



Updated: Thu., Jan. 28, 2010, 4:29 AM

## Head Start: A tragic waste of money

By ANDREW J. COULSON

Last Updated: 4:29 AM, January 28, 2010

Posted: 1:03 AM, January 28, 2010

Head Start, the most sacrosanct federal education program, *doesn't work*.

That's the finding of a sophisticated study just released by President Obama's Department of Health and Human Services.

Created in 1965, the comprehensive preschool program for 3- and 4-year olds and their parents is meant to narrow the education gap between low-income students and their middle- and upper-income peers. Forty-five years and \$166 billion later, it has been proven a failure.

The bad news came in the study released this month: It found that, by the end of the first grade, children who attended Head Start are essentially indistinguishable from a control group of students who didn't.

What's so damning is that this study used the best possible method to review the program: It looked at a nationally representative sample of 5,000 children who were randomly assigned to either the Head Start ("treatment") group or to the non-Head Start ("control") group.

Random assignment is the "gold standard" of medical and social-science research: It gives investigators confidence that the treatment and control groups are essentially identical in every respect except their access to Head Start. So if eventual test performances differ, we can be pretty sure that the difference was caused by the program. No previous study of Head Start used this approach on a nationally representative sample of children.

When the researchers gave both groups of students 44 different academic tests at the end of the first grade, only two seemed to show even marginally significant advantages for the Head Start group. And even those apparent advantages vanished after standard statistical controls were applied.

In fact, not a single one of the 114 tests administered to first graders -- of academics, socio-emotional development, health care/health status and parenting practice -- showed a reliable, statistically significant effect from participating in Head Start.

Some advocates of the program have acknowledged these dramatic results, but suggest that it's not necessarily Head Start's fault if its effects vanish during kindergarten and the first grade -- perhaps our K-12 schools are to blame.

But that's beside the point. Even if it's true, it means that Head Start will be of no lasting value to children until we fix our elementary and secondary schools. Until then, money spent on Head Start will continue to be wasted.

Yet the Obama administration remains enthusiastic. Health and Human Services Secretary Kathleen Sibelius and Education Secretary Arne Duncan both want to *boost* funding for Head Start -- that is, to spend more on a program that's *sure to fail*. That's after the president already raised spending on the program from \$6.8 billion to \$9.2 billion last year.

Instead of throwing more dollars at this proven failure, President Obama might consider throwing his weight behind proven successes. A federal program that pays private-school tuition for poor DC families, for instance, has been shown to raise students' reading performance by more than two grade levels after just three years, compared to a control group of students who stayed in public schools. And it does so at about a quarter the cost to taxpayers of DC's public schools.

Sadly, Obama and Duncan have ignored the DC program's proven success. Neither lifted a finger to save it when Democrats in Congress pulled the plug on its funding last year.

Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect national Democrats to end a Great Society program, even when it's a proven failure. Perhaps it's unrealistic to expect them to stand up to teachers' union opposition and support private-school-choice programs that are proven successes.

Of course, until last week, it seemed unrealistic to expect a Republican to win the Senate seat long held by Ted Kennedy. If voters get angry enough with federal education politics, national Democrats may start learning from their state-level colleagues who *are* starting to support effective policies like school choice. Or *they* may just lose their seats, too.

*Andrew J. Coulson directs the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom.*