Head Start

A summary of the scientific literature on Head Start.



How This Impacts Children's Development

Head Start has been found to increase education retention for low-income communities and reduce behavioral issues. A 2002 study found that non-Hispanic white children enrolled in Head Start were 22%

more likely to complete high school than their siblings who were in some other form of preschool, and 19% more likely to attend some college.

Read the RFI: SRCD Response to Proposed New Head Start Rules, 2024

Read the Brief: Head Start's Benefits Outweigh Program Costs, 2007

Talking Points from the SRCD Briefs

- Head Start is a $6.78 billion program that provides early childhood education and other services to almost 1 million American children from low-income families (as of 2007).
- The Head Start Impact Study, an experiment conducted for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, provides rigorous evidence about the program's short-term impacts.
    - However, a variety of projections must be made about how short-term impacts for today's children translate into long-term outcomes as they grow older.
- At $9,000 per child, short-term effect sizes may be enough for Head Start to generate both short- and long-term benefits that exceed costs.
- A study of African American and White children found that a 50 to 100% increase in funding for Head Start is associated with an increase in schooling attainment of about six months and a 15% greater likelihood of attending some college.

Policy Considerations in the Briefs

- The success of a social program is often judged by benefits-cost analysis. It has been found that Head Start benefits likely outweigh costs.
- The efficiency standard in public economics is to invest up to the point where the marginal dollar invested generates exactly one dollar more in program benefits. By this standard, the case can be made for substantially expanding existing investments in early childhood education.
- There might be more cost-effective ways of using Head Start resources, including making the program more academically oriented and shifting public dollars to state pre-kindergarten programs. However, uncertainty about the effects of these changes and potential downsides make is risky to change the current Head Start model.

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