

The Problem of Head Start

Nowhere is resistance to structured, curriculum-based, standards-and-assessment-driven early education clearer than in the big, iconic, federal early-childhood program known as Head Start, a legacy of Lyndon Johnson's mid-1960s declaration of war on poverty. Though this program and its founders were surely not anti-education, today's enormous Head Start fan club insists that it be viewed as a child development program, not as preschool—and thereby illustrates the difficulty of incorporating a firm focus on school readiness into an established venture that has long had a softer and more diffuse mission (and a weak cognitive track record).

At the outset, little was made of the child development vs. preschool distinction. In a letter to Congress in February 1965, LBJ characterized his proposal as “a school readiness program for 100,000 children about to enter kindergarten.”⁶⁸ A few months later, describing Project Head Start, then just a summer program, he said that “nearly half the preschool children of poverty will get a head start on their future. *These children will receive preschool training to prepare them for regular school in September.* [emphasis added] They will get medical and dental attention that they badly need, and parents will receive counseling on improving the home environment.”⁶⁹

Within a few years, however, studies began to suggest that the program was not, in fact, preparing children very well for regular

school. In 1969, the Westinghouse Learning Corporation and Ohio University published the first major evaluation of Head Start and concluded that, while it did commendable things for needy children by way of socialization and health care, its cognitive impact on them was nil once they reached the primary grades.

This finding launched a four-decades-long battle over how to judge Head Start's effectiveness and whether it should even be regarded as an education program. Study after study—including comprehensive federal reviews in 1985 and 2005—showed time and again that the cognitive impacts were feeble and transitory. In response, Head Start's defenders and boosters, as well as the burgeoning and organized groups of program operators and staffers, denied ever more vociferously that it is primarily about school readiness—and maintained that it should not be appraised that way. Meanwhile, appropriations ballooned. (See Figure 4.)

In other words, evidence that Head Start was not an effective education program led to the contention that it shouldn't be viewed *as* an education program!⁷⁰ As Hirsch recounts, "The health, nutrition, motivation, and self-confidence of poor children were deemed to be at least as important to their future well-being as their academic learning..."⁷¹

Yale psychologist Edward Zigler, often termed "the father of Head Start" (and head of the program during the Nixon administration), confirms this in his own chronicle of what he calls "America's most successful educational experiment." He acknowledges that critical reviews of Head Start's educational impact encouraged supporters of the ever-expanding program to justify it on other grounds. Here is how he recalls his own response to the first negative appraisal:

When asked about the Westinghouse report, I argued that the measures used in the report were much too narrow. Don't crucify

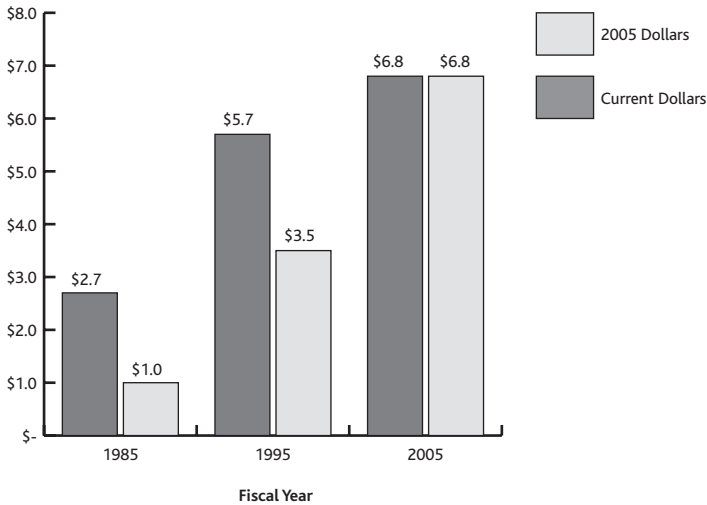


FIGURE 4 Head Start Appropriations (billions of dollars)

Source: U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children & Families, *Head Start Impact Study*

the child on the cross of IQ, I said. Always I would repeat the theme that what we should be evaluating was not Head Start’s impact on cognitive ability, but rather its influence on the motivational factors that lead children to make the most of the cognitive abilities they have. Head Start should be evaluated on much broader criteria, such as not only school performance but also health, nutrition, and attitudes toward self and society.⁷²

Zigler had powerful allies, including Health, Education and Welfare (HEW) Secretary Elliot Richardson, who, he says, encouraged him to “publicize Head Start’s strengths.” This pattern continued for years, justifying the program on grounds of child development rather than school readiness. When the new cabinet-level education department was being stripped out of the old HEW in 1978-79, Head Start proponents campaigned fiercely and successfully to

keep their program in what became known as the Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), where it remains today. They argued that it belonged with other health, welfare, and child development programs, rather than with federal education programs, as the Carter White House had proposed. Congress concurred.⁷³

Contending that Head Start was only about developing, not “educating,” poor children became somewhat harder to justify after *A Nation at Risk* (1983) began to re-orient America’s education policy priorities from equality to quality and as schools came to be judged by their academic performance rather than their intentions. By then, however, thousands of centers across the land were employing tens of thousands of Head Start “workers,” many of them poor and not well educated themselves. This was, after all, part of the War on Poverty’s “community action” program, and lots of these folks came from the neighborhood. They weren’t teachers in the usual sense, nor were they paid teacher-level salaries. But these jobs were important to them, their families, and their communities, and they weren’t about to walk away to make room for cognitively focused preschool educators. They and their associations became a significant lobbying force, as did the operators of Head Start centers that were organized and staffed in accord with the program’s child development, anti-poverty, and community-based emphases.

Conflict was inevitable. The country now yearned to boost school achievement and studies showed that under-achievement arrived with many poor children at the kindergarten door. Yet those who worked for Uncle Sam’s premier pre-K program, operated its centers, and watched over it in academe and on Capitol Hill insisted that it was not and ought not be focused principally on preparing young poor children for academic success in school.

Pushed by such critics as Hirsch to reshape Head Start into something more like France’s curriculum-driven preschools, Congress

finally tiptoed in this direction in 1998. It ordered HHS to develop “education performance standards to ensure the school readiness of children...on completion of the Head Start program.” Congress even spelled out five areas that such standards must cover, including “phonemic, print, and numeracy awareness,” “increasingly complex and varied vocabulary,” and “an appreciation of books.” Lawmakers further stipulated that within five years, at least half of the Head Start workforce should possess associate degrees or better. (The modest goal attests to the meager credentials of the existing workforce.) And they required program operators to include child outcomes in their self-evaluations.

This reorientation did not sit well with the Head Start “community,” and a further dust-up arose in 2000 when President-elect George W. Bush signaled that he intended to turn Head Start into a “reading program.” Zigler harrumphed in *The New York Times* that it was *already* a reading program “at the level that is possible for children of 3 and 4.” Perhaps Zigler hadn’t spent much time in those French preschools that Hirsch extolled. In any case, he insisted that most Head Start-age children lack “the cognitive capacity to attribute meaning to abstract symbols, like written words. Even for the rare ones who do, most teachers agree that time is better spent learning behavior needed in school, like listening, taking turns and getting along with others.”⁷⁴

The argument about Head Start’s mission flared again in 2003, when HHS Assistant Secretary Wade Horn announced that the program would begin assessing four-year-olds on their literacy, language, and math skills. The instrument would be a brief assessment that was not (despite much erroneous reporting to the contrary) a paper- and-pencil test for small children so much as a checklist that their teachers worked through with them, one by one. This exercise

comprised part of the National Reporting System that was central to Horn's broader effort to boost Head Start results by gathering more robust data on cognitive outcomes and to tie the beloved federal program more tightly to the goal of school readiness—the very goal that Congress had set for it five years earlier.

Horn and his colleagues were keenly aware that plenty of evaluations had revealed Head Start's meager cognitive benefits. Indeed, 2005 brought the first findings from a massive, Congressionally-mandated "impact study" that was more faithful than its predecessors to rigorous social-science methodology (including, for example, random assignment of 5,000 three- and four-year-olds to Head Start and other kinds of community programs). Head Start participation did bring some cognitive gains, but they were small and found in just in a few domains.⁷⁵ As Besharov and Caeli Higney summarize the results:

Head Start four-year-olds were able to name about two more letters than their non-Head Start counterparts, but they did not show any significant gains on much more important measures such as early math learning, vocabulary, oral comprehension (more indicative of later reading comprehension), motivation to learn, or social competencies, including the ability to interact with peers and teachers.⁷⁶

Note, too, that these small gains were measured immediately upon exit from the program; there was no way to know whether they would fade as time passed. Even at the point of kindergarten entry, therefore, Head Start graduates benefited from little gap-narrowing, despite the expenditure of nearly \$10,000 in federal funds on each of them. So Horn had good reason to try to beef up the

program's preschool elements and to evaluate it and its providers on the basis of their cognitive outcomes. The National Head Start Association went wild, however. It feared that such assessment results would be used to appraise program operators, maybe even individual Head Start workers, and that the assessments were part of the Bush administration's grand conspiracy to turn veteran Head Start "child development aides" into teachers—maybe to replace them altogether. The program's faithful Congressional allies were swiftly drawn into the fray.

Much argument and rival testimony followed. But the program's old guard was soon winning, its familiar assumptions were being reinforced, and the wind was going out of the reformers' sails. In 2005, HHS Secretary Tommy Thompson exited. The following year, the Democrats took control of both houses of Congress. In early 2007, Horn left government, and later that year, Congress forbade continuation of the National Reporting System. Although the most recent Head Start reauthorization again pays lip service to the program's school-readiness role and its need for better-qualified staffers, no real enforcement mechanism remains or is likely to be re-established any time soon.

This Congressional aversion to true school readiness and results-based accountability for early-childhood programs, and the corresponding predilection to rely instead on staffing ratios and college degrees as proxies for program quality, extends beyond Head Start. It stretches across a host of well-meaning bills by prominent federal politicians, including former Senator and presidential candidate (now Secretary of State) Hillary Clinton. Despite its child-centered title, her "Ready to Learn" bill focused on ensuring that preschool classrooms were staffed by bachelor-degree-holding teachers. Similarly, Hawaii Congresswoman Maizie Hirono, author

of the “Providing Resources Early for Kids” bill, would use associate’s degrees for teacher aides as proxies for quality. And the 2008 revision of the big federal Higher Education Act, which for the first time covered early-childhood educators, again shows a total preoccupation with their formal academic credentials rather than their effectiveness in preparing children for school.

What President Obama will propose for Head Start and its ilk, besides more funding, remains to be seen.