

BY ROCHELLE STANFIELD Kiara Griffen was a shy and lonely little girl before she entered the Child-Parent Center, a comprehensive preschool program for low-income children in Chicago. “She just kept to herself,” her grandmother, Lou Doris Johnson, recalls. Kiara, 5, has blossomed since she’s been in the school. “You should see little Kiara now,” Johnson says. “She’s very lively. She no longer has this shyness. She’s learning real good and she loves to go to school.”

Johnson has been an ardent fan of the Child-Parent Centers (CPCs) for more than two decades. Kiara is the second generation of the Johnson family to participate in the 34-year-old program. All but one of Johnson’s 14 children attended the Dewey CPC on Chicago’s South Side—one of 24 centers in inner-city Chicago neighborhoods—and Johnson credits the center with providing a foundation that has helped them turn out well. Three of her children are in college; most of the others have good jobs. “It’s an outstanding program,” she says.

facts to the policy debate that has engulfed the federal Head Start program for more than 30 years. CPC is like Head Start in many—but not all—respects. Thus, the success of the CPC program to some degree validates Head Start.

Kiara Griffen, 5, has blossomed since entering the Dewey Child-Parent Center in Chicago, overcoming her shyness to enjoy and excel in her classes.

Head Start has never been the subject of a long-term, scientifically rigorous evaluation. When supporters argue that Head Start helps its participants over the long haul, they usually cite statistics from studies of small model programs conducted in the 1960s and ’70s that provided more intensive services than Head Start and didn’t operate in large inner cities. Detractors maintain that Head Start is not equivalent to those more elite programs. They also contend that most improvements achieved by children while participating in Head Start dissipate by the time the kids reach third grade.

CHICAGO’S CHILD-PARENT CENTERS

PROVING THE VALUE OF EARLY CHILDHOOD EDUCATION IN THE REAL WORLD

A large-scale, long-term scientific evaluation of the CPC program confirms Johnson’s assessment. Arthur J. Reynolds, a University of Wisconsin researcher, has been tracking 1,500 disadvantaged minority kids in Chicago for the past 16 years. About two-thirds of the youngsters attended CPCs. They were much more likely to finish high school and less likely to be held back a grade, drop out, or get arrested than the one-third of youngsters who participated in alternative programs, he and three coauthors reported in the May 2001 issue of the *Journal of the American Medical Association*.

These findings not only document the enduring value of the CPC program, but they also contribute important

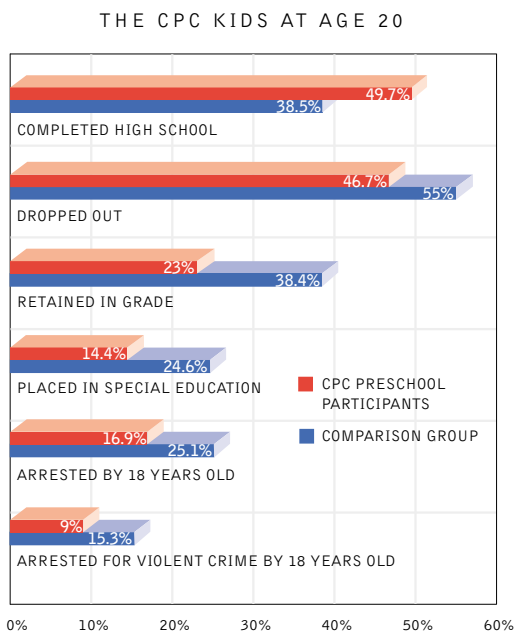
The CPC study has provided Head Start advocates with new ammunition about the lasting effects of early childhood education. It shows that an established government-funded and -administered program that serves thousands of inner-city children and spends about the same amount of money per child as Head Start can generate powerful benefits that stay with the kids until they are 20 years old.

But the differences between CPC and Head Start also confirm some concerns voiced by Head Start critics. Most children spend only one year in Head Start while many Chicago youngsters participate in CPC for up to six years. CPC teachers are more experienced and more highly



FOR YEARS, HEAD START ADVOCATES HAVE BEEN SPOUTING STATISTICS FROM SMALL EXPERIMENTAL PROGRAMS CONDUCTED IN THE 1960s AND '70s. THESE PILOT PROGRAMS PRODUCED ENDURING BENEFITS FOR CHILDREN AND LONG-TERM SAVINGS FOR TAXPAYERS, BUT THEY LEFT OPEN A LARGER QUESTION: CAN EARLY CHILDHOOD PROGRAMS PRODUCE SIMILAR GAINS WHEN OPERATED BY PUBLIC AGENCIES SERVING VAST NUMBERS OF CHILDREN—OR DO THEY THRIVE ONLY IN THE RARIFIED AIR OF A RESEARCH LABORATORY? EVIDENCE TO ANSWER THAT CONTROVERSIAL QUESTION IS NOW IN.

Figure 1



Source: *Journal of the American Medical Association*, May 9, 2001, p. 2344.

The CPC study shows that a government-run program serving thousands of inner-city children and spending about the same amount per child as Head Start can generate powerful benefits that stay with the kids until they are 20 years old.

trained, on average, than Head Start teachers. And, perhaps most important, CPC is much more focused than Head Start on getting children ready to learn to read.

“At Child-Parent Centers, there’s a much higher focus on literacy,” Reynolds says. “It’s what Head Start needs to do more of. People have known that for a long time.” Indeed, Head Start advocates insist that’s the direction in which the federal preschool program has

been heading. President Bush is determined to make pre-literacy a central focus of Head Start. (See box on p. 26 for current policy debate.)

THE CPC SUCCESS STORY

The Child-Parent Centers show dramatic results with low-income youngsters, according to the Chicago Longitudinal Study that Reynolds directs. At age 20, in 2000, nearly half the CPC participants in the study—all from the city’s most impoverished neighborhoods—had completed high school. While disappointing in absolute terms, that’s about average for Chicago as a whole and almost 30 percent better than a comparison group of equally disadvantaged children who did not take part in CPC. The comparison group didn’t just stay home and watch TV, either: About one-quarter of the comparison group attended Head Start, and all went to full-day kindergarten.

“The kids in the study are the poorest kids in the entire city,” Reynolds says. “So the fact that half of them complete high school by age 20 is pretty good relative to the context they grew up in.” And the older they get, he explains, the more schooling they receive. By March 2001, when they were 21 years old, 61 percent of the CPC group had completed high school, according to updated findings published by Reynolds in February 2002.

Meanwhile, 40 percent fewer CPC participants than members of the comparison group were held back in school or placed in special education. The difference in crime rates is similarly impressive. CPC participants had one-third fewer juvenile arrests overall and 41 percent fewer arrests for violent crime. (See Figure 1 for the numbers.)

“Looked at another way, leaving kids out of the program increased by 70 percent the risk that kids would be arrested for violent crime in their teens,” comments Sanford Newman, president of Fight Crime, Invest in Kids, a Washington-based organization of criminal justice professionals and others. “Those are pretty striking findings.”

Reynolds calculates that for every dollar invested in the preschool component of the program, \$7.14 was returned to society in increased earnings for participants

The differences between CPC and Head Start also confirm concerns voiced by Head Start critics. Most children spend only one year in Head Start, while CPC serves Chicago youngsters for up to six years. CPC teachers are more experienced and better trained, on average, than Head Start teachers. And CPC is much more focused than Head Start on getting children ready to learn to read.

and reduced costs to society for remedial education and crime. (For more on CPC’s return on investment, see box on p. 27.)

HOW IT WORKS

Each year, about 2,500 children take part in the CPC program. Because the program is operated by the Chicago Public School system, all CPC teachers must have a bachelor’s degree and an early childhood certificate. Each center has a parent resource room staffed by a full-time teacher, and all parents must sign an agreement to participate the equivalent of half a day a week.

Enter any CPC and “what you see is a lot of adult-pupil interaction in a print-rich environment. You see a lot of colorful materials,” explains Pamela Stevens, the CPC Program Manager in the school system’s central office. “You see a lot of play that’s laced with literacy materials.” Children learn to identify colors and the letters in their names. In the parent room, activities are tailored to the needs of the adults in attendance, and might include discussions on nutrition, health, safety, or how to read to a child. Parent participation has declined since the enactment of welfare reform in 1996, however, as more parents have entered the workforce.

Bridgette Wallace Faust is the mother of five current and former participants at Dewey. When her older children were in the program, she regularly joined in the parent activities. Last March, she went back to work. “Now, I can’t actively participate by being there,” she says. Instead, the center permits working parents to find alternative ways of taking part in the program.

“There’s a problem because many parents are going back to school and many are employed,” says Bernadine DeMichele, a Dewey CPC teacher. “So, we have to brainstorm and find ways of getting these parents involved. They must work and that’s wonderful, but they can still find a way of working with their child.”

Whether they work or not, all parents are encouraged to read to their children. DeMichele says that every Monday she sends a book home with every child and

CHILD-PARENT CENTERS VS. HEAD START: A COMPARISON

	CHILD-PARENT CENTERS	HEAD START
PARTICIPANTS	Preschool-age children in all sites, elementary school children in some sites	Preschool-age children only
PROGRAM DURATION	1–2 years in preschool-only sites, up to six years in sites with elementary school component	One year of preschool (typically)
CURRICULUM	Strong emphasis on pre-literacy skills development	Limited emphasis on pre-literacy
HEALTH/SOCIAL SERVICES	Health, nutrition, other social services provided	Strong emphasis on health, nutrition, social services
PARENT PARTICIPATION	All sites have parent resource room with full-time teacher; parents required to participate in program one-half day per week	Parent participation encouraged
TEACHER TRAINING	All teachers must have bachelor’s degree and early childhood education certificates	No requirement for bachelor’s degree or early childhood certificate; 30 percent of teachers have bachelor’s degree



CPC PARTICIPANTS WERE ALMOST 30 PERCENT MORE LIKELY TO COMPLETE HIGH SCHOOL THAN A COMPARISON GROUP OF EQUALLY DISADVANTAGED CHILDREN. FORTY PERCENT FEWER CPC PARTICIPANTS WERE HELD BACK IN SCHOOL OR PLACED IN SPECIAL EDUCATION, AND CPC PARTICIPANTS HAD 41 PERCENT FEWER ARRESTS FOR VIOLENT CRIME.

expects the book back, read, on Friday. Faust recalls how her son Wallace would “come home with the book and then he’d be saying, ‘Read the book! Read the book!’” As a result, Faust says her children “were taught from the womb to love reading.”

The preschool element for 3- and 4-year-olds and Kindergarten students is a crucial part of the CPC

program. “The most significant outcomes like high school completion and delinquency reduction are being driven mostly by preschool,” Reynolds says.

But CPC doesn’t stop there for many kids. CPC sites also offer an in-school component that reduces class size and provides one-on-one tutoring and a staffed parent room for children in grades 1–3. Originally an

Bernadine DeMichele, a Child-Parent Center teacher, uses storytelling to help kindergartners begin learning how to read. integral part of the CPC program, this elementary school component has been cut back for budgetary reasons and now operates in only about half the CPC schools. That's unfortunate, Reynolds says, because the in-school program "clearly does have a long-term payoff. If you look at the kids with the best outcomes ... [those] are kids who have 5 or 6 years of the program."

LIKE HEAD START, ONLY MORE SO

The Child-Parent Centers achieve these positive results with an annual investment of \$3,000 for each school-age child and \$6,700 for each preschooler, about \$1,000 more per child than the typical Head Start program. This compares to a cost of roughly \$15,000 in today's dollars for the two exemplary projects usually cited in debates about Head Start—Perry Preschool in Michigan in the 1960s, and North Carolina's Abecedarian from 1972–85.

In Chicago, Head Start was launched in 1965, CPC two years later. Both were designed to get disadvantaged children ready to learn in elementary school. In fact, in addition to operating the CPC program the Chicago Public School system also runs a number of Head Start centers, where it employs a reading-focused curriculum and requires similar qualifications for teachers. "All of our early childhood programs, whether CPC or Head Start ... stress pre-literacy and focus on professional development for our teachers and assistants around a pre-literacy package," says Armando Almendares, the Chicago Public Schools' Chief Officer for Language, Cultural, and Early Childhood Education, who administers the CPC and Head Start programs.

Most local Head Starts, however, both in Chicago and nationwide, are run by social service agencies rather than school systems. Prior to 1995, there were few national requirements for teacher training. A 1997 survey commissioned by Head Start showed that less than 30 percent of Head Start teachers had at least a bachelor's degree. A 1999 paper, based on that survey, the Family and Child Experiences Survey, concluded: "A probable reason why Head Start children are not learning early reading skills like letter recognition and

print awareness is that many Head Start teachers are not teaching them. Interviews with lead teachers revealed that most do not give children's acquisition of these skills a particularly high priority in their curricular goals or daily activity plans."

A NEW DIRECTION FOR PUBLIC PRESCHOOL?

Nationwide, Head Start is changing—at least, it is supposed to be changing—to become more like CPC. Over the last decade, Congress has ordered a variety of improvements in Head Start operations, teacher qualifications, and children's outcomes. But no one knows for sure what difference the changes make—or what difference Head Start makes, for that matter—because there's never been a scientific evaluation of Head Start's long-term impact.

In 1997, the General Accounting Office criticized the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services for its failure to conduct such a study. Does Head Start work? How important is the pre-literacy component? The

"A probable reason why Head Start children are not learning early reading skills like letter recognition and print awareness is that many Head Start teachers are not teaching them. ... Most do not give children's acquisition of these skills a particularly high priority in their curricular goals or daily activity plans."

—Nicholas Zill, Gary Resnick, and Ruth Hubbell McKey in a 1999 paper for the Advisory Committee on Head Start Research and Evaluation, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services

health and nutrition components? "The answer is: We don't know," says Janet Currie, an economics professor at the University of California (Los Angeles) who has studied Head Start. "There's a lot of resistance to having these things evaluated, and there's never been an evaluation."

While opponents argue that a classic sociological study, a random evaluation, would be unethical because it would deny services to the control group, Reynolds's long-term investigation of CPC demonstrates that it is possible to create a study design "so you don't deny services to anybody," Currie says.

In the absence of solid evaluation research into Head Start, Reynolds believes that "literacy and early learning philosophy is where Head Start is and needs to go," he says. "We could learn a lot from the CPC model."

Rochelle Stanfield, formerly a staff correspondent for National Journal, now works as a freelance journalist in the Washington, D.C. area.

THE HEAD START DEBATE CONTINUES

Most politicians love Head Start. Presidents and members of Congress, Republicans and Democrats alike, have praised the preschool program for disadvantaged children since its inception in 1965. Almost no one threatens to do away with Head Start.

But popularity hasn't shielded Head Start from continuing debate over its 37 years. As the argument usually shapes up, one side says the program needs to be beefed up with better qualified teachers and a curriculum more focused on literacy. The other side insists the program already works and should be expanded to serve all eligible children.

Since 1990, Congress three times has required higher standards, more rigorous evaluations, and increased training for Head Start teachers. Now President Bush has called for reforming Head Start. His Reading First Agenda proposes, among other things, to make pre-reading and numeracy "Head Start's top priority." First

childhood learning in July 2001, and a high-level federal task force was formed to integrate research results on early childhood learning into practice in federal programs such as Head Start.

The other side of the debate insists the most urgent need is to expand Head Start to serve more children. Currently about 900,000 children are served by the program—about three out of five low-income children nationwide, according to the Children's Defense Fund. That's the tack taken by the National Head Start Association (NHSA), a nonprofit organization of Head Start teachers, staff, and parents. Criticisms of Head Start "are unfounded, inappropriate, outdated, and politically motivated," the NHSA declares on its website. Stressing literacy over health, nutrition, and social services would be a mistake. "It is abundantly clear in developmental literature that the basic needs of children must be met before any attempt to deal with higher order cognitive skills can succeed," NHSA continues. "Merely

providing hungry children with books is meaningless."

The teachers unions straddle the middle. They want it all: expand Head Start, keep its comprehensive focus, and upgrade its educational component. In a July 25, 2001, news release, National Education Association President Bob Chase "praised President Bush's focus on literacy, but warned that his plan will be built on quicksand if it does not adequately address the health, nutrition, brain and social development needs of infants and toddlers."

That echoed the sentiments of American Federation of Teachers President Sandra Feldman in a speech two weeks earlier. Feldman proposed a universal early childhood education system based on Head Start. She also stressed the need for maintaining a comprehensive package of services. "The evaluations tell us that these components are as important to our children's success as getting them academically ready, which, as many Head Start officials are the first to admit, still needs beefing up in many Head Start programs."

A BIG BANG

FOR THE CPC BUCK

Chicago's Child-Parent Centers not only help participating children and their families, but they also give society at large a generous return on taxpayers' investment, according to a cost-benefit analysis conducted by University of Wisconsin researcher Arthur J. Reynolds and colleagues.

Benefits of the CPC program exceeded its costs whichever slice of the program was analyzed. But the component that delivered the biggest overall bang for the buck—\$7.14 for every \$1 spent—was the preschool program. That finding should please supporters of the federal Head Start program, because CPC preschool resembles Head Start in many ways. The extra expense of extending the CPC program into elementary school garnered a slightly smaller payback, although it too was well worth the cost—returning \$6.11 for every \$1 invested in children who stayed with the program for 4 to 6 years.

The researchers calculated the costs and benefits in 1998 dollars. The average participant spent 1.5 years in the CPC preschool program at a cost of \$6,692. The researchers figured the total benefit from CPC amounted to nearly \$48,000 per participant. Of that amount, the participants themselves gained over \$20,000 from increased earnings due to better jobs resulting from their higher educational attainment, and almost \$1,700 in reduced child care costs. The public at large gained even more, about \$25,800. According to the researchers' estimates, participants paid an

additional \$7,200 in taxes because of their higher earnings, and they saved society \$7,100 in criminal justice costs due to lower arrest rates. In addition, the crimes not committed by CPC participants saved potential crime victims nearly \$6,100. Finally, the school system—and thus taxpayers—saved a further \$4,900 because fewer of the participants were left back or placed in special education. As the economists view it, CPC offers a win-win-win proposition.

SOURCE: Reynolds, Arthur J., Temple, Judy A., Robertson, Dylan L., and Mann, Emily A., *Age 21 Cost-Benefit Analysis of the Title I Chicago Child-Parent Centers* (Madison, WI: Institute for Research on Poverty, February 2002).

EVERY DOLLAR SPENT ON CHILDREN IN CPC LEADS TO...

