

# Head Start and Latino Children

## A Summary of:

### “Does Head Start Help Hispanic Children?”

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By Janet Currie and Duncan Thomas.

#### Focus

- ✓ Early Childhood
- Primary School
- Middle School
- Secondary School
- Postsecondary
- Extended Learning

## Overview

Begun in 1965 as part of the federal government’s “War on Poverty,” Head Start is a preschool program funded by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services that provides a comprehensive set of services including health care, learning activities and social skill development for economically disadvantaged children ages 3-5. Head Start endeavors to give children from poor backgrounds the support necessary to begin elementary school with the same scholastic potential as more advantaged children.

## POPULATION

The program requires that 90% of participants come from families living below the poverty line, and 10% of the openings are set aside for children with disabilities. In Fiscal Year 1998, Head Start served 822,316 children, 35.8% of whom were African Americans, 31.5% white, 26.4% Latino, 3.4% Native American, and 2.9% Asian American. More than 72% of Head Start families had incomes of less than \$12,000. This study looks at 750 Latino children from 324 families across the country.

## Key Findings

Using data from the Picture Peabody Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and the Peabody Individual Achievement Tests in math and reading (PIAT-Math and PIAT-Reading), evaluators found that Head Start:

- ◆ Closes between one-quarter and one-third of the gap in test scores between Latino and white children.
- ◆ Closes two-thirds of the gap between Latino and white children in the probability of repeating a grade.<sup>1</sup>

### Subgroup Findings:

- ◆ Mexican American children in Head Start outperformed siblings who stayed at home and those that attended private pre-schools.
- ◆ Puerto Rican Head Start students outperformed siblings in other preschools, but neither group performed as well as Puerto Rican youth who stayed at home.

*1. When the evaluators controlled for what they termed observed differences among students (such as family income or age and gender of the child) and “unobserved family differences,” they found that Head Start had a stronger positive effect on test scores and on the probability of repeating a grade than private preschooling and no preschooling.*

## Program Components

Head Start is administered by the Administration for Children and Families (ACF) in the Department of Health and Human Services. Grants are awarded to public or private non-profit agencies and the community must match 20% of the program costs. Though there is flexibility for local variation and adaptation, all Head Start programs focus on:

- ◆ education
- ◆ nutrition
- ◆ socio-economic development
- ◆ physical and mental health
- ◆ parental involvement

With these various components, Head Start programs foster children's intellectual, social, and emotional growth, while respecting their ethnic or cultural heritage. Head Start's health services include immunizations, medical, dental and mental health care. Head Start agencies also emphasize community outreach, needs assessment, emergency assistance and/or crisis intervention, and service referral.

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## Contributing Factors

### *Early Intervention*

Research indicates that children who receive intellectual stimulation and adequate health care from an early age are more likely to succeed in school and later life. Head Start is an early intervention to ensure that the most vulnerable children—those who live in poverty and/or have disabilities—have the same preparation for success as children from more fortunate backgrounds.

### *Cultural Sensitivity and Awareness*

Head Start programs provide activities that foster children's intellectual, social, and emotional growth, while respecting children's ethnic and cultural traditions. Evaluators suggest that this mix of culturally sensitive social development components helped the children of Hispanic immigrants learn English and assimilate into American culture.

### *Parental Involvement*

Parents serve as members of advisory councils and they participate directly in managerial and administrative decisions for local Head Start centers. They also attend workshops and classes on child development, health and nutrition education. Head Start staff members also conduct home visits and work with parents on educational activities that can take place in the home.

### *Cost*

The Head Start preschool programs cost an average of \$4000 per child, per year (1993). Evaluators compared that figure to the amount an average family with a working mother spent on childcare in the early 1990s (\$3000) to argue that the government-funded program "may be of higher quality than what many families could afford to buy on their own."

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### **STUDY METHODOLOGY**

Evaluators used data recorded from the 1970s to the 1990s in the National Longitudinal Survey of Youth (NLS) and the National Longitudinal Survey Child-Mother (NLSCM) files. The study compared the achievement of Latino children who enrolled in Head Start with their siblings who did not, with Latino children from other families who attended another preschool or no preschool at all, and with non-Latino Head Start students. The evaluators also disaggregated data for children of immigrants from Mexico and Puerto Rico.

### **EVALUATION FUNDING**

The National Science Foundation and the National Institute of Child Health and Human Development.

### **GEOGRAPHIC AREAS**

All fifty states, the District of Columbia and Puerto Rico have Head Start programs.

### **CONTACT INFORMATION**

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