Head Start is a nationwide preschool program targeted at children who come from socio-economically disadvantaged backgrounds. The program, started in 1965 as part of the ‘War on Poverty’, is funded federally. Head Start has served over 30 million children and their families in urban and rural areas in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, Puerto Rico and the U.S. territories. It provides comprehensive [early childhood education](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Early_childhood_education), health, [nutrition](https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Nutrition), and parent involvement services to these children and their families. While the Obama administration consistently increased the funding for the Head Start program, the Trump administration has cut down the budget allocated for education and training outlays by about 45.7% of which Head Start is a part.

Head Start helps to create healthy development in low-income children ages three to five. Family and Community Partnerships offers parents opportunities and support as they identify and meet their own goals, nurture their children and advocate for communities that support children and families.

Migrant and Seasonal services are for children of migrant and seasonal farm workers. Services target children from six months to five years. Service hours are longer and programs extend for fewer months than traditional Head Start. Head Start also serves indigenous Americans, with centers on reservations as well as in urban communities. Homeless children were included explicitly as subjects with the 2007 reauthorization. Programs must identify and provide services to homeless children of all ages within a reasonable period.

Eligibility is largely income-based, although each local program includes other eligibility criteria, such as disabilities and services needed by other family members. Families must earn less than 100% of the federal poverty level. Families may also qualify under a categorical eligibility category—receipt of Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF) funds, Supplemental Security funds, or Homeless, as per the McKinney-Vento Act. Up to 10% of any funded program's enrollment can be from higher income families or families experiencing emergency situations. All programs are required to provide services to children with disabilities, who must comprise 10% of their total enrollment. Per the Head Start Act (2007), programs may elect to serve families whose income is between 100-130% under certain circumstances. Programs must also complete additional reporting requirements if this is appropriate for their community.

Effectiveness

Many studies of program effectiveness have been conducted during Head Start's multi-decade history. The studies failed to produce an academic or political consensus about the program's effects.

Supportive studies and statements

In 2014, CCR Analytics published the results of their study of 49,467 children assessed in the 2012-2013 school year from 81 Head Start programs throughout the state of California (more than 50% of the entire California Head Start population). Participation in the study was open to all California Head Start programs who used the DRDP-PS 2010 assessment tool. The study found that providing two years of Head Start to a child increases the probability by between 13% to 86% that the child will meet age appropriate expectations. The analysis compared three-year-olds enrolled in Head Start to four-year-olds who returned to Head Start for their second year. This also eliminated the issue of selection bias because both groups chose to attend Head Start as three-year-olds.

In 2009, David Deming evaluated the program, using the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth. He compared siblings and found that those who attended Head Start showed stronger academic performance as shown on test scores for years afterward, were less likely to be diagnosed as learning-disabled, less likely to commit crime, more likely to graduate from high school and attend college, and less likely to suffer from poor health as an adult.

Lee collected data across sixty Head Start classrooms in 2007 and 2008. A sample of 1,260 children ages three to four were selected as the final sample. Of these children, 446 had entered Head Start at age 3 and enrolled for a year (Group 1); 498 had been entered at age 4 and enrolled for a year (Group 2); and 316 children had been enrolled for 2 years, entering at age 3 (Group 3). Academic outcome measures in literacy, math and science were collected based on the Head Start and Early Childhood Program Observational Checklist rating on a 4-point scale (1—not yet to 4—excels. Family risk factor indicators (developed by the State Department of Education) included single parent, unemployed parent, teenage parent, parental loss (divorce/death), low parental school achievement, food insufficiency. Group 3 had higher literacy, math and science scores than the other groups. Children in the high-risk group had significantly lower literacy, math, and science scores than those who had three or fewer risk factors. Head Start is associated with significant gains in test scores. Head Start significantly reduces the probability that a child will repeat a grade.

Mixed studies and statements

In 2005, Barnett and Hustedt reviewed the literature and stated, Our review finds mixed, but generally positive, evidence regarding Head Start's long-term benefits. Although studies typically find that increases in IQ fade out over time, many other studies also find decreases in grade retention and special education placements. Sustained increases in school achievement are sometimes found, but in other cases flawed research methods produce results that mimic fade-out. In recent years, the federal government has funded large-scale evaluations of Head Start and Early Head Start.

Head Start "fade"

"Head Start Fade", in which significant initial impacts quickly fade, has often been observed, as early as second and third grade. One hypothesis is that the decline is because Head Start participants are likely to attend lower-quality schools, which fail to reinforce Head Start gains.[31]

Other comments

According to the Administrative History of the Office of Economic Opportunity, children who finish the program and are placed into disadvantaged schools perform worse than their peers by second grade. Only by isolating such children (such as dispersing and sending them to better-performing school districts) could gains be sustained.

In 2011, Time magazine's columnist Joe Klein called for the elimination of Head Start, citing an internal report that the program is costly and makes a negligible impact on children's well-being over time. Klein wrote: You take the million or so poorest 3- and 4-year-old children and give them a leg up on socialization and education by providing preschool for them; if it works, it saves money in the long run by producing fewer criminals and welfare recipients ... it is now 45 years later. We spend more than $7 billion providing Head Start to nearly 1 million children each year. And finally, there is indisputable evidence about the program's effectiveness, provided by the Department of Health and Human Services: Head Start simply does not work.

W. Steven Barnett, director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University, rebutted Klein, "Weighing all of the evidence and not just that cited by partisans on one side or the other, the most accurate conclusion is that Head Start produces modest benefits including some long-term gains for children."