

Head Start provides comprehensive early child development services to low-income children, their families, and communities. With more than 18 million children served since the program began in 1965, a federal appropriation of \$4.7 billion in fiscal year 1999, and increased attention to outcomes and accountability for federal resources, the program has been challenged to demonstrate its effectiveness through rigorous research designed by nationally renowned experts. Specifically, the Head Start Amendments of 1998 (P.L. 105-285) directed the Secretary of Health and Human Services to establish an expert panel on Head Start research and evaluation, charged with offering recommendations for a study or studies that provide a national analysis of the impact of Head Start, advising the Secretary on the progress of the research, and commenting on the study reports. The Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation was organized to meet this charge.

The Committee met three times between April and July 1999 to fulfill the first part of the Committee's charge. This report to the Secretary summarizes the deliberations of the Committee and sets forth a framework for evaluating the impact of Head Start.

Recommendations

The Committee concludes that a study or set of studies of the impact of Head Start must address two main questions. First, as specified in the statute, the study or studies must answer the question of impact: what difference does Head Start make in the development (and, in particular, the multiple domains of school readiness) of the nation's low-income children? Second, and consistent with the legislation, the Committee believes that a successful study or studies must address the question of how impact varies in certain key situations: under what circumstances does Head Start work best and for which children?

The Committee saw its charge as developing a research design that is capable of answering these questions and that meets two key criteria:

- ◆ An acceptable design must be scientifically valid and widely **credible**. It must provide evidence that is scientifi-

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cally convincing and persuasive to a variety of audiences, such as the Congress, the research community, program staff, and parents.

- ◆ An acceptable design must be **feasible**. It must be capable of being implemented in the real world by researchers working in close partnership with Head Start programs.

Much of the Committee's deliberations focused on the potential tension between these two criteria. In the end, after a rich and lively debate, the Committee set forth a framework for impact research in Head Start that we believe is both credible and feasible. The key elements of this framework are as follows:

1. The Committee believes that the research design should include random assignment of children and families to Head Start and non-Head Start groups at a diverse group of sites located across the country. The Committee spent a considerable portion of its deliberations discussing the feasibility, ethics, and credibility of random assignment designs and concluded that random assignment of children **within the framework described here** represents the best approach that the Committee can identify to answering the two central research questions and meeting the two key criteria. Committee members believe that random assignment will not be easy to implement but is nevertheless important.
2. To ensure that random assignment is feasible and to ensure that families are not unfairly denied Head Start (an ethical concern to many members of the Committee), sites where Head Start saturates the community (i.e., where there are not enough unserved children to permit random assignment of a sufficient number of children to an unserved control group) would be excluded from the random assignment portion of the study or studies.

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3. Every effort should be made to ensure that the sites selected are representative of Head Start sites nationally. Diversity should be sought on key criteria (e.g., region of the country and poverty level of the community). Sites should reflect the range of Head Start quality across the country. Sites would be provided appropriate incentives and supports to facilitate their involvement in the study or studies. The small number of sites that are out of compliance with Head Start standards or extremely new to the program would be excluded.
4. To answer the research questions rigorously and credibly, the Committee believes that the study or studies must measure quality in the Head Start sites and in the child care, prekindergarten, and other settings experienced by control group children. More specifically, the Committee believes that the study or studies must collect the same or closely comparable information on the Head Start children and control group children across all the areas of measurement, to the extent feasible. These recommendations are particularly important to help address the concerns raised by some members of the Committee that some Head Start programs (particularly the best) are likely to have influenced other child care and prekindergarten programs available to low-income children, so that the environments of control group children have been influenced (or, in research terms, contaminated) by the Head Start treatment.
5. Outcome measurement in the study or studies should focus on the multiple domains important for school readiness of children¹ and on parental practices that contribute to school readiness. The Committee has specific recommendations regarding the domains of school readiness on which to focus, the nature of the measures that should be used, and the need to improve measurement for children for whom English is a second language.
6. The Committee identified several strategies for selecting sites. Each strategy has advantages and disadvantages,

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which should be fully assessed and reviewed by the Department of Health and Human Services (the Department) during development of the detailed research design.

7. The Committee believes more consideration needs to be given to the option of using quasi-experimental or other embedded studies to supplement the information from the randomized impact study or studies. Some members believe quasi-experimental studies could yield useful information about Head Start, but others question the validity of these studies. All members agree that the amount of money spent on quasi-experiments should be small relative to the amount spent on a randomized study or studies. This option should be more fully developed and reviewed by the Department during development of the detailed research design.
8. The Committee believes that the Department should consider carefully, in consultation with the Head Start community, what incentives for parents and for programs would be most helpful to secure participation in the study, consistent with the research methodology. The Committee strongly encourages the use of an appropriate range of incentives that are offered to Head Start programs and families as well as control group programs and families.
9. Immediate and continuing efforts should be made by the Department to promote the use of research and the findings from the impact study or studies to improve the effectiveness of Head Start programs for the benefit of children and families.
10. The Committee believes that it is critical to draw on information from the existing Head Start research agenda to complement the information gained from the impact study or studies. In addition, the Committee believes that the research design proposed here should be part of a rich and active overall research agenda, not a substitute for it.

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11. Finally, the Committee notes that none of the design options it considered, including the recommended design framework presented here, would meet the congressional time frame of a report by September 2003. Because the statute (and the Committee) endorses follow-up of children through at least the end of first grade, all of the options considered would lead to a final report in approximately the year 2006. As a result, the Committee urges the Department to make the fullest possible use of valuable information on outcomes that will be available sooner from other ongoing and new research efforts—such as the Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey and the birth and kindergarten cohorts of the Early Childhood Longitudinal Survey—and to present this information in the forms and at the times that are most useful to policymakers.

Major Issues and Challenges

The Committee developed this framework for rigorous Head Start impact research after extensive deliberations that focused on two broad areas.

Challenges Related to Credibly and Accurately Assessing Impact

The Committee spent a great deal of its time discussing the credibility, feasibility, and ethics of random assignment in the Head Start context.

Because most Committee members agreed that the most rigorous methodological approach to answering questions about impact is to compare children and families who are randomly assigned to Head Start with children and families who are assigned to a control group that does not receive Head Start, the Committee spent a great deal of its time discussing the credibility, feasibility, and ethics of random assignment in the Head Start context. Most Committee members believed ethical issues were diminished once programs with waiting lists or unserved children were considered as the basis for a random assignment sample. Among the key issues considered by the Committee in these deliberations were the following:

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- ◆ Is it ethical, and if so, under what circumstances, to assign children to a control group that receives no Head Start services?
- ◆ Is it feasible to maintain adequate participation in the research by families assigned to a control group that receives no Head Start services? Is it feasible to recruit parents who are fully informed that participation in Head Start will be determined by lottery? How do parents see their choices and what incentives for participation in the research might be helpful, ethical, and not in conflict with the research approach?
- ◆ Are there special ethical and feasibility issues with regard to children identified as particularly high-risk, who are typically given first priority for enrollment in Head Start programs?
- ◆ Is it feasible to expect that Head Start program staff will be willing to implement the random assignment approach? Are they willing to keep control group children out of the program?
- ◆ How does the dramatic expansion of other child care and early childhood alternatives, including state preschool programs for low-income children, affect the feasibility and credibility of a randomized study design?
- ◆ How does the potential effect of Head Start on broader community child care services affect the credibility of the random assignment design? That is, if Head Start programs affect the quality of the services received by control group children, how serious a problem will that be to the research design?
- ◆ Are there alternatives to a randomized study design that would be sufficiently credible in answering the key research questions?

During the course of these deliberations, the Committee benefited from the experiences of a set of Head Start feasibility studies of random

assignment conducted by researchers in the Head Start Quality Research Centers in partnership with local programs. The Committee also drew on existing research and data about Head Start, child care, and other early childhood programs, as well as the experiences of its members in state-of-the-art research and evaluation across a wide variety of policy areas.

The Committee's resolution of these issues appears in Chapter V Rationale for the Recommendations: Addressing Key Challenges.

Challenges Related to Generalizing Findings to the National Head Start Program

The Committee focused on the need to provide a national analysis of impact in the most rigorous manner possible.

The Committee focused extensively on several issues raised by the congressional charge to provide a national analysis of the impact of Head Start in the most rigorous manner possible. Among the key issues considered as part of these deliberations were the following:

- ◆ What is known about the capacity of sites to successfully comply with the demanding task of random assignment, and about the number and distribution of sites that are at saturation with respect to the percentage of eligible children currently being served by Head Start or comparable programs?
- ◆ What are the advantages and disadvantages of a strategy that involves a nationally representative, stratified random selection of sites?
- ◆ What are the advantages and disadvantages of a more purposive strategy that seeks to target a group of sites selected for diversity on key variables and chosen to maximize the likelihood of successful implementation of the research design?
- ◆ Are there alternative, quasi-experimental strategies that might yield useful knowledge at sites without the capacity to carry out random assignment?

Next Steps

Based on extensive discussion of the information available to answer these and other key questions, the Committee believes that the framework outlined in this report represents the best strategy for evaluating the impact of Head Start on children. At the same time, the Committee believes that several key next steps are critical to translating this strategy into a credible, powerful, and feasible study or set of studies. In particular, we urge the Secretary, the research community, and the Head Start community to commit to the following next steps:

- ◆ Demonstrate clear leadership and commitment to the rigorous evaluation of the Head Start program, at all levels of the Department and the Head Start community;
- ◆ Ensure true partnership between researchers and the Head Start community and involve the Head Start community from the earliest phases of the design;
- ◆ Conduct an initial feasibility study or set of activities to collect additional information that is essential to the detailed planning and refinement of the design; and
- ◆ Pay close attention to the ongoing implementation of the research, including ensuring several opportunities to review the design and modify it where appropriate.

The Committee believes that the framework outlined in this report represents the best strategy for evaluating the impact of Head Start on children.

In conclusion, the Committee hopes that a rigorous, credible, and feasible evaluation of the impact of Head Start on the school readiness of low-income children across the country will contribute to the nation's ability to achieve its goals of providing high quality care and education and enhancing opportunities for all children. We have sought to design a framework that in conjunction with the rich and active research agenda currently underway in Head Start and other early childhood programs will assist policymakers and the Congress to ensure that the goals of the Head Start program are fully accomplished and will help early childhood professionals, in Head Start and other programs, to learn more about how to improve their efforts to enhance results for children.