

THE CASE FOR EXPANDING HEAD START AS A WISE INVESTMENT IN AMERICA'S FUTURE

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The Obama administration recently announced that 57,000 preschool children across the United States would be cut from Head Start programs because of “sequestration,” a crude budget compromise generated by a divided Congress that requires automatic, across-the-board cuts in federally funded programs, regardless of their importance or value.

Unfortunately for the young children involved – and for all of us – chopping Head Start is close to the worst possible step our nation could take. A large body of research demonstrates that early childhood education reduces social inequality and boosts economic growth. If representatives in Congress really want to strengthen the economy, they should be expanding and not shrinking Head Start and other equally effective education programs for young children.

The Dire Impact of Poverty on Child Development

Founded in 1965 as part of President Lyndon Johnson’s War on Poverty, Head Start is designed to counter the effects of poverty on the development of young children. Growing up in poverty can hurt children’s development in many ways – and the ill effects can add up and prove to be difficult to reverse later in life. Children raised in poor households are more likely to live in substandard housing and suffer from inadequate nutrition. They get less preventive medical care, including dental care. Their neighborhoods tend to be unsafe. Unless corrected or countered, all of these deprivations lead to educational deficits, according to the best available research.

- Poor children are often slow to learn to talk and slow to acquire language skills and other important cognitive abilities.
- Poor children typically enter kindergarten already behind in readiness measures compared to their peers from higher socio-economic backgrounds.
- Children raised in poverty are often identified as in need of special education or remedial services, and they are more apt to have to repeat grades in school.

Overall, researchers have found strong links between family income levels and the level of educational attainment children eventually achieve. Left uncorrected, poverty tends to persist across human generations.

How Head Start Makes a Difference

In dozens of well-designed studies, researchers have pinned down many ways in which participation in Head Start programs helps children.

- Low-income white children who benefit from Head Start have been shown to be more likely to graduate from high school and attend college – and these positive developments also happen for their younger siblings, whether or not they themselves attend Head Start programs.
- Head Start children are less likely to repeat a grade or be identified for special education. They show gains in pre-reading skills, and tend to make gains in good behavior.
- Head Starters make general health gains; and program centers have had demonstrated success in reducing childhood obesity, a proven risk to long-term personal health.
- Head Start youngsters are less likely to end up engaging in criminal activities than peers who did not participate in the program.

Overall, research shows that when important social and economic factors are taken into account, Head Start children achieve at least as good life outcomes as their peers not involved with Head Start. Because many children enrolled in Head Start centers come from very poor circumstances – especially if they are minorities – researchers have to take many kinds of deprivation into account to reach meaningful conclusions about what Head Start accomplishes. The program has to be judged a success when its participants – who face many kinds of deprivations and risks – end up doing as well in life as non-participants.

Benefits for the Larger Society

The benefits of funding early childhood development programs are not limited to social and educational gains for the youngsters themselves. Society as a whole also gains – through stronger economic growth, a better-educated workforce, and reduced need for costly government services.

The link between educational attainment and income level is well documented. Today's Head Start children are tomorrow's workforce, and that is good news, because they are better-prepared to learn at school, go to college, and hold good jobs that contribute to economic growth through productive work, taxes, and purchasing power. Today's Head Start children are also tomorrow's parents, better prepared to help their own offspring succeed.

Public funding for early childhood education is also a family-friendly work policy. When quality childcare is available, parents are able to be more fully engaged and productive at work. More work performed by more wage-earners leads to increased tax revenue for governments at all levels – and also, of course, means that fewer people will have to fall back on public assistance.

In the final analysis, wise investments in high-quality childhood education actually limit the future need for government spending and reduce the overall price-tag to taxpayers. Childhood education programs are relatively inexpensive, but the government programs that have to pick up the pieces when poor children do poorly are very expensive. Child protective services, remedial education programs, welfare systems, police, and prisons – all are very costly indeed.

Time to Get America's Priorities Straight

All the evidence points to the same conclusion: now is not the time to cut Head Start or any other high quality early childhood program. Blunt sequester cuts make no sense. To reduce the size and scope of government spending in the future, the best possible approach is to invest heavily now in the country's most valuable resource, its children.