

## Executive Summary

As the nation's premier early childhood education program, Head Start is leading the way in accountability for program outcomes and services to more than 800,000 young children and their families each year. New findings from a study of 3,200 children and families show that Head Start narrows the gap between disadvantaged students and all other children in key components of school readiness. Students in the Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES), who entered Head Start in Fall 1997 in a national random sample of Head Start programs, began the year at a great disadvantage compared to other children. This was shown by their own scores on standard tests of cognitive skills, family poverty, and low levels of parental education.

The study results showed that Head Start:

- narrows the gaps between disadvantaged children and all children in vocabulary and writing skills during the Head Start year;
- improves the social skills of Head Start children; and
- leads to continued improvements in word knowledge, letter recognition, math skills and writing skills by Head Start children relative to other children during the kindergarten year.

For example, on an assessment of word knowledge, the percentage of children scoring close to or above the national mean increased from only one in four when they started the program in the fall to more than one in three in the spring—nearly a 40 percent increase.

The most disadvantaged children in Head Start, as measured by their cognitive skills when they enter, show even greater gains during the year than those who are less disadvantaged. Language-

minority children in Head Start show gains in school readiness skills and their knowledge of English by the end of the Head Start year.

The FACES study also documented key aspects of Head Start efforts to involve and support parents. Parents of Head Start children reported extremely high levels of satisfaction with Head Start, consistent with findings from the 1999 American Customer Satisfaction Index in which Head Start parents gave the program the highest rating of any government program. Parents cited Head Start as an important source of support in rearing their child. They also reported slight increases in family activities with Head Start children over the course of the year, particularly in programs where teachers were most active in child development. Head Start parents reported a greater sense of control over their own lives at the end of Head Start than at the beginning.

The study also found that Head Start classrooms continue to be of high quality, that most Head Start teachers have good teaching qualifications, and that the observed quality of classrooms is positively related to child outcomes.

Areas for improvement identified in the study included letter recognition and book and print concepts, where the Fall 1997 cohort of Head Start children showed little progress during the Head Start year relative to national norms. Among the key steps already taken by the Head Start Bureau to address these areas are the launching of a new Family Literacy Initiative and the investment of more than \$80 million annually to ensure further improvement in teacher credentials, consistent with the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start. A National Leadership Institute focusing on improving teaching, learning and assessment in the areas of language development, literacy, mathematics, science, and creative arts was held

in December 2000, and a new initiative for each local Head Start program to systematically track children's progress on key learning outcomes is beginning.

## The Study

The Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) is an ongoing, national, longitudinal study of the cognitive, social, emotional and physical development of Head Start children; the characteristics, well-being and accomplishments of families; the observed quality of Head Start classrooms; and the characteristics and opinions of Head Start teachers and other program staff. FACES involves a nationally stratified random sample of 3,200 children and families in 40 Head Start programs, who were studied at entry into the program in Fall 1997, assessed in the Spring at the completion of one or two years of Head Start, and followed-up in the Spring of the kindergarten and first grade years. Because Head Start is committed to regular, ongoing accountability measurement and program improvement, a new national cohort of FACES was launched in Fall 2000.

The Fall 1997 and Spring 1998 waves of data collection in FACES provide important findings of change in children's development and school readiness, consistency of program quality, as well as information about family characteristics and families' accomplishments over the course of the year. The kindergarten follow-up reveals important information on Head Start graduates' performance in school. Through the full cooperation of the Head Start programs studied, FACES has been able to achieve high instrument completion rates, averaging at least an 80 percent response rate on all survey measures.

## The Children and Families Studied

Head Start children are likely to face a variety of conditions that put them at risk. On entry into the program, only 43 percent lived with both parents, and changes in family configuration were common over the year. Seventy-two percent of mothers had at least a high school diploma or GED, with less than 9 percent having an Associate's or higher college degree. Forty-two percent of households reported having less than \$1,000 in monthly income from all sources in Fall 1997, including Temporary Assistance to Needy Families (TANF). Over 85 percent of households received supplemental income from one or more of a range of sources, including WIC, food stamps, TANF (27 percent in Fall) or other sources. About one-fifth of children were reported to have been exposed to community or domestic violence in their lives.

## Study Findings

FACES is designed to answer four central questions related to program performance objectives: Does Head Start enhance children's development and school readiness? Does Head Start strengthen families as the primary nurturers of their children? Does Head Start provide children with high quality educational, health and nutritional services? And, how is classroom quality related to child outcomes?

### Does Head Start Enhance Children's Development and School Readiness?

- Head Start works to narrow the gaps between disadvantaged children and all children in vocabulary and writing skills during the program year. For example, the proportion of Head Start children scoring close to or above the national mean on an assessment of word

knowledge increased from 24 percent when they began Head Start in the fall to 34 percent in the spring—nearly a 40 percent increase. (A standard score of 95 or higher was used to define a score close to or above the national mean.) On average, children completing Head Start showed significant gains relative to national norms established for children of all income levels. Gains were approximately one-quarter of a standard deviation in standard scores, within the range deemed to be educationally meaningful.

- Head Start works to narrow the gaps between children who begin the program at differing levels of school readiness. Gains in cognitive skills from the fall to the spring of the Head Start year were larger (for example, more than two-thirds of a standard deviation in vocabulary standard scores) among children who were initially in the bottom quarter of the score distribution than among those in the middle or top quarter. Despite the larger gains in vocabulary knowledge and early writing and math skills achieved by children who come to Head Start with fewer accomplishments, these children are still substantially below national norms at the end of the Head Start year.
- Language-minority children in Head Start show gains in school readiness and in their knowledge of English by the end of the Head Start year. By the spring, most Spanish-speaking children in predominantly English-language programs are able to perform a number of school-related tasks better in English than they had in Spanish in the fall, or at least as well. Spanish-speaking children in predominantly English-speaking Head Start programs have similar fine motor and early writing skills as their English-speaking peers, but continue to trail other children on tasks that require English-language proficiency.
- Both parents and teachers noted significant improvement in social skills essential to successful functioning in school. Over the program year, Head Start children’s play became more complex, with children becoming more involved in interactive play with peers, a key indicator of social development.
- Children leaving Head Start are indeed “ready to learn,” because they have, in fact, learned a great deal by the end of kindergarten. By the spring of the kindergarten year, Head Start graduates made substantial gains in word knowledge, letter recognition, math skills and writing skills relative to national norms. For example, 83 percent of the Head Start graduates could identify most or all letters of the alphabet, and children demonstrated familiarity with key book and print concepts as well as phonemic awareness.
- FACES was also designed to identify priority areas for improvements in Head Start program quality and staff development. Head Start children showed little progress in letter recognition or book and print concepts over the course of the program year. The small number of Head Start children with problem behaviors showed minimal or no change in this area, with the exception of hyperactive behavior, which showed a small but significant decline. Future rounds of FACES will help determine whether these findings have changed as a result of technical assistance and increased teacher preparation since the study and the 1998 reauthorization of Head Start.

#### **Does Head Start Strengthen Families as the Primary Nurturers of Their Children?**

- Primary caregivers (usually parents) were equally as likely to be married as single. The typical caregiver was young (between 20 and 30 years of age), had at least a high school

diploma or GED, and was employed. Despite the high proportion of caregivers in the workforce, 85 percent of Head Start households received supplemental income from other sources.

- More than two-thirds of Head Start parents reported reading to their children at least three to five times a week. Frequency of parental reading, especially daily reading, was linked to higher child vocabulary development.
- Most parents were active in their Head Start program, and approximately 80 percent had visited with Head Start staff in their home, attended a parent-teacher conference, and observed in the classroom.
- Across all households, family activities with Head Start children increased slightly over the course of the year. In centers where teachers received more in-service training in child development and engaged children in academic activities more often, parents reported larger increases in educational and recreational activities at home.
- Over 85 percent of parents were very satisfied with the services their child received, including helping their child grow and develop, preparing their child for kindergarten, and identifying and providing services for their child. These findings reinforce the 1999 report of the American Customer Satisfaction Index, in which Head Start received the highest rating of any government program.
- Head Start parents cited many accomplishments during the Head Start year. More primary caregivers obtained a license, certificate or degree (a 9 percent increase from fall to spring); more caregivers were employed (an increase of 2 percent from fall to spring); and fewer received welfare assistance (a decline of

3.8 percentage points from fall to spring). The change in receipt of welfare assistance represents a 14 percent decline among Head Start parents.

- Head Start parents cited Head Start as an important source of support in rearing their children. In addition, Head Start parents reported a greater sense of control over their own lives at the end of Head Start than at the beginning.
- Fathers appeared to play an important and positive role in the lives of children. When the father was present in the home, there were more resources available to the family, both socially and financially. Families with fathers in the household were less likely to be exposed to crime and domestic violence.

#### **Does Head Start Provide Children With High Quality Educational, Health and Nutritional Services?**

- Quality in Head Start classrooms continues to be good across three points of measurement. In Fall 1997, the average Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale (ECERS) score across the 518 observed classrooms was good. Seventy-five percent of Head Start classrooms were rated as good or better, nearly one-fifth of the Head Start classrooms were rated as very good or excellent, and no classroom was of "inadequate" quality. These ratings compare favorably with other studies of preschool and child care.
- The average numbers from both class size and child:adult ratios were far better than those required by the Head Start Program Performance Standards and the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) accreditation standards.

- Most Head Start teachers have good teaching qualifications. Nearly one-third of all Head Start teachers had a bachelor's or graduate degree, and teachers averaged nearly 12 years of teaching experience. The higher the teacher's educational level, the better the observed classroom quality.

#### **How Is Classroom Quality Related to Child Outcomes?**

- Children in classrooms rated higher in learning environment materials spent more time in simple interactive play or pretend play, and they spent less time in non-interactive play. Observed play behavior is a key indicator of social development.
- The observed quality of Head Start classrooms has been linked with child outcomes. For example, children in classrooms with richer teacher-child interaction and more language learning opportunities have higher vocabulary scores. And children in Head Start classrooms with lower child:adult ratios show greater gains in vocabulary scores over the Head Start year.