally praised that it seems almost a sacrilege to question it. And why not? *Everybody knows* that the earlier we begin childhood education, the better, and this is "for the children," after all. How can we begrudge whatever it takes to give them a chance at the education they need? So presidents from Ronald Reagan to Jimmy Carter and George W. Bush to Bill Clinton have embraced the program, and roughly \$100 billion has been invested in it.



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But what if it doesn't actually work?

That ought to be a question every educator is asked in the wake of a study last week showing that, while there are small benefits to children enrolled in Head Start, they largely disappear by the end of first grade. And this was not a study by the CATO Institute or the Heritage Foundation or some other libertarian or conservative interest group. It was a large-scale control study of nearly 5,000 children released by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services.

Many conservatives cited the study and called for an immediate end to the program. Why keep pouring billions into something that isn't working? Well, that isn't going to happen.

This isn't the first study to show only short-term temporary gains for Head Start students. There have been a bunch of them over the decades. A 1985 study also showed no long-term gains. A study during the Clinton administration, for example, showed that after spending six months in Head Start, 4-year-olds could identify two more letters than children of the same background not in the program, and there were no gains at all in math comprehension. Both of those studies were also conducted by the federal HHS.

If nothing was changed after *those* studies, why would anything be changed because of this one? Educators are so invested in Head Start that they just don't hear the concerns, or at least they ignore them.

We can at least hope that somebody in the academic or political arena might suggest an examination of Head Start programs to see if any work better than the others. Is that too much for taxpayers to expect?

This is important because the push for more pre-K education programs continues to gain momentum, even here in conservative Indiana. We should stop and consider what we're doing instead of just taking it on blind faith that it is the right thing. It's bad enough to waste money. To do so while pretending we're helping children who really aren't getting the help is morally indefensible.

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