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'Head Start': The \$166 Billion Fed Ed Failure

Posted By [Andrew J. Coulson](#) On January 22, 2010 @ 12:03 am In [Education](#), [Politics](#), [US News](#) | [39 Comments](#)

"Head Start," the flagship pre-kindergarten program introduced in 1965, has been a \$166 billion failure. That's the upshot of a sophisticated multi-year study just released by the Department of Health and Human Services.

An earlier iteration of the study, published in 2005, had found a few modest improvements in the language skills of participating students while they were enrolled in the program. But by the end of the first grade, even those few effects have disappeared, according to the follow-up released this month. Out of 44 separate cognitive tests given to former Head Start students at the end of the first grade, only *two* showed even marginally significant effects. The other 42 showed no statistically significant effect at all.

But even that overstates the case for Head Start. That's because, on each of the 44 separate tests, there is a 1 in 10 chance of a false positive: a test result that *appears* to show a positive impact but is really just a random fluke. With so many test results, we'd expect to see at least a few false positives. Statisticians have [ways to control](#) ^[1] for this problem, and when the authors themselves applied such a control, they found that the two apparently "significant" effects vanished.

What's more, this applies to all the non-cognitive tests administered to students as well. After controlling for the likelihood of false positives, the study's authors found no "socio-emotional" benefits and no "parenting practice" benefits either. No benefits to Head Start of any kind at the end of first grade. None.

Why is this important? Because \$166 billion has been squandered on this program over the past half century, and the Obama administration is wasting even more, even faster. The president already increased annual spending on Head Start by more than a third last year, from \$6.8 billion to \$9.2 billion. He has made clear he does not intend to stop there.

But if the president were true to his own rhetoric, he would immediately reverse course. At least six times since the fall of 2008, [President Obama has said](#) ^[2]: "We've got to eliminate programs that don't work, and we've got to make sure that the programs that we do have are more efficient and cost less." Well, Mr. President, your own Department of Health and Human Services has demonstrated that Head Start does not work.

But President Obama and Congress have already had a golden opportunity to show that they will heed their own scientific evidence, supporting what works and what is efficient: the D.C. private school voucher program. The latest [Department of Education study](#) ^[3] revealed that after attending private schools for three years, voucher-receiving students were reading more than two grade levels ahead of the randomized control group who had remained in public schools. What's more, the average voucher value was a mere \$6,600, compared to D.C. per-pupil education spending of [over \\$28,000](#) ^[4].

What did Congress do to the program that has proven itself dramatically more effective and many times more efficient than D.C.'s public system? They decided to sunset its funding, effectively killing it. What did President Obama do to save it? Nothing. He let it die despite [having previously said](#) ^[5] that "if there was any argument for vouchers it was, 'Let's see if the experiment works.' And if it does, whatever my preconception, you do what's best for kids."

Or not.

There are only two explanations for the contradiction between the president's talk and the president's walk on education: a lack of courage or a lack of integrity. Either he is afraid to stand up to the public school employee unions who despise educational choice and relentlessly demand more money for their members, or he never really cared "what's best for kids" or intended to "eliminate programs that don't work."

Only the president himself knows which it is. Neither explanation is of much solace to the children and taxpayers who must live with his decisions ... at least until the next election.

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[1] [ways to control](http://www.amstat.org/sections/sigmedd/Advamed/Advamed08/presentation/Najarian_-_pres.pdf): http://www.amstat.org/sections/sigmedd/Advamed/Advamed08/presentation/Najarian_-_pres.pdf

[2] [President Obama has said](http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/26/debate.mississippi.transcript/): <http://www.cnn.com/2008/POLITICS/09/26/debate.mississippi.transcript/>

[3] [Department of Education study](http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/pdf/20094050.pdf): <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/pubs/20094050/pdf/20094050.pdf>

[4] [over \\$28,000](http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2009/12/17/dc-vouchers-solved-generous-severance-for-displaced-workers/): <http://www.cato-at-liberty.org/2009/12/17/dc-vouchers-solved-generous-severance-for-displaced-workers/>

[5] [having previously said](http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=718193): <http://www.jsonline.com/story/index.aspx?id=718193>

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