Testing And Protesting Preschool Test Taking

No early childhood issue generates more heated debate than testing these days. In a brief column like this, I can’t do justice to the various points of view. Suffice it to say that people on all sides share important concerns for the well-being of young children and the effectiveness of the public programs we provide to educate them. If we start from this point, we may be able to generate more light and less heat—on how, when, and why to assess young children.

Early childhood educators have strong concerns regarding the risks associated with assessing what and how much young children learn. Early education practitioners grapple with the reality that preschoolers are so capable of learning and yet are relatively unreliable—in comparison to older children—in demonstrating how much they learn, especially when given one-size-fits all tests. In addition, they are well aware of the history of misuse of highly imperfect tests to make decisions about whether children should be allowed to start school or progress to the next grade, or whether children need special education services.

Yet, the trend toward more preschool necessitates a renewed emphasis on assessment among preschoolers. Screening for disabilities and further diagnosis of children who may have learning problems is a necessity. So is accountability for public program effectiveness on children’s learning and development. Teachers need to fully understand the learning and development of all the children in their classes.

Standardized testing of preschoolers has been in the ascendency of late for all these purposes, partly due to its apparent low cost and partly due to the fondness politicians have for “hard numbers” to justify money spent on programs. A pertinent example is Head Start, where standardized tests are administered to nearly half a million young children, much to the discomfort of many educators who know the results will not tell the whole story and worry about the consequences. It will be important to rigorously evaluate just how well the Head Start national assessment system has worked.

It’s a sure bet, though, that more preschool will mean more assessment, especially as states commit to making preschool available to all. Just when we need to understand the full dimensions of assessment, along comes a timely and eminently useful new booklet on the subject. Oralie McAfee, Deborah J. Leong and Elena Bodrova have collaborated with examples, McAfee, Leong and Bodrova have created a valuable and easily-understood volume that is as much a primer as it is primer. Kudos to them. Basics retails through NAEYC for $11.

Our assessment research at NIEER will produce in early August a new policy brief, complete with recommendations. It nicely complements Basics. The two taken together should inform policy decisions with the kind of fullness required to measure what preschoolers are learning.

W. Steven Barnett
Director, NIEER
The call for standards in the public schools arrived more than two decades ago, as part of school reform, eventually bringing the nation’s public schools new report cards, high-stakes testing and the battle cry of “No Child Left Behind.”

The movement has been controversial, but also widely embraced as bringing new accountability to public education.

But public preschool, which now operates at taxpayer expense in more than 40 states and serves nearly 700,000 of the nation’s 3- and 4-year-olds has largely escaped the same scrutiny—until now.

The standards movement has arrived in early education, to delight and consternation alike. “I think it’s fair to say that there is no hotter issue, nothing more important to those of us in early education than the question of accountability,” says Catherine Scott-Little, professor of education at the University of North Carolina, Greensboro, and leading expert on early learning standards. Scott-Little ran a session on how to assess progress in prekindergarten at a recent national meeting and it “was packed. This is something people are really eager to learn about.”

The questions are myriad and raise bedrock questions about what benefits children will reap, and what kinds of programs states should fund. What, exactly, are children supposed to learn? The alphabet? Phonics? Vocabulary? How to get along with others? How to listen? To see a connection between written words (print) and spoken language? All of this and more.

“It’s been a real struggle for states to arrive at consensus, because the whole field is so new and so fragmented. Almost 40 states now have standards or are working on them, but half of them didn’t even start until 1999. We are still getting to which questions to ask,” says Scott-Little, who serves on a special advisory group on assessment for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC).

Indeed, many early educators are reluctant to use the word “standards” in connection with early learning programs, since the paths children take to learning can be so remarkably individual. In general, testing is not recommended for children before third grade, because even the same child may test differently on one day than another. Very young children might also be alarmed or nervous in the face of a test, especially if adult authority figures such as teachers or administrators CONTINUED ON PAGE 8 >>
Should The U.S. Have Preschool For All? Potential Win-Win For Kids, Taxpayers

Middle-Class Children Get A Surprising Boost, Most Disadvantaged Children Gain

Providing free public preschool to all children could be the smartest and most cost-effective way to reach children who need early enrichment programs the most.

Prekindergarten programs that serve all children may also provide an important academic boost to many middle-class children, closing a gap in achievement that now exists between them and their more wealthy peers.

Those are two of the more surprising conclusions of researchers at the National Institute for Early Education Research (NIEER) in a new policy brief, The Universal vs. Targeted Debate: Should the United States Have Preschool For All? The brief compares the benefits of universal preschool with targeted programs—an area policymakers and researchers alike are keen to learn more about as they consider the shape of public preschool programs in the future. “It’s intriguing to see that middle-income children are making significant gains in these programs,” says Ellen Boylan, head of the Starting at 3! Program, which advocates for a legal right to preschool. “I know that advocates and lawyers handling school finance cases will be interested in these findings.”

Four out of five states now offer some form of public pre-K, but only two, Georgia and Oklahoma, have programs open to all 4-year-olds, regardless of income. New York has a universal prekindergarten program on paper, but because of tight budgets, state officials have had to restrict enrollment to low-income families. Elsewhere, state officials have chosen to target the poorest children, arguing that such an approach makes the best use of taxpayer dollars by reaching the children most in need. Even the federal Head Start program, the largest preschool effort of all, targets disadvantaged children.

But the summary from NIEER suggests that it’s possible states can get a bigger bang for the buck by creating universal, voluntary preschool for all their youngest citizens. “It sounds counterintuitive, since we know that disadvantaged children do gain the most benefits,” says Steve Barnett, NIEER’s director and lead author of the new policy brief. “But now we see that we might reach more of those disadvantaged children if we open it up to all preschoolers.”

The report identifies many reasons to expect higher rates of enrollment of at-risk children in universal pre-K programs. For example, the enrollment process is simpler and more welcoming. Without a need to verify income, families can sign up the way they do for public school. Families may be more aware of the service, there is less paperwork, and no stigma about having to declare poverty-level income or participate in a poverty-level program.

Bigger Gains In Universal Pre-K

Some research suggests that disadvantaged children may make bigger gains in socioeconomically mixed programs than they do in classrooms filled with children who are at risk of school failure. Children also learn from their peers, so the more diversity in the classroom, the better. And classes that are open to all children obviously provide the widest range of learning opportunities.

Those benefits are readily visible to many preschool teachers. In Oklahoma’s universal prekindergarten program, for example, children of the wealthy arrive right alongside those from low-income and even transient families—with each child teaching the rest unique lessons, based on his or her special perspectives and experiences. Those lessons manifest themselves in many ways, from literacy to social skills. A child in a less-privileged environment, for example, who has had to learn to speak up for what she needs, may show a shy child, from a more wealthy family, how to better communicate with adults. “It’s so wonderful to see how the idea of universal preschool works, in the classroom, among individual children,” says Steffani Allen, director of early childhood education for Norman public schools in Norman, Oklahoma.

Middle-Class Kids Also Reap Rewards

The report is focused on the idea that middle-class children may make significant gains in preschool programs open to all children. “Some middle-class children may arrive in kindergarten without the social and academic skills they need to succeed, and public preschool can boost their skills, as well as those of children more at risk,” says the report’s co-author and NIEER assistant director, Kirsty Brown. This is an area that Brown and her colleagues at NIEER are currently investigating in more depth and with new data.

“It sounds counterintuitive, but we may reach more disadvantaged children if we open state preschool programs to all children.”

Steve Barnett
Director, NIEER

“Up until now, most of the conversation about public preschool has been about...”

NIEER POLICY BRIEF
the benefits for the lowest-income children,” says Brown. “There’s no doubt that children at risk of school failure do make gains. But now we are considering whether high-quality preschool may help middle-class children who might otherwise later need special education, be retained in grade, or be at risk of dropping out.”

What’s The Biggest Bang For The Buck?

Most state programs today still take a targeted approach, choosing to serve only the children known to be most at risk of school failure—usually the lowest-income families and those who do not speak English as their primary language. That strategy is certainly less costly overall, since such programs limit enrollment to a smaller number of 3- and 4-year-olds. Nevertheless, a universal approach that provides preschool education for all may yield more cost efficiency for taxpayers and more benefits for children in the long run.

Two leading economists, Jonah Gelbach and Lant Pritchett, have concluded that, while targeted programs cost less in the short run, universal programs may be sounder policy in the long term because they reach more children, provide more benefits to all families, and help produce a better-educated citizenry for the future.

These findings are adding to the momentum building for universal prekindergarten. Not only have most states launched public preschool efforts, most have done it in the last decade. The prestigious Committee for Economic Development (CED), comprising some of the nation’s leading business and academic leaders, for example, has issued a call for new federal grants to fund public preschool for all the nation’s 3- and 4-year-olds.

“We believe universal preschool is an absolutely essential prerequisite to school reform,” says Charles Kolb, CED president. In 2002, CED issued a landmark report, Preschool for All: Investing In a Productive and Just Society. “We are convinced of this priority based on the scientific evidence,” Kolb says.

Top state education officials have already reached consensus on the matter. The Council of Chief State School Officers has been calling for universal early learning programs since 1999. That year, the council put out the call as a necessary part of school reform, recognizing that children who do not have such high-quality early education experiences often can’t keep up once they start kindergarten.

More states are following the example of Georgia, Oklahoma and New York by passing laws and initiatives calling for a universal approach that will provide preschool for all in the future. West Virginia recently passed a law promising preschool to all 4-year-olds by 2012. Massachusetts followed suit with a law setting up a new agency charged with providing preschool for all by 2010. In Florida, where voters amended their constitution in 2002 to mandate public education for all 4-year-olds by 2005, the political struggle continues in the wake of Governor Jeb Bush’s veto of the inadequate measure sent to his desk by the legislature.

NIEER researchers say a universal approach not only could be more effective, but also is affordable and realistic in the long run. “It’s true that a universal program would shift some costs from middle-income parents to all taxpayers,” says Barnett. “But the overall result could be large net gains for taxpayers.”

Potential Benefits, Important Cautions On Preschool For All

Most states offer public pre-K programs only to the children most at risk of failing school. But now new research shows that universal programs may provide an even bigger payoff for both children and taxpayers:

- Programs that serve only poor children may be poor programs that are starved for resources—neither offering quality nor reaching all the kids.
- Programs that include all children can offer more diversity in the classroom.
- Targeted programs can disrupt both children’s learning and a family’s routines, since changes in a parent’s income can change a child’s eligibility for preschool.
- Families may be less likely to hear about or sign up for a targeted program.
- Targeted programs are unlikely to reach middle-income children who stand to gain from high-quality preschool.

The report cautions policymakers considering preschool for all that:

- High quality standards for all children are required if preschool for all is to be effective. States should not compromise program quality in order to accelerate moving toward universal coverage, but move only as fast as maintaining quality allows.
- Targeting more intensive services toward specific populations within universal programs (e.g., children in poverty) may be needed to ensure that these children benefit fully from voluntary universal prekindergarten programs.
- As policymakers confront the costs associated with universal preschool programs, they may wish to expand toward universality by gradually raising thresholds of eligibility for targeted programs.

To download the full policy brief, visit www.nieer.org, and click on Policy Briefs.
PRESCHOOL NEWS FROM
in the trenches

Questions On Public Pre-K Research? New Website May Have Answers

What, exactly, does it mean to be ready for school? How do you know if a public preschool program is effective? What’s the return on a dollar spent for public preschool?

These are the kinds of questions that many scientists are trying to answer—but until now, there was no easy way to find out exactly who, or how they were conducting their inquiries. A new database intends to do just that, by allowing scientists to post news of their ongoing research and findings.

The new “Prekindergarten Research in Progress” database, sponsored by the National Institute for Early Education Research and the National Prekindergarten Center, is now online at http://prekinnrip.org. Researchers can post their own studies, check in on what others are doing, and even sign up for email alerts as new studies are added.

The database will be coordinated by the Early Childhood and Parenting Collaborative at the University of Illinois, Urbana-Champaign campus, with funding from The Pew Charitable Trusts and the Foundation for Child Development.

Massachusetts Breakthrough: State Forms New Council On Early Education

It’s been years in the making, with hundreds of activists on the frontlines championing the cause of universal preschool for all of Massachusetts’ youngest citizens—and now, finally, state lawmakers have signed on, taking the first critical step toward creating a statewide system of early education, including high-quality preschool education.

As part of the new state budget, Governor Mitt Romney signed a law that creates a new council on early education, charged with the creation of “publicly funded early education and care.” The new and independent body will not only work to create a high-quality system of preschool education, but also work to create a plan for the infrastructure needed to ensure that public preschool delivers on its promise. The council will work with the state’s boards of education and higher education to create a system to credential teachers and assess children’s progress.

“This is a great victory, and one that belongs to so many people, from every walk of life, who have worked for several years to make early education a priority,” says Margaret Blood, executive director of Early Education for All, a broad-based coalition of activists who helped galvanize support for the new initiative.

The action from lawmakers came even as state education officials awaited a decision from the state’s Supreme Court on whether high-quality preschool education should be mandated for children who are at risk for school failure.

“There is a lot of positive momentum in the state right now, which points us toward creating high-quality early education,” adds Blood. “It is the result of a growing consensus about the value of preschool education.”

For more information on the new law and other developments about preschool in Massachusetts, visit www.strategiesforchildren.com.

One Percent Solution For Preschool

High-quality preschool for all 3- and 4-year-olds in America would require roughly $30 billion in additional public funding. That is only 1 percent of total government spending. Such an investment could reap far more in benefits for the public.

—NIEER, 2004
ACROSS THE NATION

Activists and policymakers in Minnesota are known as champions for early education, even trendsetters for the rest of the country. The “Ready 4 K” coalition, around for several years now, brought together early educators, business leaders and politicians to educate the public about the value of high-quality preschool.

Minneapolis Federal Reserve economist Art Rolnick got the message and started spreading it himself, with research showing that high-quality pre-K returns up to 16 percent on every dollar spent. “I can’t think of a better investment,” he told *Preschool Matters* late last year (see December 2003).

Now local business leaders have intensified their campaign, with the creation of the new “Minnesota Business Readiness Advisory Council.” About 80 prominent business leaders from better than 50 companies formed the council to move high-quality pre-K off the back burner and into the frontlines of policy for state lawmakers. “The issues of child development and school readiness are absolutely essential to the future economic well-being of our state,” said Al Stroucken, CEO of the H.B. Fuller Company and chair of the new organization. Brain research, he says, gives urgency to the need for high-quality early learning. “There is a direct relationship between the early nurturing of children and their ability to learn and be productive. We cannot afford any longer to wait until children enter school to ensure they get the right start.”

The group, which includes former Vice President Walter Mondale as well as other prominent state leaders, created three task forces to address the best ways to get high-quality pre-K off the ground, including policy initiatives, best practices, and sparking more public awareness. To that end, the group has already begun sponsoring local meetings and media coverage on the value of early education, with notable success. Both the state’s major urban papers and more local outlets are already covering those meetings. To learn more about the council, visit www.ready4K.org.

Researcher: Universal Pre-K Is No Luxury

Today almost everyone readily concedes the value of pre-K targeted to children at risk of school failure. Who can argue with studies that show high-quality pre-K helps these children catch up with their more affluent peers, cuts crime and helps assure that more children graduate from high school and even college?

Creating a program targeted at those children seemed the most efficient use of taxpayer dollars. Ramping up a program for all 4-year-olds would be generous, but far too costly, most policymakers reasoned.

On the other hand, Clive Belfield, an education researcher at Columbia University Teachers College, contends that New York State could save money by offering preschool to all 4-year-olds, rather than just targeting its lowest-income students. That’s because New York already has much higher rates of children in special education and far more incidents of grade retention than other states. Footing the bill for all those costs works out to a much higher tab than just providing universal pre-K to all the state’s 4-year-olds. In fact, Belfield concludes, the state would see a 41 to 62 percent return on every dollar it spent on a universal program. To read the complete study, visit www.winningbeginningny.org.

Minnesota’s Business Leaders Launch New Campaign For Pre-K
Setting The Bar For Quality: States Debate What It Means To Be ‘Ready’ For School

National Institute Offers Guidance On New Debate Over Standards In Public Pre-K

>> CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

interpret the results in terms of success or failure.

“We need to be sure that we are testing the program and not the child, and that any standards take into account today’s best understandings of how young children develop and learn,” says Deborah Leong, research fellow for the National Institute for Early Education Research and co-author of a new policy brief on the debate over standards for prekindergarten programs.

For all these reasons, many early educators have begun to worry aloud about just how the new demand for child outcomes and uniform program standards will affect the course of public preschool programs. Some worry aloud about high-stakes testing trickling down to the pre-school set, and doing more harm than good. Others worry that standards will lead to a lock-step approach to teaching at preschools.

“Many of us are all in favor of accountability, but we want to make sure that we are holding the program accountable and not the children, as we move forward,” says Steve Barnett, NIEER’s director.

That concern mushroomed in the last year, as new testing began in the national Head Start program. Under a mandate from the Bush Administration, thousands of 4-year-olds took new tests for the first time, in an effort to measure the effectiveness of the early education program.

Many prestigious authorities in early education, including a panel from NAEYC, protested the new Head Start testing. Many experts on early education and assessment contended the tests themselves were flawed and failed to adequately measure the gains that children might be making in the program.

“The whole point of accountability should be to make programs better, to ensure they really do have benefits for children,” says Barnett. “Any assessment should be tied to helping programs make concrete improvements to get that job done. We all know the promise of preschool, the point is to keep that promise to children and taxpayers.”

NIEER’s new brief on standards offers some strong guidelines to parents, policymakers and educators who want to be sure that their local preschool programs meet the needs of their children. Among the nine guidelines, the institute recommends that preschool standards:

- Represent values that make sense to children’s families and communities,
- Are based on scientific evidence,
- Are flexible enough to allow teachers creative ways to carry them out,
- Take a comprehensive approach to education, weaving skills together in all aspects of a child’s life,
- Make sense to teachers,
- Are written in a way that makes it possible to judge whether they have been achieved.

For more information on the standards movement in preschool, or a copy of the policy brief, contact Carol Shipp, deputy director of NIEER at cshipp@nieer.org. To download a copy of the paper, visit www.nieer.org and click on Resources.
Many advocates and experts have been holding their breath since New Jersey rolled out one of the nation’s most ambitious public preschool programs. More than 42,000 3- and 4-year-olds now attend the classes, six hours a day, throughout the school year.

“It’s the scale of it that is so remarkable, and the dedication to quality,” says Barbara Reisman, executive director of the Schumann Fund and a nationally known activist for high-quality early education. “Many of us see this as a golden opportunity and a possible model for how preschool can be done.”

The state-funded effort, now operating in 30 of the state’s poorest school districts, includes classrooms both in the public schools and off-site in private centers. “It’s so ambitious. We all hoped it would succeed, but it was such a challenge to do so much so fast,” says Reisman. “We all took a leap of faith, based on the science. We hoped the assessments would show children making progress.”

And so they are—as are teachers.

That’s the message in the first statewide assessment of New Jersey’s court-ordered Abbott preschool program. That study, *Inch by Inch, Row By Row, Gonna Make This Garden Grow*, by the state’s Early Learning Improvement Consortium (ELIC), reveals that children are making statistically significant gains on several measures of literacy, including readiness to read and recognition of letters and words. Classroom quality is also on the rise and, most importantly in areas “most likely to influence children’s learning.”

These findings were among those presented to a packed house at the recent meeting of the International Reading Improvement Association in Reno, Nevada, where hundreds of educators and researchers packed a room to hear Cynthia Esposito Lamy, one of NIEER’s research associates and an author of the report, describe the results and the breakthroughs New Jersey is making in measuring both program quality and the children’s progress.

The new report was produced by the ELIC, which consists of distinguished educators and researchers from the state’s colleges and universities who have agreed to help the state create new tools to investigate classroom quality, classroom gains, and the effectiveness of teaching methods. The researchers used a variety of measures to come to their conclusions, ranging from the widely used ECERS observations to brand-new instruments that investigate children’s math skills.

“Much of what we are doing is groundbreaking, and I don’t just mean the program itself,” says Lamy. “Everyone is struggling with how to assess both what is being taught in the classroom and what gains children are making. This is one of the first studies of a major public preschool program to go beyond literacy and look at how well preschool teachers work to develop children’s math and numeracy skills as well.”

As they investigated how well classrooms support early literacy, Lamy and her colleagues were especially pleased with the performance of a new classroom observation instrument, Support of Early Literacy Assessment (SELA), developed by Sheila Smith at New York University. They found children made their biggest strides in reading readiness. Classrooms scored significantly higher this year across all aspects of literacy.

“It was a nice surprise to see the gains in the Get Ready to Read scores,” says Lamy. “It’s clear the program is helping them get a good, strong handle on the skills they need in kindergarten.”

The children’s gains in vocabulary were significant, but not as strong. “That’s why we called this report ‘Inch by Inch,’” says Lamy, “because we understand that it will take time to create quality.”

For a copy of Lamy’s presentation at the Reno meeting or to download the full report, visit NIEER’s website at www.nieer.org/resources/papers.
Compassionate Couple Cares About Kids, Creates Scholarship For N.J. Preschoolers

Stuart Lasser recalls the moment when he understood the value of preschool. “It was parent observation day at our son’s preschool, and we were amazed,” he says. “We could see what a difference it was making in his life. He was learning so much.”

It was also at that moment that he and his wife, Jill, decided they wanted to give the same opportunity to other children whose families might not be able to afford the tuition.

“Jill and I were both 46 at the time, and not planning to have any more children,” he says. “But we were so excited by what we’d seen that day. We could afford to send other children to preschool. So that’s what we decided to do, and that’s when Project Acorn was born.”

Lasser, who runs a car dealership in Western New Jersey, had no background in early education. But he believed it would be relatively easy to identify children who could benefit from such a program, and pay tuition for them at a local program. “I just went to a local minister and asked if he knew families who made education a big priority and had young children,” says Lasser. By that fall, the Lassers were paying to send several children to local nursery schools.

That was about a decade ago, and it wasn’t long before the Lassers found that friends also wanted to sponsor local youngsters. Today, Project Acorn provides scholarships for about 70 children in Morris County, N.J., to attend local preschools. “Most of these kids are the children of working families who don’t qualify for any other help. They are kids who’d fall between the cracks, if there weren’t some program like this,” says Lasser.

Indeed, one mom, Pam Osborne, reports that most programs were simply too pricey for her family. “The schools we looked at cost a pretty penny, and we couldn’t have afforded them without this help,” she says.

Project Acorn, now a nonprofit with the appropriate slogan, “Seeding early education,” has operated out of just one county so far, with help from individual families and local foundations. But Lasser and his wife hope to spread the word.

“We are now very cautiously trying to figure out how to take this baby idea and replicate it in other communities. We believe it can be replicated without a whole lot of difficulty. All it takes is a few local people who are committed to the importance of early education.”

Experts in early education finance know of no similar effort anywhere in the U.S. “There are many foundations and local nonprofits dedicated to early education. But I haven’t heard of any other individual creating a focused effort like this, to give kids scholarships to preschool,” says Anne Mitchell, author of several national reports on financing early education.

Lasser knows that New Jersey has one of the nation’s largest public preschool programs, but he believes there’s plenty of room for more private efforts like this one. “I welcome the day when we are out of business, and every child has the means to attend preschool,” he says. “But in the meantime, we see that many hardworking families can use this help, so we want to spread the word.”

Project Acorn has a short video and printed materials describing their efforts, how they select families and fund the children. To learn more, write Lasser at projectacorn@aol.com.
Broad New Investigation Underway

Does Head Start Really Work? New National Study Mandated By Congress For Answers

Though few people can recall the moment now, the debate over Head Start’s value really gained momentum way back in 1997, when the General Accounting Office (GAO) issued a landmark report, *Head Start: Research Provides Little Information on Impact of Current Program.*

That report landed like a match on gasoline, re-igniting the long-simmering political controversy over Head Start’s effectiveness. Most notably, the GAO insisted the “body of research on current Head Start is insufficient to draw conclusions about the impact of the national program,” and called for “definitive research studies, even though they may be costly” to decide whether the federal investment of billions of dollars was worth it.

Conservatives and liberals alike stormed the halls of Congress, making claims and counter-claims for the program, engaging in fierce debate about a program that had, until that time, attained a good deal of bipartisan support.

“I’m not sure any of us want to revisit the controversies that brought us to where we are today,” says Mike Lopez, senior research analyst with the federal Department of Health and Human Services, who now oversees the Head Start Impact Study, a congressionally mandated, nationwide evaluation of the federal program. “What’s important now is that we have made great headway in creating one of the most ambitious and well-constructed studies of Head Start ever.”

While the questions seemed reasonable enough, constructing a randomized national study that could provide rigorous answers was a monumental task. To be sure, many studies had affirmed the value of high-quality preschool education. But in 1998, no one had conducted a true experiment to measure Head Start’s broad impacts on children and families with a control group (the Head Start experience. “These were families and children we were dealing with, and communities with a deep commitment to the program,” says Ronna Cook, researcher at Westat, a private research organization conducting the field studies. “Many directors had ethical questions about such a project. We had to really grapple with that.”

But that was only one of the heated questions that dogged the first two years of designing the massive study, enrolling parents and programs to participate and ensuring that the survey, observation and analysis produced valid results. And, given the politically-charged atmosphere, the researchers also knew many local Head Start directors worried the study would simply be used as a weapon to defund them.

Part of that anxiety was eased by a personal message from the National Head Start Association’s president, Sarah Greene, who encouraged the local programs to see the new research project as an opportunity to show the nation just how valuable Head Start could be for America’s most disadvantaged children.

“Sarah Greene was key in ensuring that this study would be the best it could be,” says Lopez.

Even so, the researchers took an unusual step to ensure the broadest participation...
and the most nonpartisan approach possible. They spent a year on the road, visiting Head Start sites, explaining the design and goals of the research and working with possible participants to work out any kinks in advance that might compromise the integrity of the findings. “We had to know how we could keep in touch with the families and follow them over time. We had to assure everyone that our goal was to find out what was best for children and families,” says Lopez. “We think taking that extra time, which is unusual in such research, really helped get us the participation we needed.”

By 2002, the researchers began to collect their data at 378 centers, involving 4,750 3- and 4-year-old children, a nationally-representative sample that includes children who attend Head Start and those who do not. The children not attending a program are eligible, but there are no seats available in local programs. This research approach created the largest randomized trial of Head Start programs ever undertaken, and promises to provide both broad and detailed answers on the effort’s effectiveness, the best practices, and the ways to improve it in the future.

So far, the participation rate has been nothing short of spectacular. Just this spring, the scientists released an interim report showing a response rate of over 85 percent rate among Head Start children, and a nearly 80 percent response rate for children in the control group. In addition, there is at least one completed interview with a parent in 90 percent of the original cases. “This response rate is phenomenal, which gives us reason to expect quite meaningful results,” says Lopez.

The scientists now have data from child assessments, interviews with parents, teachers and center directors, as well as observations in the centers. Among other things, the data now in hand provide information on children’s literacy, including receptive and expressive language, as well as their social, emotional and physical development. The information collected will also allow the researchers to draw conclusions regarding effects on parenting and about the quality of Head Start’s classroom teaching practices.

“One of the pleasant surprises has been that we’ve had relatively few outright objections to the study, and a very positive level of support and cooperation in the end,” says Lopez. “We’re now putting a tremendous amount of effort into careful consideration of how to analyze the data. We believe that we will be able to produce the most meaningful research to date on Head Start, a study that will be of value to everyone, but especially the children.”

When will those results be available? December 2006 is the deadline set by Congress. To read about the background of the study and its design, and an interim report delivered to the National Head Start Association, visit www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/core/ongoing_research/hs/impact_intro.htm.

Meanwhile, some strong new Head Start data have become available. As reported in Preschool Matter’s Winter 2004 issue, Martha Abbott-Shim and her colleagues were the first out with results of a randomized trial of Head Start’s impact on children’s learning and development. While not a national sample, the study of Alabama programs does document the positive effects of programs. For more information on that study, contact Abbott-Shim at masqcounts@aol.com or call her at 404-327-9896.