

Study: Head Start's impact on kids fades by first grade

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February 22, 2010 12:00 AM

Head Start provides a boost to young children's learning and health and helps improve parenting, but most of these benefits fade away by the end of first grade, a recent government study reported.

The Head Start Impact Study was conducted for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services as part of the reauthorization for the program, and released last month.

It evaluated the impact of Head Start on 3- and 4-year-old children, as measured against a control group who went to other programs or stayed at home.

"There are statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group on every measure of children's preschool experiences measured in this study," the study found.

For 4-year-olds, gains were seen in language and literacy, as well as access to dental care.

The impacts for 3-year-olds in the program were even more pronounced. Early academic skills increased, and less hyperactive and withdrawn behaviors were observed. There was less evidence of parents spanking their children; parents also read to their children more often.

The weaknesses described in the study did not apply to the local branch of Head Start, Pocono Services for Children and Families, said Tim Lee, director of the program. It serves 225 families.

The federal study found that 30 percent of staff working at Head Start programs held a bachelor's degree. In Monroe County, about 70 percent of the staff either already earned a bachelor's or would do so soon, Lee said.

He said the main criticism — that only one boost in cognitive skills in Head Start graduates persisted through the end first grade — is of concern, but has already been on his program's radar.

"They hit kindergarten about as strong as anyone can expect them to," said Lee, "but what happens after that?"

Lee credited his program's high level of engagement with parents as one of the main reasons children showed gains while they were still at Head Start. He added that he and his staff were trying to find ways to continue that level of contact as children continue into the elementary grades.

"That may be where some of this fadeout exists," he said.

Lee said he wanted to extend Head Start's contact with families until second and third grade. If space permits, Lee said he wanted to establish Head Start classrooms in elementary schools.

Head Start is one of the keystones of the 1960s-era War on Poverty. It envisioned what it calls a "whole child" model that combines preschool education with medical, dental, mental health and nutritional care, as well as parenting help to adults.

"We are right in there helping them with electricity and clothes and food. We help them not be evicted from their home," Lee said.

Members of the working poor, who are typically served by Head Start programs, are growing in number in Monroe County. Over the past decade, the county has had the largest percentage increase in the state in students qualifying for free and reduced lunch.

"That is a serious, evolving need," he said.

Prior reports have described more lasting long-term results of Head Start.

Research by RAND in 2000 found that Head Start was linked to a significantly increased probability of completing high school and attending college. There was some evidence that Head Start led to better earnings into the early 20s, and lower likelihood of being charged or convicted of a crime.

Last year, a researcher writing in the American Economic Journal: Applied Economics found that Head Start closes one-third of the gap between the poorest children and those whose families' incomes are at the median.

"The long-term impact for disadvantaged children is large despite 'fadeout' of test score gains," wrote David Deming, a Harvard University doctoral candidate.

Still, opponents of Head Start discerned in the recent study's results a justification to scuttle the program.

"Head Start should now be considered a demonstrated failure," said Adam Schaeffer, a policy analyst for the Cato Institute's Center for Educational Freedom, in a statement. "The obvious conclusion to be drawn from these facts is that government preschool programs are no substitute for fixing our K-12 education system."

Researchers gathered a nationally representative sample of 84 agencies that included nearly 5,000 children, ages 3 and 4, who were randomly assigned to either Head Start or to a control group of some other kind of early childhood program selected by their parents.

Data began being collected in fall 2002 and continued through 2006. Researchers followed the students through the spring of first grade.