

ROUNDTABLE

Head Start in an Era of Standards and Accountability

Chair: Krista Kafer

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Manna: The perspective of a researcher who has focused on standards and accountability policy in kindergarten through 12th grade education in the United States, and the relationship between the national government and the states, is useful for this discussion in light of Head Start's role helping prepare students for school. This perspective is also useful to discuss current debates about the scope that states should have in managing, implementing, and controlling Head Start. The increasing focus on standards and accountability will likely influence the future of Head Start's implementation.

Standards are evaluated from two broad categories by authors and scholars conducting research and writing on policy implementation and public management. One category involves policy outputs, which includes spending money on programs, hiring staff, maintaining facilities, processing applications for programs, and so forth. However, what most people have in mind when they think of standards is how they relate to outcomes. Outcomes might be intermediate, such as how many are served by the program, or longer-term outcomes, such as does the program actually help improve the lives of the participants. In theory, output and outcome are related to one another. A good standards-and-accountability system would measure and gather data that links the activities that program implementers are engaged in with the results seen.

One question is how standards and accountability are defined in a way that is consistent with Head Start's overall mission, in part because Head Start is such a multidimensional program. The program aspires to affect academic preparation, social readiness, physical health, and life in general for young people. It is interesting to look at the legislatively mandated domain elements in those outcomes. None of those falls into what might loosely be termed the nonacademic areas of Head Start. Once again, there is discussion of whether Head Start should focus more on reading and math than on health, nutrition, and parenting.

A second question is what might be considered an acceptable result. Head Start and other early childhood education programs are considered successful if students are ready for the demands of kindergarten, but success could also be defined in a value-added way. How much progress did the student make over the course of that student's experience in the Head Start program, however long they attended?

A third question is what model of accountability should be used? Accountability could be thought of in a high-stakes context where there could be sanctions if the outcomes are not met. Accountability could also be thought of as a tool for improvement. Standards are identified and those standards are monitored to gauge the level of assistance needed to help providers improve. There is currently some ambiguity in how the national reporting system for Head Start will be used. Most of the accountability for the Head Start national reporting

system is focused on the grantee level, which might not be the right level to gather data and aggregate results if targeting improvement and technical assistance.

The last question is how standards and accountability policy should be coordinated in Head Start with state-level standards and accountability policy that already exist in prekindergarten and kindergarten through 12th grade. This is a fascinating intersection, given that in Head Start, the national government is involved in identifying and defining outcomes and outputs. At the state-level though, No Child Left Behind notwithstanding, state governments have some freedom to define standards. Many questions would arise if the two systems were integrated. Would the states be given more freedom? Would the federal government hold fast on the outcomes they now control?

Vinovskis: The history of Head Start has greatly impacted current policy making. Early childhood education was initially not important in the War on Poverty, but was actually the Republican alternative to the War on Poverty. The beginnings of Head Start are much more diverse than one would suspect, and points of contention remain today with some people insisting it was an education program, while others insist it was a community action program. Once Shriver became involved, he pushed early childhood education with President Johnson and made it the Administration's centerpiece.

Helping disadvantaged Americans was not just a question of early childhood education. The War on Poverty was fought in a larger context. Over time, Head Start has become separated in the minds of many people, not only from other education programs or other health programs, but also from any concept that there is a War on Poverty. There is greater inequality today than in 1960, a problem that should not be avoided.

The other issue is that accountability has been discovered. Senator Robert F. Kennedy made accountability the centerpiece of the Elementary Secondary Education Act (ESEA). There was a fight about whether Head Start should ever be evaluated, creating a split within the Head Start Advocacy Committee from the beginning. From the beginning, studies were done both by the government and by private individuals. That past is more complex than what is expressed in congressional discussions today.

As far back as 1967, it was known that Head Start by itself would not work, and a new program called Follow Through was invented in 1967. Follow Through looked at the transition from Head Start into public school, but unfortunately the program and its findings are little remembered. In 1973, The Brookings Institution held a conference on Head Start plan variation and came up with a good program for planned variation studies development. With the nation at risk, there is a belief that everybody should be educated, get the same education and opportunity. There is also belief that people should be held accountable and that the federal government should be more involved.

What is new is that the regulations are now being implemented and enforced. In this climate, how do politics play out? The focus on K-12 education on reading, science, and math is having an adverse effect on other subjects. That is not a topic that the Department of Education is willing to discuss. These subjects are important, but what is this going to mean

for Head Start? One might think that this would indicate a need to put money into Head Start or Early Head Start because that would help reach the goals. Instead, there seems to be more initiative on high schools.

What information is used to make decisions? Despite attempts to be scientifically rigorous with the No Child Left Behind Act, the interim report published in April 2006 admitted the lack of scientifically rigorous materials on education today. The Department of Education through the Institute of Education Scientists is more interested in scientific research and randomized experiments, but this is expensive. What is missing in Washington is the idea of taking Head Start, trying it out in a model situation as many studies are now doing, then trying it in different localities to make adjustments, and using the development process. The question for the Head Start community is what are the program's plans, and what will happen in an environment where the goals will not be reached for No Child Left Behind? Does Head Start fit in, and if so, where?

Haskins: This is the era of accountability for many reasons. First, Washington is becoming increasingly worried about international competition. Some believe the country will be taken over by the Chinese, while 20 years ago people feared the Japanese. In the case of education, the United States does not compete well on the international stage.

The second reason is perennial dissatisfaction with public schools. Most Americans feel that the school their own children attend is fine, but that all the rest of them are bad. There is clearly great dissatisfaction in public education. In fact, it is so great that in No Child Left Behind, the Republicans gave an astounding degree of control to federal government. This is a gauge of how serious people are about the state of education.

Third, this country continually fails to properly prepare poor children for public school. When poor children arrive at public schools, they already lag behind by a full standard deviation. The logic of Head Start was correct in the first place, to repair the problem as early as possible. Fourth, Head Start should address the whole child and the family. Even Republicans see an important federal and state government role for making sure poor children can achieve in public schools. There is evidence that preschool programs can work and demonstrate impacts that last all the way into adolescence.

Finally, this era of accountability began for Head Start with the reauthorization in 1998, when Congress decided that not enough was known about Head Start. Even those who say Head Start probably does not work still love Head Start. Just over the horizon is Armageddon. When that comes, many child, family, and social programs in the United States will be cut back. At a minimum, their growth rates will be reduced or done away with completely. What do Congress and the nation want out of Head Start?

Ed Zigler was clever to emphasize the whole child approach in this program to ensure that the Westinghouse evaluation that founded Head Start and did not produce IQ or achievement impacts would not scuttle the program. Instead they developed broad goals so that people would be happy feeding the children and offering health care. Now the nation provides food stamps and Medicaid, which should take care of those goals, so the goal of Head Start is to

get children ready for the public schools, and that means primarily reading and math. It also means addressing behavior, which impacts on a child's ability to learn.

What the public and members of Congress want, and the reason for the emphasis on accountability, is that poor children should go to school performing at an average level. Study results show that, at best, Head Start produces modest impacts. This means that Head Start has not had the impacts that Congress is paying for. What should be done about this? First, programs must be improved by trying approaches, modifying those approaches, and using experimentation. Some projects are federally funded, some are state funded. However, as long as people believe that Head Start works, there is a tendency to want to leave it alone. This attitude makes progress more difficult, and challenges programs to produce greater impacts.

About 2 years ago on Capitol Hill, the President proposed better coordination between early childhood programs and the public schools, by giving the states more control of Head Start. This caused a huge explosion and an ugly fight. Now there is a proposal in the House calling for better coordination rather than state control.

An enormous amount of money is spent on all forms of child care, probably upwards of \$12 billion. There are problems because there are different standards. There ought to be coordination between these programs and the schools, and Head Start should lead the way in this coordination. Since budget cuts are coming, it is vital to show that Head Start programs have impacts, especially in the education of poor children or minority children in the United States.

Kafer: The existing standards for Head Start programs are a mix of outcome and output accountability measures. Where should flexibility be injected into the Head Start system, on the outcome or output side, where both types of expectations exist?

Manna: The government provides money for Head Start and it requires results such as whether children are more prepared for school, with knowledge that can help them, at a better level of development that will serve them in the future. Those are the primary outcomes, but Head Start has many standards along different dimensions such as child-level and parent-level outcomes. Many of these outcomes are process outcomes. There are the child level outcomes, but then there are also parent-level outputs and outcomes.

One challenge that Federal program implementers have with flexibility is how to compare results across jurisdictions. There is a need for timely, strict, coherent accountability, but with a degree of flexibility. It is difficult to imagine how public managers in government could make that work. Allowing too much flexibility on outcomes threatens the ability to compare programs across the country, but if there is no flexibility in outcomes, there is no ability to tailor the program to local communities.

Vinovskis: Early childhood education and development is somewhat different than what we face with grades 3 through 8 and up. There are expectations of young children, but there should be a catalogue of what can be done in a comprehensive program with the funding available. There needs to be discussion of what works best under what conditions. One

response is to set up criteria, such as in the case of Even Start. The first Abt study of Even Start, which is a combination of a Head Start-type program and Working With Parents, used a randomized sample approach. The results show that Even Start has no value-added. This information was never reported when Congress had a hearing about Even Start. Both Democrats and Republicans knew about it, but the way things work in Washington they trumped a million-dollar study that said Even Start was not working well by bringing in someone who had been in Even Start as a young child, who said, "It changed my life." Once the criteria is set, there should be a plan for the kinds of studies to be conducted, and what will be done with the results. Another problem is that the early childhood development and education community has not participated in developing recommendations of indices for progress to watch for while developing Goals 2000 in 1998.

Haskins: People are reticent to accept the idea that the amount of money spent has almost no relationship to any outcomes. In 1946, in constant dollars, \$1,500 was spent per pupil compared to \$9,000 today, yet achievement has declined.

Kafer: Several anecdotes remark that Congress has essentially ignored studies that say that a program does not work or is only modestly useful. What about those that have shown that something actually works? Many of these had been largely ignored by both the political and, in effect, the educational community. Why is there always the sense that more studies are needed?

Haskins: Congress ignores some studies and pays attention to others. The challenge continues to be how to produce impacts on a large scale. Most people believe that the most important ingredient is the teacher and how the teacher approaches children. There must be emphasis on what can be done with the kind of people who populate Head Start, including in-service training and different curriculum activities.

Kafer: There is a clear place in public policy for additional research and for modeling positive research. What concrete solutions could help coordination with state-based programs?

Haskins: Congress should spend at least \$1 billion a year for some period of years and find two or three states where the Head Start organization, the public schools, and child care organizations are willing to participate in this experiment. They would have a coordinating council, and they would demonstrate improvements to the curriculum. Their goal would be explicitly to affect children's performance on reading and math when they go to public schools. The federal government would also fund serious evaluations.

Vinovskis: One of the points of learning since the 1960s is the importance of early childhood education as well as lifespan development. It is not clear where the most return on the dollar come from when helping children, particularly disadvantaged children. When they start out behind, for example, at age 3 years, are they so far behind that they will never catch up and, therefore, early childhood education should be the focus? Or what about programs like Success for All, which do not focus on early childhood education, yet have an impact? No

social programs in this area are having that impact. No Child Left Behind will not reach the goal because it has unrealistic standards.

Manna: If there is a Head Start pilot where states have some control, with the focus on reading and math, who in the federal government brokers the disputes and sends them waiver requests from states when there are questions? Is it the Head Start bureau in the Department of Health and Human Services, or would it be the Department of Education?

Haskins: If a waiver and a structure are needed, enacting legislation, not only the money, would offer the authority to waive any statute that applies to any of the preschool programs or to Head Start. The state would decide what they need waivers from, and the sector would have the power to grant them; they would not necessarily be subject to any federal rules. Democrats believe that the performance standards are a crucial part of Head Start, and therefore prohibit the states from cutting back on the performance standards. There is going to have to be a compromise, like everything else in politics.

Linda Williams: Head Start has a more holistic view. If the focus shifts to academics, there is a risk of losing the social aspects of the program that have been successful in preparing children. Will redirecting standards make the program more child- or family-focused? It is a larger question than math and literacy.

Haskins: This is a false dichotomy. With a large-scale program, there is less confidence that what is done with parents will have a major impact on the children's school performance. Parents have a lot on their plates, especially now with an increase in single-parent families with many mothers working outside the home. At this time, the emphasis should be on teachers and what they are doing in the classroom. If children have good learning experiences repeatedly, and in a sequenced way, they will become smarter and perform better.

Vinovski: Even Start put a large amount of money into training parents. That approach did not pay off. Parental involvement is less the issue than supplementing a high-quality teacher in the classroom.

Audience question: The definition of standards is different in Head Start compared to the school districts. Head Start performance standards are really inputs to set the environmental scene, for example, the types of degrees teachers must hold, the experiences offered, and the parent council structure. If coordination occurs at the state level, individual community differences may wane. In a universal blended system, how will the poor children catch up?

Haskins: That is exactly right and that is why these groups have to work together, because Head Start children will end up in the public schools. The blended approach should take place in two or three states on an experimental basis to ensure that the Head Start program is not harmed. But overall, reading and math are crucial. Children must go to school performing at least at the average. There should also be local flexibility for doing other things in a program that the community feels is important.