Young children and those who look out for them recently lost two figures whose contributions to early childhood education and development are sure to endure well beyond their passing. Urie Bronfenbrenner, the Cornell professor and researcher, and Lew Platt, the business leader and preschool advocate, came to the service of children from opposite directions.

Bronfenbrenner came to America from Russia as a boy and witnessed the squalid conditions in which children with problems were placed. That spurred him to make the study of human development his life’s work. Like other towering figures in the sciences, he had a vision of how things work that others did not possess.

Bronfenbrenner’s vision was this: human development does not take place along the neat lines drawn by the disciplines that study it. Before Bronfenbrenner, psychologists studied the child, sociologists examined the family, and anthropologists and economists looked at society. Bronfenbrenner brought to the world the concept of human ecology, the idea that human development could be studied through the combination of these environments and viewed from a “life course” perspective. He broke through barriers between the social sciences and built bridges across which new findings began to march.

A faculty member at Cornell for more than 50 years when he died last month, Bronfenbrenner was a founder of Head Start and the inspiration for what is now the aptly named Bronfenbrenner Life Course Center at Cornell.

If we are to achieve a society in which children develop and learn up to their potential, it will take, in addition to the Bronfenbrenners of the world, business and community leaders like Lew Platt to make things happen “on the ground.” Platt, who also died last month, was a born leader and problem solver whose tenures at the helm of Hewlett Packard and Boeing are held in high regard in an age when most CEO’s receive mixed reviews.

Platt understood that high-quality preschool education is good for business and American competitiveness and he knew how to get results. He became an articulate advocate of the view that all young children should receive a good preschool education. As he put it, “In the case of preschool for all, the benefits are numerous. With this one improvement you positively affect workforce readiness, economic development, education reform and crime prevention. I don’t know many other policy changes we can make that would, in one stroke, begin to mend so many problems in our society.”

Platt volunteered for television spots in which he promoted the economic and educational benefits of high-quality preschool programs. He had the credibility borne of experience when he pointed out to community leaders that parents recruited by companies like Boeing and Hewlett Packard “are exactly the type of people who will want to know if we offer preschool programs for their kids. They will be attracted to regions that are providing the opportunities for their children to learn and thrive.”

In the space of a few weeks, two key leaders have departed—one dedicated to human development and the other to providing the resources that can foster it. It will take longer than a few weeks to replace them. We can honor their work by continuing it.
State courts began seeing school finance lawsuits after the U.S. Supreme Court slammed the door on such cases at the federal level in 1973. In *San Antonio Independent School District v. Rodriguez*, the highest court said equal protection under the law as set forth in the constitution does not extend to equality in education funding. That’s not necessarily the view in state courts, however. Since *Rodriguez*, legal teams in 45 states have mounted challenges to school funding formulas and decisions in several states have led to redressing unequal or inadequate funding of low-income schools. As lawyers gained experience with these cases, they modified their strategies to permit preschool claims.

Early on, plaintiffs brought equity claims based on their state’s constitutional mandate that all its citizens be treated equally under the law—essentially the same argument made in *Rodriguez*. About two-thirds of the time the courts ruled in favor of the state rather than the children for whom the case was brought. With no option for appeal at the federal level, the plaintiffs’ lawyers eventually switched strategies, opting to pursue claims based on whether the state’s public schools were living up to another constitutional mandate—to provide an “adequate” education.

The new rationale opens the door to prekindergarten claims and over the past decade, plaintiffs have, with some success, argued that preschool is necessary to provide the education stipulated in states’ constitutions.

The win-loss record on the pre-K claims is split: Rulings in New Jersey and North Carolina were victories for supporters of state-funded preschool, while decisions in Massachusetts and Arkansas have failed to establish pre-K as a remedy. In North Carolina’s decision, the Supreme Court did not require the state to fund preschool but did require the legislature to address the needs of at-risk preschoolers.

In the country’s best-known school finance case, *Abbott v. Burke*, the New Jersey Supreme Court did something courts have traditionally been reluctant to do. The justices mandated state-funded preschool for children in the poorest districts in the state (Abbott districts) after the legislature failed to follow three previous directives to correct an unconstitutional funding system.

A different story played out in Massachusetts. In *Julie Hancock v. Commissioner of Education*, the state’s Supreme Judicial Court ruled against families seeking a major increase in state funding for school districts in low-income communities. While conceding that major inadequacies remain in public education, the court said in its February ruling that it was satisfied the state showed “a steady trajectory of progress” in addressing inequities in public education.

Ellen Boylan, a lawyer who heads Starting at 3, a national project to support preschool claims in school funding litigation, calls *Hancock* far more conservative than recent rulings in Kansas and Montana. The Massachusetts justices upheld the earlier decision, *McDuffy v. Secretary*, that established education as an enforceable duty of the state but fell short when it came to enforcing *McDuffy*. “What the court said is ‘effort’ is a constitutional standard—not adequacy,” says Boylan.

Michael Weisman, lead
Delaware’s Mike Castle: The Head Start Impact Study and the Reauthorization

Rep. Mike Castle (R-DE) has been putting his stamp on education policy since his first term in Congress, when he served on the House Education and Workforce Committee. He helped write the No Child Left Behind Act and has supported controversial Head Start reforms.

Q: What did you see as the most interesting findings from the recent Head Start Impact Study, and why?
A: I think that the study confirms that Head Start has positive benefits as far as children are concerned but obviously doesn’t bring them up to the starting line equal with other kids. That’s a concern. Head Start needs additional shoring up—something we knew before the research, but now we have the information and data behind us to know where we need to focus our efforts—like on strengthening academics. In the last session, we tried to address some of the services that are provided [to students] and how those relate to academic achievement, but those efforts weren’t successful. But it’s important to note that even if Head Start kids are not entering school at the same level as other children, they’re still better off for having gone through the program.

Q: The Head Start impact study finds small gains in children’s learning from one year of Head Start. The gains in general cognitive ability (as measured by the PPVT) were among the smallest and no significant effects were found for math abilities. What is your reaction to the results?
A: It’s something we hope to address in the current legislation by outlining some of the indicators for pre-reading and pre-math skills students should be required to attain, raising teacher standards and emphasizing professional development. They’re small changes, but I believe they’ll improve the quality of the programs and outcomes. Hopefully we’ll see these improvements reflected in the next Impact Study.

Q: Preschool programs in a number of small experiments have produced much larger gains for children. Some people say that it is just not possible for a government program to replicate these gains on a large scale. Others say that without intensive attention from well-educated teachers, strong results are just not possible—Head Start teachers are poorly educated and poorly paid. What do you think?
A: Clearly I believe it is very important to raise the standard levels as far as teacher qualifications—it’s hard to teach if you don’t have the preparation. The House and Senate bills both call for teachers to have two years of college and some to have four years of college, which I think is already happening at better Head Start institutions. The downside is you can’t call for better-trained teachers without allocating funds to pay for it. There’s no question as we add this educational [aim] to Head Start that we need to focus on teachers and we need to look at the broad daily list of what young people will be doing at Head Start. I have never believed we should give up health and social service aspects of the program, but there needs to be a balance between those services and education. We also recognize that you can’t replace the current system with a new super-charged academic environment—you have to do it gradually.

Q: Does the new research on Head Start impacts suggest policy changes that you think ought to be implemented or at least considered?
A: If you look at the states that have had the most success with young students—including children in Head Start—you’ll find that those states have invested heavily in early education programs are the places having the greatest achievement. I’m on record with supporting the concept of having some states being given more authority to deal directly with Head Start, which probably won’t be achieved through Congress. But I think it’s an important concept for where Head Start is going.

Q: Even the best research study can’t by itself answer all of the important questions about a program like Head Start. What additional questions about Head Start would you like to see future research address?
A: We need better longitudinal studies of the impacts of Head Start on students in the program versus their peers at the time of school entry and for several years beyond. We have some criteria for this, but we don’t have enough. Also I’d like to see [research on] the benefits of teachers with greater education levels—is that truly making a difference or not?

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10>>
Head Start Impact Study: Findings Show Gains, Methodology is Rigorous

Results Could Affect Congressional Reauthorization

When Congress charged the Department of Health and Human Services with researching Head Start’s effectiveness, lawmakers wanted answers to questions about how much children were benefiting from a program that, at the time, cost $4.3 billion to operate. That was 1998. Today, Head Start costs $6.8 billion to operate and the answers—at least some of them—have arrived.

First year findings from the eagerly awaited Head Start Impact Study, released in June, show gains for Head Start attendees (the treatment group) over their non-Head Start peers (the control group) in school readiness skills, health status and how well their parents do such things as read to them. The findings come at a time when Congress is considering Head Start reauthorization and many expect a new law relatively soon.

The report details the effects of participating in Head Start for one year. Four domains are examined: cognitive, social-emotional, parenting and health. The picture painted by the results is one of both progress and inertia. Three-year-old Head Start participants showed some of the largest cognitive impacts in pre-reading and parent perceptions of their literacy skills compared to children in the control group. The 3-year-old participants also had fewer behavioral problems and were less likely to be physically disciplined at home than non-participants. They received more dental care and were more likely to have excellent or very good health, as reported by their parents.

Sarah Greene, executive director of the National Head Start Association, says that while the 1998 reauthorization bill placed more emphasis on cognitive skill development, it has only been since the 2000-01 school year that those changes have been in effect. Seeing gains after just three years, she says, is testament to the work the program has done to retrain and retool to meet the new academic standards.

Impacts of Head Start were strongest for 3-year-olds, although when positive impacts were found for 4-year-olds, they were generally on similar measures. Overall, these results translate to gains in fewer than half (14 of 30) of the skill areas measured for 3-year-olds and just 6 of 30 areas for 4-year-olds (See Table 1).

While the children attending Head Start closed some of the achievement gap, they fell well below national norms in nearly every cognitive skills category. Neither 3- nor 4-year-olds gained significantly in math skills or oral comprehension/phonological awareness. Four-year-olds showed no signs of positive impacts on social-emotional development. No effect was found on parents’ child safety practices at home for either age group.

Some in early childhood education found the results disappointing. However, they point out that Head Start does not have the resources to duplicate smaller, more intensive programs for disadvantaged children like the Perry Preschool.

Table 1. Effect Sizes*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Cognitive Domains</th>
<th>3-Year-Olds</th>
<th>4-Year Olds</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Pre-Reading</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Woodcock-Johnson III Letter-Word Identification</td>
<td>0.24</td>
<td>0.22</td>
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<tr>
<td>Letter Naming</td>
<td>0.19</td>
<td>0.24</td>
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<tr>
<td>Pre-Writing</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>McCarthy Draw-A-Design</td>
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<tr>
<td>Woodcock-Johnson III Spelling</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vocabulary</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>PPVT-III Adapted</td>
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<tr>
<td>Color Naming</td>
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<td>Parent-Reported Literacy Skills</td>
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<tr>
<td>Oral Comprehension and Phonological Awareness</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Early Math</td>
<td>no effect</td>
<td>no effect</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* Effect sizes are an index of the magnitude of the research result and are not percentages. All effect sizes in the table represent significant differences between treatment and control groups.

CONTINUED ON PAGE 10>>
States Make Gains in Preschool Access

All eyes were on Florida this year as it ramped up its new program intended to be available to all 4-year-olds in the state. With about 75,000 children attending, the program fell well short of the 150,000 children some policymakers thought might enroll. Still, the program has meant a substantial increase in preschool enrollment in the state and, despite lingering issues of funding and standards, it represents what leading advocate David Lawrence calls “an honorable start.” Other states made progress this year as well. Here’s a look:

California
San Francisco and San Mateo counties have joined Los Angeles County by initiating programs aimed at eventually providing pre-K for all. San Mateo County enrolled its first students in March and expects to invest more than $10 million over the first three years. Voters in San Francisco approved $3.3 million to fund the free half-day preschool that serves 1,000 children in four low-income neighborhoods.

Hawaii
A $5 million increase in Hawaii’s Preschool Open Doors program will provide spaces for 1,000 to 1,500 more children. The quality improvement piece of the legislation did not pass, but a program for those who receive a federal or state child care subsidy will give more money to centers that use the state’s preschool content standards and increase professional development opportunities.

Illinois
Making good on his pledge to increase preschool funding by $90 million over three years, Gov. Rod Blagojevich was successful in getting the final $30-million installment through the state’s budget process. That brought the Early Childhood Education Block Grant funding to $270 million annually and made pre-K available to 8,000 more children.

Iowa
In Iowa, a debate over quality versus quantity in pre-K is heating up following an influx of $20 million to the state’s community empowerment coalitions for early childhood initiatives. Of that money, $4.6 million is designated for prekindergarten tuition assistance. Wanting to be sure the programs were of high quality, the state’s Empowerment Board developed guidelines for how the money should be allocated, raising the ire of some who believe serving more kids is preferable to raising quality.

Nebraska
A $1.68 million appropriation approved this summer will fund early childhood education for 650 more youngsters through the state’s Early Childhood Grant program. Programs must be operational by January 2006. The legislation, which originally requested $45 million over three years, also included a change in the school funding formula that will allow programs to include in their counts for state aid any 4-year-olds eligible to attend kindergarten the following year.

New Mexico
As students returned to school, 1,500 4-year-olds became the first preschoolers in the state’s voluntary pre-kindergarten program. Thirty providers were selected to participate in the $5 million pilot program, which was narrowly approved in the final days of the legislative session.

North Carolina
The state’s biggest newsmaker was the newly established lottery, which will fund early education, among other priorities. The state’s budget also contains a funding increase that will expand the More at Four program from 12,000 to 15,000 children.

Pennsylvania
A $15 million increase for Head Start is included in the $24 billion state budget. That represents a doubling of the state’s commitment to Head Start. In addition to supporting Head Start, the state funds block grants that can support preschool at the district level.

Tennessee
Enrollment in the state’s pilot preschool program nearly tripled this year, thanks to an infusion of $25 million in lottery money that Gov. Phil Bredesen pushed through a contentious legislative session. The money is funding an additional 300 classrooms and up to 6,000 more students.
ACROSS THE NATION

State UPK Pioneer Joins Trend Toward Birth-To-5 Education
New Georgia Agency Elevates Profile of Early Education in State

In a move that is being watched around the country, Georgia’s governor, Legislature and top early education officials have created a new governance structure that unites services for children from birth to age 5. The result is Bright from the Start: Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning.

The new agency brings together the state’s early care and education offices, including the Office of School Readiness (Georgia’s UPK program) and the child care licensing office formerly part of the Department of Human Services. It will also oversee the federal food program, child care development block grant, and child care resource and referral agencies.

The move elevates early care and education to a stature on par with the Department of Education, which remains a stand-alone entity. It also allows for better coordination among agencies and makes it easier to align learning standards for birth to age 3 with preschool and K-12. “We want to infuse [the child care] system with a culture of education,” says Bright from the Start Commissioner Marsha H. Moore.

It has been a long road, supporters say. Sharen Hausmann is director of Smart Start Georgia, a private non-profit that works closely with the state government, the business community and other child advocacy groups to improve the quality of early care and education. Her first priority with the organization was to push for this unified approach. “If somebody would have told me 10 or 15 years ago that we’d be where we are now, I would have told them they were crazy,” Hausmann says.

Bright from the Start provides a single entry point for family day care providers, center directors, and Head Start teachers as well as educators in the state-funded pre-K program. Getting there has been complicated. Moore has had to weave together separate staffs and work cultures, not to mention different funding streams and priorities, a delicate procedure requiring statesman-like skills. “We are showing that you don’t have to be a part of any single state agency to provide quality services to children and families, but it helps to have all the agencies that serve children and families at the table to coordinate, to communicate and to share resources,” Moore says.

A new training and technical assistance system currently under construction will help reduce turnover, boost teacher certification rates in non-UPK programs and provide center directors with the skills to operate successfully. State colleges and universities will provide the training.

Moore concedes there are still hurdles ahead. But the ultimate goal, she says, is to make it less complicated for parents to get the services they need.

Mobile Classrooms Go Where the Need Is: On the Road

With classrooms at maximum capacity and widely dispersed, converted school buses painted to resemble cows are a familiar sight to at-risk preschoolers in Nevada.

The COW bus as it is called, (Classroom on Wheels), brings free, bilingual preschool to 414 at-risk children who otherwise would not attend a program until they enter the public school system at kindergarten. The eight buses operate in Las Vegas, North Las Vegas, Henderson and Reno, as well as Storey and Washoe Counties in northwestern Nevada. A local Head Start grantee and the state department of education provide funding for the mobile classes and one stationary site outside of Las Vegas.

Children attending the program receive 2 1/2 hours of instruction four days a week from certified teachers, and parents receive two hours of education and parent-child activity time each month. Each bus is painted with a different pattern of splotches, so kids can recognize their own classroom.

Classroom on Wheels was founded in 1992 by Louise Helton, who was inspired to help children prepare for school when a first-grade classmate of her daughter couldn’t identify the color red. Since then, the program has provided early education to more than 2,000 children. There are other COWs, too. The organization also operates Clinic on Wheels, which offers immunizations and free medical and dental screenings, as well as a computer training program for parents known as Computers on Wheels.

COW is participating in a longitudinal study following children through grade 3 to determine the impact of quality prekindergarten on school readiness. A report should be available in 2008.
Pre-K Claims in School Lawsuits

attorney for the plaintiffs, differs, pointing out that while the court rebuffed the Hancock argument and the preschool claim, it did not reverse McDuffy as it could have chosen to do. “The Hancock decision was not a victory for children, but an exercise in judicial patience,” he says, adding that the ruling simply gave the legislature more time to prove its commitment to adequately fund education. Plaintiffs could be back in court if the legislature does not live up to McDuffy.

Pre-K claims are on the rise. A claim for pre-K funding has been included in seven pending school finance cases and plaintiffs in Connecticut and Missouri have plans to add such a claim. Even when

advocacy opportunities that arise as a result of the litigation to advance the pre-K ball. For example, in New York’s Campaign for Fiscal Equity v. State, the pre-K claim was not in the original complaint but because of the work of Child Care, Inc. and the Schuyler Center for Analysis and Advocacy, the claim arose in the remedy stage—after the school funding system had been ruled unconstitutional by the New York Court of Appeals.

These groups were successful in getting the cost of pre-K included in two studies commissioned after the court ruling to determine the cost of a “sound basic education.” They also filed a “friend of the court” brief last year before the trial court that was considering whether the state had complied with the Court of Appeals ruling. Their brief argued that to meet its constitutional obligation, the state must fully fund pre-K for all 3- and 4-year-olds as part of the school funding formula.

These advocacy efforts raise the profile of pre-K before the courts and legislature, and may influence the New York Legislature to finally provide full funding for the state’s universal pre-K program.

According to Mike Rebell, executive director of the Campaign for Fiscal Equity, judges are inclined to rule in plaintiff’s favor where pre-K is involved. Preschool claims appear during litigation as a result of the argument that students cannot achieve the states’ education standards without high-quality preschool, Rebell says. That’s typically done by the plaintiff’s lawyers, but in North Carolina, the judge hearing arguments in Hoke County Board of Education v. State took the unusual step of directing the plaintiffs to amend their complaint to include pre-K as part of the requirement for a sound, basic education.

These cases reflect broader thinking about how to define public education. “In the past, preschool was not necessarily considered a way to close the achievement gap, but today school administrators are beginning to realize that it is an integral part of an adequate education,” Boylan says. In many cases, lawsuits that include pre-K as a remedy are led by school districts. Other times, schools are looking first to get adequate funding in the system before contemplating the task of including preschool.

Other States
Plaintiffs in the Wyoming case, Campbell County School District v. State, asked the court to mandate state funding for preschool during the remedy phase of the case but were recently rebuffed when the trial court granted partial summary judgment, dismissing the pre-K claim before the case went to trial. Plaintiffs plan to appeal the ruling to the Wyoming Supreme Court, arguing that all of the state’s children are entitled to a high-quality pre-K program.

In Colorado, Labato v. State of Colorado, filed in August, challenges the constitutionality of the school funding formula and alleges the state has failed to adequately fund the Colorado Preschool Program (CPP). The complaint further argues that preschool programs are necessary to ensure all at-risk students an opportunity for quality education under the state constitution, state school reform laws and the federal No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).

Although NCLB does not extend to pre-K, the law’s mandate for high standards means children must come to school ready to learn. Some plaintiffs have argued—and some courts have agreed—that the state’s own learning standards, often adopted in response to the federal law, amount to the definition of a constitutionally adequate education.

In Nebraska, where the courts have never considered the constitutionality of the school funding formula or whether education is a fundamental right, two pending lawsuits include claims for prekindergarten. One represents four urban school districts, including Omaha Public Schools; the other was filed on behalf of 34 rural school districts. The trial court heard arguments on the state’s motion to dismiss the rural case in early July, and a decision could come in the fall, says Elizabeth Eynon-Kokrdka, lead counsel for Omaha Public Schools. Regardless of the outcome, it seems inevitable that plaintiffs in other states are likely to include pre-K claims in their cases. “The more it’s in the consciousness of educators, the more school districts are going to be turning to lawyers and saying to add pre-K funding to their lawsuits,” Boylan says.
Lesser-Known Benefits of Preschool That Can Last into Adulthood

When the merits of high-quality preschool are debated, the conversation seldom moves beyond the well-documented outcomes like better performance in school, better jobs and reduced crime. The NIEER report “Overlooked Benefits of Prekindergarten” examines lesser-known yet highly significant benefits that can accrue not only to the children who attend high-quality preschool, but also to their parents.

Author and NIEER Research Associate Karen Schulman analyzed a number of studies, including the High/Scope Perry Preschool Program, Abecedarian Project, Chicago Child-Parent Centers and Parent Child Development Centers with an eye to gaining a broader perspective on overlooked benefits. Considering such factors as family life, health behaviors, social adjustment and financial stability, Schulman found that prekindergarten can also strengthen commitment to school, lead to better health consciousness and behaviors, and start children on the road to financial independence.

In the High/Scope Perry Preschool study, for instance, preschool attendees were more likely to wear seatbelts and less likely to drink and smoke later in life.

Intensive family support in the Chicago Child-Parent Centers may be responsible for lowering the incidence of abuse and neglect among the children participating, a reduction that translates into lowered costs for the child welfare system and victim’s services.

Schulman’s analysis suggests that seemingly unrelated outcomes may be rooted in concepts children begin to understand in prekindergarten, such as cause and effect.

The research points to multiple pathways by which preschool education can shape children’s learning. Cognitive learning is the most obvious and measurable. But there are other ways children learn. Programs that enable children to take the initiative and make choices in their activities can be effective in motivating children to persist in achieving their goals and can foster their commitment to school.

“If children are doing well in school they will have better experiences and likely go on to graduate.”

—Karen Schulman
NIEER Research Associate

“New research found that seemingly unrelated outcomes as adults may be rooted in concepts children begin to understand in prekindergarten, such as cause and effect.”

Head Start Study Findings

Program. Others saw positive news in the fact that a program serving 900,000 disadvantaged children produced measurable benefits, given that many teachers are poorly paid and under-qualified.

"Most agree that Head Start has never been funded adequately to achieve expected benefits," said NIEER Director Steve Barnett.

Beyond the findings, researchers were encouraged to see that a large randomized study like this one can be ethically and rigorously conducted. Over the years, doubt has emerged as to whether the practice of designating a control group could ethically be developed since some individuals would, by necessity, not receive the services being studied.

The firm chosen to lead the study, Westat of Rockville, Maryland, created a nationally representative, random sample of about 5,000 3- and 4-year-old Head Start applicants. Children from that sample were either assigned to a treatment group (that received Head Start services) or a control group (that did not). To design the sample in an ethical manner, researchers chose 84 Head Start grantees/delegate agencies that had many more applicants than slots so as to provide the number of children needed for a control group. That way, the group consists of children who would be turned away whether a study were being conducted or not.

The Impact Study is one of only a handful of nationally representative randomized studies conducted on social programs in the United States. It also marks the first time researchers have measured the benefits on a national scale for children who attended Head Start compared with children in a rigorously constructed control group. The earlier large-scale Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) simply measured students’ skills before and after attending the program. The FACES studies lack comparison groups of children who did not attend Head Start, making it difficult to draw conclusions about the program’s overall impact.

Barnett says research like the Impact Study can be done ethically and should be done more often. “The relevant question is what can kids gain from federal Head Start compared to what’s available to them when Head Start isn’t an option, either because there are no spaces, or there are no other alternatives?” he says. “These kinds of scientifically rigorous studies can offer some of those answers.”

Ronna Cook, the study’s project director at Westat, agrees, but points out even rigorous studies like this one aren’t flawless. For instance, control group children who did not receive Head Start may have attended other early childhood programs in the area. If those other programs were beneficial, this would likely mean the Head Start findings are understated.

There were surprises along the way. Cook says children who ended up in the control group were significantly more likely to remain in parent care rather than attend another preschool program.

Cook says this is the first report of the study. Researchers will follow the children until the end of first grade, so they will be able to tell more about the continuing benefits of their early education. Also to be examined in future reports are quality issues such as teacher qualifications, part-day vs. full-day care, Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale—Revised Edition (ECERS-R) scores, teacher-child relationships and activities in the classroom. Once the children reach school age, teacher assessments will be added and different cognitive measures can be used.


Congressman Mike Castle

Q: How do you expect the rest of the Head Start reauthorization process to go, and do you think it will be influenced by the findings of the Impact Study?
A: A lot of the things we’re trying to accomplish are part of what’s in the Impact Study, so I think it supports the changes we’re proposing. I’m now concerned about the legislative calendar because of the hurricane situation. When we can get to the floor—and I think that will be late this year or early next year—we’ll be able to get the legislation passed in the House and probably in the Senate, too. I think by summer of next year—I’d like it to be by the end of this year—we’ll have reauthorized Head Start.

Q: What do you think Head Start should look like 10 years from now, and how has that vision been influenced by your reading of the research, old and new, on preschool programs, including Head Start?
A: I’d like to see us have definitive studies and research showing what works and what doesn’t. I hope we’ve moved in the direction of more professional teaching and a greater focus on the education component. Culturally, I would like us to have a better understanding that we’re now giving kids in some of the lowest income brackets an opportunity to get a true head start and part of that is not just being cared for but providing an academic component. I’d like to make sure they don’t start behind the eight ball and they’re not able to get out from behind it.
Social Science: What Makes Strong Research?

When the Head Start Impact Study was published this summer, it quieted naysayers who doubted that a nationally representative randomized trial study of a social program could be conducted ethically and reliably. The study, led by Rockville, Maryland-based Westat, is widely regarded as an example of good science.

Reading the 300-plus page report can be a challenge for those whose interests do not run to standard deviations, effect sizes and regression analyses. Still, it is important for non-researchers to be able to separate strong science from the other variety. Preschool Matters developed the following Q and A to address the science behind the findings:

**How is it Designed?**

There is debate in the research field about whether randomized or qualitative studies are best.

Randomized studies are considered the “gold standard” of research, and when carefully conducted, provide the best evidence about the effect of an intervention, says C. Hendricks Brown, director of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, is the leader of one of the longest-running studies of the effects of early education, the Perry Preschool Study (See Recommended Reading). A member of NIEER’s Scientific Advisory Board, he says the primary focus with any study should be achieving clean comparisons between groups. For example, measuring children before and after the study captures both the growth that took place because of the program and the growth that would have occurred anyway.

In the case of the Head Start Impact Study, the researchers were attempting to measure key differences between children who attended Head Start and those who did not. By comparing the two groups, they could isolate and measure the program’s effects.

It is also important to know whether the study examines a point in time or progress over the course of time. Such characteristics help paint the picture that studies are designed to reveal and often suggest how the data are applied to policy-making.

**What Does it Measure?**

Lawrence Schweinhart, president of the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation, is the leader of one of the longest-running studies of the effects of early education, the Perry Preschool Study (See Recommended Reading). A member of NIEER’s Scientific Advisory Board, he says the primary focus with any study should be achieving clean comparisons between groups. For example, measuring children before and after the study captures both the growth that took place because of the program and the growth that would have occurred anyway.

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**Recommended Reading: Lifetime Effects: The High/Scope Perry Preschool Study Through Age 40**

By Lawrence J. Schweinhart, Jeanne Montie, Zongping Xiang, W. Steven Barnett, Clive R. Belfield and Milagros Nores

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One need not be a researcher to gather valuable insights from the latest monograph from the long-term study documenting the effects the Perry preschool program has had on the lives of disadvantaged children by the time they reached age 40. This installment from the High/Scope Educational Research Foundation returns us to the lives of the children from poor families who attended the highly regarded Perry program and were last featured in a monograph when they were 27.

Those familiar with the age 27 work will find in the age 40 data important confirmation of trends that, though promising, needed more time. This report delivers it, and much more. Perry attendees far out-paced non-attendees in being employed at 40, earned about 25 percent more money and were more likely to own their own homes and have savings accounts. On the social side of the spectrum, Perry attendees had considerably fewer arrests across the board.

It is big-ticket items like these that account for a significant share of the substantial return the report attributes to a societal investment in high-quality preschool. But many other aspects are explored as well, offering fascinating glimpses into the lives of the Perry Preschoolers. Do they raise children who are more likely to succeed? Are they healthier? Are they more civic-minded? The Age 40 monograph sheds important light on these and other questions. More definitive answers are sure to come in future installments of this important and rigorous research. Also in the monograph is a commentary from Nobel laureate James J. Heckman whose perspective on the research is illuminating. For more information, visit the High/Scope web site at: [http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm](http://www.highscope.org/Research/PerryProject/perrymain.htm). Used with permission.
Who Sponsored the Research?
Researchers sometimes say numbers will confess to anything if you torture them enough. Data is subject to interpretation, and study design can be manipulated to achieve a specific outcome. An organization with a vested interest in a topic can conduct research that tells their story, which may or may not be the actual truth.

Even federally funded research, typically considered scientifically rigorous, can be questioned. A recent *Washington Post* article reported that a survey of federally funded researchers found more than 5 percent of scientists admitted tossing out data that contradicted their previous research or circumventing some human research protections. More than 15 percent admitted changing a study’s design or results to satisfy a sponsor, or ignoring observations because they had a “gut feeling” they were inaccurate.

Research sponsored by major foundations is generally considered high-quality, as are federally funded studies. In cases where a study is not federally funded or conducted in the academic world, third-party endorsement by authoritative entities like Harvard, Rand Corporation and others can serve as a seal of approval for research results.

How Were the Results Made Public?
Scrutinizing a study’s design and funding is critically important, but so is the way the data become public. Peer review, conducted by colleagues or anonymously, helps affirm the study’s rigor. Anonymous review is typically done when an article is submitted for journal publication. One drawback to journal publishing: between revisions requested by editors and a lengthy peer review process, it can take a year or longer for a study to appear in print.

Will it Apply to My Situation?
Randomized studies can tell if something works in the aggregate. But it cannot tell how it works or account for the variations in student populations, types of preschools and teaching philosophies that inevitably occur in a particular setting, says Joseph Maxwell, professor of education at George Mason University and author of several books on research methodologies.

Putting research into practice can be challenging. Results from large studies don’t always translate to results in the classroom because research cannot take into consideration the specific characteristics of each setting. That is where qualitative data come into play. It can answer questions that get directly to implementation: What is the process by which it works? In what situations is it likely to work? Maxwell says there is a movement afoot to have teachers conduct this type of small-scale, qualitative research, which can add context to quantitative studies.

The science of early education research is relatively young, but as education practitioners and policymakers rely more often on science-based decision-making, demand is likely to grow. Separating fact from fiction doesn’t take a Ph.D. in statistical analysis—just the tenacity to wade through research terminology and a willingness to ask questions.