

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report provides a portrait of children who entered Head Start for the first time in fall 2009 and completed a year in the program in spring 2010. It also describes their family backgrounds and the classrooms and programs that serve them. Data are drawn from the 2009 cohort of the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), a periodic, longitudinal study of program performance. Successive samples of Head Start children, their families, classrooms, and programs provide descriptive information at the national level on the population served; staff qualifications, credentials, and opinions; Head Start classroom practices and quality; and child and family outcomes. Previous FACES cohorts were initiated in 1997, 2000, 2003 and 2006.

Methods

Sample. A total of 3,349 newly enrolled 3- and 4-year-old children participated in FACES in fall 2009. A total of 3,022 children were eligible for the spring 2010 followup and 89 percent participated.

Data Collection. In both fall 2009 and spring 2010, children in the study were administered a battery of direct child assessments, and their parents and teachers were interviewed. In spring 2010, observations were conducted in 370 Head Start classrooms. We use data from the parent interviews to describe children's backgrounds and home environments, and we use data from the direct child assessments to report on children's cognitive and physical outcomes at the beginning and end of their first year in Head Start. Parent and teacher ratings provide information about children's social skills, approaches to learning, problem behaviors, and academic and nonacademic accomplishments during the Head Start year. We use teacher interview data to describe children's first classroom experiences in Head Start and classroom observation data to describe classroom quality.

Population Estimates. The data used to report on child and family characteristics and child outcomes were weighted to represent the population of children entering Head Start for the first time in fall 2009 who were still enrolled in spring 2010, or to represent the teachers and classrooms supporting them. We

describe differences across groups or changes from fall to spring that are statistically significant.

Head Start Families

Thirty-six percent of children completing their first year of Head Start are Hispanic/Latino, 34 percent are African American, and 22 percent are White. Twenty-six percent of Head Start children live in households where a language other than English is the primary language spoken to them, and are considered dual language learners (DLLs). Spanish is by far the most prevalent non-English language and is the primary language spoken to 24 percent of children at home. Ninety-two percent of DLLs are from Spanish-speaking homes.

Families of many children completing their first year of Head Start face a number of economic risks. Thirty-two percent of children live with a parent who is unemployed or who has less than a high school education, and 63 percent live in a household with total income at or below the federal poverty threshold. Half of Head Start children live with a single mother.

Despite these challenges, Head Start parents actively support their children's learning, health, and well-being. Family members of most children regularly engage with them in activities that support learning. In the spring, 77 percent of families read to the child three times a week or more, and 92 percent or more reported engaging the child in the past week in activities such as teaching letters, words, or numbers (98 percent); playing with toys or games indoors (98 percent); playing a game or sport or exercising together (92 percent); or counting different things (92 percent). On average, families eat dinner together more than five nights per week. Almost all children have health insurance (97 percent), have a regular health care provider (93 percent), and have had a medical and dental check-up in the past year (98 percent and 95 percent, respectively). On the other hand, a minority of children eat fruits and vegetables at least twice a day (42 percent and 37 percent, respectively), and 19 percent of children watch more than two hours of television each day. Parents reported high levels of satisfaction with their own and their children's experiences in Head Start at the end of their first year in the program; 80 to 90 percent of children's parents are "very satisfied" with

Head Start in terms of the support it provides for children and families in most areas (for example, helping the child to grow and develop and being open to parents' ideas and participation). The two areas where parents are less likely to be very satisfied are identifying and providing services for the family (71 percent) and helping parents become more involved in community groups (65 percent).

Children's Cognitive, Social-Emotional, and Physical Development and Health

Cognitive Development. We used direct child assessments to measure children's cognitive abilities in language, literacy, and mathematics. The language in which children were assessed is based on their home language and their proficiency in English, determined through a brief screening of English-language skills. Here, we summarize findings for children who were assessed in English and for those who were assessed in Spanish.

Child assessments used in FACES can be scored in multiple ways, each of which can be used to address different types of questions about children's skills and development. Our discussion of children's cognitive skills focuses on standard scores, which allow for examinations of progress relative to a group of peers of the same age. These scores have a mean of 100 and a standard deviation of 15 points. Scores above or below the mean indicate that the child's skills are more or less advanced than those of their same-age peers, respectively. With the exception of letter-word knowledge, Head Start children assessed in English score below norms (that is, below the mean of 100) across cognitive areas, including language, literacy, and mathematics, in both the fall and spring of their first program year; however, in all areas these children progress at a rate greater than their same-age peers. Letter-word scores for Head Start children increase from a mean of 96.4 in the fall to 102.2 in the spring, above the national average. In receptive vocabulary, children progress from 87.3 in the fall to 90.7 in the spring, and in expressive vocabulary from 81.6 in the fall to 84.6 in the spring, still a full standard deviation below the mean for same-age peers. In the area of early writing, children progress from a mean of 94.6 in the fall to 97.4 in the spring, and early math scores increase from 90.0 in the fall to 92.4 in the spring.

By spring, children assessed in Spanish score below the mean for a sample of same-age peers across all

developmental areas. Furthermore, children assessed in Spanish make progress toward the mean only in letter-word knowledge, with scores increasing from 81.1 in the fall to 87.3 in the spring. Their scores in English receptive vocabulary are more than two standard deviations below the national mean in the fall and spring (62.2 by the spring), and their scores in Spanish receptive vocabulary are almost one standard deviation below the mean (85.6 in the spring). In expressive vocabulary, the skills of Spanish-speaking children can be compared to those of their English-speaking peers and their bilingual peers. In both cases, scores are well below the mean; by the spring, these children score two standard deviations below English-speaking peers (70.0) and one standard deviation below bilingual peers (87.6). In both fall and spring, these children score about 90 in the area of early writing, and in the spring, they score 84.2 in early math.

Social-Emotional Development. FACES 2009 uses measures from a variety of sources to provide multiple perspectives on children's positive and challenging behaviors that may affect their ability to learn and interact with peers and adults. We report on children's social-emotional outcomes and approaches to learning on criterion-referenced measures using raw scores (standard scores are not available). Raw scores allow for measurement of change or growth in performance over time. They are an indicator of absolute, rather than relative, performance. We also report on children's executive functioning using the percentage of correct responses on a pencil-tapping task.

According to multiple sources, children show growth in their social skills during their first Head Start year. Based on teacher reports, children's positive social skills scores increase from 15 to 17 points (on a scale of 0 to 24) from fall to spring. Teachers also rated children as having fewer problem behaviors by the spring, including hyperactive behaviors, with scores decreasing from 4.7 in the fall to 4.4 in the spring (on a scale of 0 to 36, with lower scores indicating fewer behavior problems). Finally, teachers reported more positive approaches to learning; children's scores increase from 1.6 to 1.9 (on a scale of 0 to 3). Children are also able to control their first impulse and follow directions on a pencil-tapping task more consistently by spring, suggesting an improvement of executive functioning; on this direct assessment

completed by children entering Head Start as 4-year-olds, children responded correctly 43 percent of the time in the fall and 61 percent of the time in the spring.

Physical Development and Health. At the end of the Head Start year, parents reported 81 percent of children to be in excellent or very good physical health, and there are no differences in these reports between program entry and the end of the program year. Fourteen percent of children have an identified disability, the majority of which are reported to be speech or language impairments. In addition, more than one-third of children (37 percent) are overweight or obese at the end of the first program year. Overall, the percentage of children who are overweight or obese does not change from the fall to the spring. However, at the end of the year more 4-year-olds than 3-year-olds, more boys than girls, and more Hispanic/Latino children than those of other racial/ethnic backgrounds are obese.

Head Start Classrooms and Programs

Head Start teachers bring many years of experience to the classroom, with 68 percent having taught in Head Start for five years or more. A large majority of teachers—85 percent—have at least an associate’s (A.A.) degree, and 50 percent have at least a bachelor’s (B.A.) degree. Teachers’ attitudes appear consistent with developmentally appropriate practice in preschool classrooms, with scores averaging 8.0 out of 10 points. Teachers also reported engaging in a variety of language, literacy, and mathematics activities daily or almost daily, such as working on letter naming, writing letters, discussing new words, counting out loud, and working with geometric and counting materials. Teachers’ mental health status could affect their classroom behaviors and interactions with children. Although most teachers did not report symptoms of depression, 11 percent reported symptoms of at least moderate depression.

Head Start classrooms fall well within professional guidelines and Head Start Program Performance Standards for group size (14.2 children) and child-adult ratio (6.2 children to each adult). On average, classrooms score in the minimal-to-good range for classroom materials and arrangement (4.0 on a scale of 1 to 7) and for the quality of teacher-child interactions (4.7 on a scale of 1 to 7), as measured by the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Revised. On the Classroom Assessment Scoring

System (CLASS), instructional support was rated in the low range (2.3 on a scale of 1 to 7) and emotional support and classroom organization in the middle range (5.3 and 4.7, respectively, on a scale of 1 to 7)—a pattern consistent with other studies.

Correlates of Classroom Quality, Teacher Attitudes, and Children’s Developmental Status

We examined associations among teacher and classroom characteristics and child outcomes. We found few associations between teacher characteristics and either classroom quality or teacher attitudes. Shifting to child outcomes, we found that only two child outcome measures consistently relate to classroom quality: children’s letter-word scores have positive, linear associations with both CLASS Instructional Support and Language Modeling, such that higher observed quality is associated with higher letter-word scores, and teacher-reported social skills have a positive, linear association with CLASS Classroom Organization, such that higher observed quality is associated with higher social skills.

We also asked whether the relationship between quality and outcomes differs in higher quality versus lower quality classrooms—whether there is a “threshold effect.” We identified a threshold in only two associations: receptive vocabulary with CLASS Instructional Support and problem behaviors with CLASS Positive Climate. In both cases, associations of observed quality and children’s scores are marginally stronger in higher quality classrooms. In other words, when classrooms are of higher observed quality, there is a stronger association between children’s scores on receptive vocabulary and the quality of instructional support, and a stronger association between children’s social skills and the quality of the emotional climate.

In general, these findings are consistent with the broader research literature that examines linkages between child outcomes and classroom quality: we identified a handful of modest, linear associations but also found evidence of nonlinear associations for certain quality-outcome pairs, including threshold effects.