

Does Head Start Work?
Summary of the Findings of the National Head Start Impact Study and
Assessments of Head Start Programs Serving Boulder County

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Background

Head Start is a comprehensive child development program, providing education, health, nutrition, and social services to children and their families through direct services and referrals. As the largest federally-funded early childhood program in the U.S., Head Start has been an important part of the nation's policy for low-income children since its inception in 1965.¹

The release of the National Head Start Impact Study's 1st grade results in January of this year has aroused considerable controversy nationwide about the program's long-term effectiveness. The purpose of this fact sheet is to summarize:

- Key findings of this study,
- Commentaries on the study by experts, and
- Standardized assessments of children's developmental progress, access to health care, and program quality in the two Head Start programs serving Boulder County.

National Head Start Impact Study²

Goals

In the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start, Congress mandated that the Department of Health and Human Services conduct a national study to determine:

- The impact of the program on children's school readiness,
- The impact of the program on parental practices that support children's development, and
- Under what circumstances Head Start achieves its greatest impacts and for which children.

Methodology

- A nationally representative sample of 84 Head Start agencies was selected that included 4,667 newly entering, Head Start-eligible 3- and 4-year old applicants to the program.
- The nearly 5,000 children who had applied to one of the sampled Head Start programs were randomly assigned to either a Head Start group or a control group. Children in the Head Start group were offered the opportunity to enroll in one of the sampled Head Start programs. Children in the control group could not enroll in the sampled Head Starts but could enroll in other early childhood programs.
- The first set of outcomes was measured after nine months of Head Start participation. Follow-up outcome data were collected at the end of kindergarten and at the end of 1st grade.
- Data collection was conducted from fall 2002 through spring 2006.

Summary of Key Findings

- In the first year of the study, the Head Start group showed positive program impacts when compared to the control group in at least some outcomes in every domain measured in the study – cognitive development, social-emotional development, health, and parenting skills.
- A greater number of statistically significant differences were found between the Head Start group and the control group than would be expected based on chance alone.
- 3-year olds had a greater number of positive impacts from Head Start than did 4-year olds.
- At the end of 1st grade, there were only a few statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group.
 - The 3-year old cohort continued to show positive effects of Head Start through 1st grade in some measures of social-emotional development and parenting skills, while 4-year olds did not.

¹ National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs, *Understanding the Head Start Impact Study*, 2010, www.developingchild.harvard.edu.

² U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Head Start Impact Study, Final Report - Executive Summary*, Washington, DC, January 2010; National Head Start Association, *Head Start Impact Study Findings in Context*, www.nhsa.org.

- 4-year olds showed benefits at the end of 1st grade in health insurance coverage.
- Specific subgroups of children showed Head Start benefits through 1st grade in some measures of cognitive development, social-emotional development, and health (although not necessarily among both the 3- and 4-year old age cohorts): e.g., children with special needs, children with lower cognitive skills, children from non-urban settings, Dual Language Learners, and children from higher risk households.
- The group that showed the most widespread unfavorable impacts was 3-year olds whose parents reported symptoms of moderate depression.

Summary of Expert Commentaries on the Study³

There is little debate that in the first year of the study the Head Start group showed positive program impacts in comparison to the control group in all four domains of the early childhood experience. The controversy arises primarily about longer-term impacts of the program. The following is a summary of the major criticisms of the study. These criticisms focus on aspects of the study design that decreased the likelihood of detecting differences between the Head Start group and the control group, both in the study's first year and in the follow-up years.

1. The study design resulted in contamination of the control group, since the group included a mixture of early childhood arrangements. As a result, differences in outcomes between the two groups of children may have been lessened.
 - During the first year, over 15% of control group children attended Head Start programs other than those selected into the sample, since they were prohibited only from enrolling in the sampled Head Start programs.
 - 60% of children in the control group attended child care or early education programs during the first year of the study.
 - As a result, the control group was not a "no-services" group, but rather a mixed group, most of whom received some type of early childhood services, including Head Start.
2. The Head Start group was defined as children who were offered the opportunity to enroll in Head Start, but about 17% did not enroll in the first year of the study. Thus, not all children in the Head Start group had actually attended the program.
3. During the second year of the study, the control group was given access to any Head Start program. In the 3-year old cohort, about 50% of the control group and 63% of the Head Start group were in Head Start in the second year. As a result, the Head Start group and the control group had greater similarity in care settings in the year before kindergarten than would normally be the case in a controlled study.
4. Most children in both the Head Start group and the control group attended kindergarten and 1st grade in schools of middling quality, as measured by state assessments, and these schools had much higher levels of poverty than schools nationwide. The benefits of quality early education may have been more lasting in both groups of children had they attended higher quality elementary schools.

³ U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, *Head Start Impact Study, Final Report - Executive Summary*, Washington, DC, January 2010; National Head Start Association, *Head Start Impact Study Findings in Context*, www.nhsa.org; H. Yoshikawa, *Placing the First-Year Findings of the National Head Start Impact Study in Context*, Society for Research in Child Development, www.srkd.org; National Forum on Early Childhood Policy and Programs, *Understanding the Head Start Impact Study*, 2010, www.developingchild.harvard.edu; E. Zigler, *Putting the National Head Start Impact Study into a Proper Perspective*, no date, www.wsaheadstartecep.com; M. Zaslow, *Issues for the Learning Community from the First Year Results of the Head Start Impact Study*, Plenary Presentation, Head Start's Eighth National Research Meeting, June 27, 2006, www.childtrends.org.

5. The study's findings do not reflect quality improvements in Head Start that were mandated by Congress as part of Head Start's reauthorization in 2007.

Head Start Programs Serving Boulder County: Assessments of Children's Developmental Progress, Access to Health Care, and Program Quality

Assessments of children's developmental progress, access to health care, and program quality have been conducted at both Head Start programs serving Boulder County. While these assessments do not include controlled comparisons with children served at the county's other early childhood settings or with children receiving no early childhood services, and are not intended to, they do provide standardized assessments of these programs. The results are summarized below.

Children's Developmental Progress

Using The Creative Curriculum® Developmental Continuum for children aged 3 to 5, Head Start teachers assess children's progress several times a year in reaching 50 specified objectives in four domains of development – social/emotional, physical, cognitive, and language.⁴ In each domain, children's developmental level is classified into one of four steps – Forerunner (not yet at the initial level of typical preschool development but showing progress), Step I (beginning level of typical preschool development) and Steps II and III (higher levels of preschool development).

As seen in the summary below, the majority of children demonstrated developmental progress, advancing one or more steps between fall and spring of the 2008-09 year.

Boulder County Head Start	Wild Plum Center Head Start
% of all children gaining 1 to 3 steps between fall 2008 and spring 2009: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Language Development: 87% • Literacy: 89% • Mathematics: 93% • Social/Emotional: 89% • Physical Health & Well-Being: 84% 	3-4 year olds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fall: 69% were at Forerunner, 31% were at Step I, 0% were at Steps II or III • Spring: 11% were at Forerunner, 54% were at Step 1, 36% were at Steps II or III 4-5 year olds: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Fall: 77% were at Step I, 23% were at Steps II or III • Spring: 100% were at Steps II or III

Sources: Boulder County Head Start, Wild Plum Center Head Start.

Children's Health Services and Screenings

Assisting families to access health services and providing comprehensive health and developmental screenings are key components of the Head Start model. The table below summarizes the results of these activities between the beginning and end of the 2008-09 year, showing substantial increases in access to health services for children participating in both programs.

	Boulder County Head Start	Wild Plum Center Head Start
Health insurance: beginning/end of year	85%/100%	73%/91%
Medical home: beginning/end of year	85%/100%	88%/100%
Dental home: beginning/end of year	67%/100%	83%/87%
Up-to-date on immunizations: beginning/end of year	96%/96%	85%/98%
Of those eligible to receive special education services: % who had received those services	100%	100%
Completed screenings for developmental, sensory, and behavioral concerns	90%	100%

⁴ For children whose first language is not English, The Creative Curriculum® Developmental Continuum does not assess a child's progress in acquisition of English.

Program Quality

In 2009-10, both Head Start programs employed the Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS), a standardized method to assess quality in pre-school classrooms in 10 domains (e.g., positive climate, teacher's sensitivity, behavior management, concept development) and 42 indicators. The assessments were conducted by Head Start staff whose responsibilities included the supervision and/or professional development of teaching staff. In the beginning of the year, Wild Plum scored high on three of the 10 domains and middling on seven. Boulder County Head Start scored high on two domains and middling on eight. In a follow-up assessment in March 2010, this program increased its high scores to five domains and decreased its middling scores to five. Neither program scored low in any domain.

Boulder County Head Start also employed the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) to assess the quality of the early childhood environment. ECERS measures 43 items in seven domains (e.g., use of space, materials and experiences to enhance children's development, daily schedule, supervision). In the 2008-09 assessment, the program had an overall score across all items and classrooms of 5.6. A score of 5 or above is considered to reflect a "high" quality learning environment.

In on-site reviews conducted at both Head Starts in 2009 by the Administration for Children and Families (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services), it was determined that both programs were in compliance with all Head Start Program Performance Standards, laws, regulations, and policy requirements.