



Head Start Program Variation

Variation in Child Experiences and Dosage to Head Start

Overview

Head Start is a federal program that reaches children in all corners of the country, yet participants have diverse experiences and are exposed to different dosages of the program. Dosage refers to the amount of time children participate in Head Start during a program year (i.e. full day vs. part day, number of weeks, etc.). Although there are guidelines and regulations that dictate the services children receive and certain aspects of how they receive them, there is still substantial variation between local programs. Additionally, the establishment of school readiness as a major goal of Head Start in 1998 has led to changes in the program across the last decade. The variation and changes in the program may result in differences in the program quality and intensity experienced by children, which may complicate Head Start's ability to improve school readiness and reduce disparities between program participants and their higher income preschool aged peers.

Different Educational Experiences

Head Start classrooms differ in the types of educational activities offered, both within a given year and across time. For example, [Head Start educational guidelines](#) require the use of a written, research-based curriculum, but do not recommend or require any particular curriculum. The guidelines do detail some specifications around what constitutes an acceptable curriculum, but ultimately leave curriculum choice and cost to each local program. Below, Table 1 reports the breakdown of primary curricula used by Head Start programs from 2000 to 2009. There is some consistency across programs: Creative Curriculum or High Scope is used by over half of programs. However, a significant portion of grantees have chosen other curricula, introducing a good deal of curriculum variability across local programs. While High Scope's effectiveness has been demonstrated through the Perry Preschool experiment,¹ other curricula used have not established effectiveness. A recent review of 14 studies of Creative Curriculum, the most widely used curriculum in Head Start, did not find any discernable effects on language or math scores.²

This variation in curricula can translate into potential equity issues within the program, both overall and for subgroups. The fact that, as of 2009, the majority of all Head Start children were exposed to curricula without proven effectiveness could signal that Head Start curriculum choices may need to be modified for everyone so as to ensure substantial school readiness gains. In addition, past evidence that classrooms using some other curriculum besides either Creative Curriculum or High Scope tended to be of poorer quality and serve more very poor and minority children suggests that certain groups of Head Start participants may have systematically different or unequal experiences in the program.³ Therefore, to advance more equitable opportunities and outcomes for Head Start children, it is important to be aware of overall trends in Head Start service implementation, as well as variation within the program.



Table 1. Curricula Used in Head Start Classrooms: Fall 2000 – 2009⁴

Curricula ^a	Percent of Classrooms			
	Fall 2000	Fall 2003	Fall 2006	Fall 2009
Creative Curriculum	38.5	51.7	54.9	49.4
High/Scope Curriculum	20.0	17.7	16.4	16.6
Locally Designed Curriculum	NA	NA	5.1	3.5
Widely Available Curriculum ⁵	9.6	8.1	6.0	11.6
Other	31.9	22.5	17.6	18.9

^a Percentages represent the primary curriculum used by teachers in the classroom, regardless of whether the teacher uses only one curriculum or if s/he uses a combination of curricula.

In addition to variation across classrooms in a given year, there is also historical variation in Head Start children's experiences. For example, Table 2 shows that from 2000 to 2009, the proportion of classrooms engaging in many different academic activities increased notably, although there were some activities that experienced a decline. Activities surrounding letter recognition and writing especially increased in prominence: 85% of classrooms engaged in letter naming activities in 2009, compared to 68% in 2000. Likewise, 69% of classrooms practiced writing letters in 2009, up from just 35% in 2000. On the other hand, learning about common prepositions decreased by more than 10 percentage points over the same time period. This variation in activities over time highlights the fact that Head Start is still evolving: the program that children experienced in 2000 was not the same as the program that children experienced in 2009. The variation in program services over time and across programs highlight the multifaceted nature of Head Start that can make it difficult to nail down a 'typical' Head Start experience. In particular, the changes in program activities over the last decade have implications for the timing of effectiveness evaluations and the interpretation of results. For more information on assessing Head Start effectiveness within the context of program change over time, see the diversitydatakids.org Research Evidence section.

Table 2. Frequencies of Reading and Language Activities that Occur Daily or Almost Daily, as Reported by Classroom Teachers: Fall 2000 – 2009⁶

Reading and Language Activity	Percent of Classrooms			
	Fall 2000	Fall 2003	Fall 2006	Fall 2009
Work on letter naming	68.1	83.4	88.1	84.9
Practice writing letters	34.6	65.1	64.6	69.0
Discuss new words	77.5	80.6	78.6	81.4
Dictate stories to an adult	53.2	45.6	54.2	58.9
Work on phonics	50.8	63.5	68.0	70.5
Listen to teacher read stories where they see the print	91.1	89.2	93.1	91.2
Listen to teacher read stories where they don't see the print	26.8	17.4	26.3	24.6
Retell stories	60.1	64.3	58.5	56.7
Learn about conventions of print	71.3	78.9	77.1	76.4
Write own name	46.7	68.3	75.1	71.5
Learn about rhyming words and word families	42.9	46.4	51.0	47.6
Learn about common prepositions	74.7	70.8	67.7	63.7



Different Dosage to Head Start

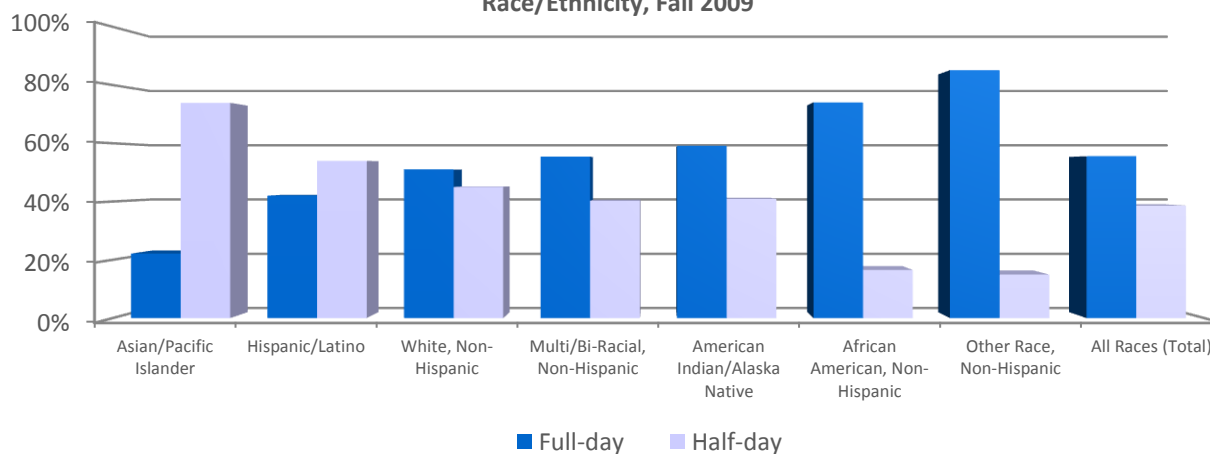
Children also experience different dosages of Head Start, depending on what center they attend, or even the state where they live. For example, not all local center-based programs have the same operating schedule. Programs can choose to operate full-day or part-day, as well as full-week or part-week. Table 3 below displays a national breakdown of program operating schedules.

Table 3. Operating Schedules of Head Start Center-Based Programs Nationwide, 2010-2011⁷

	5 days	4 days	Total
6 or more hours per day	52%	4%	56%
Less than 6 hours per day	19%	25%	44%
Total	71%	29%	100%

The degree of variation in operating schedules means that some children receive a greater dosage of Head Start services per week than others. In 2011, 52% of center-based programs offered full-day, full-week services, while 25% offered part-week, part-day services. Interestingly, operating schedules fluctuate greatly between states. As shown in Table 4, the vast majority of center-based programs in Alaska offer part-day, part-week schedules. However, programs in states like Arkansas and Alabama are almost exclusively full-day, full-week programs. Head Start dosage also varies considerably by child race/ethnicity. As shown by the chart below, among children participating in Head Start center-based programs, the majority of Asians/Pacific Islanders and Latinos participate in half-day classrooms, while the majority of whites and blacks participate in full-day classrooms.⁸

Chart 1. Child Participation in Full-day or Part-day Head Start Center-based Classrooms, by Race/Ethnicity, Fall 2009



Different levels of dosage for certain types of children may constitute an equity issue if they lead to different degrees of exposure to critical developmental services that can enhance school readiness. Moreover, the variation in Head Start dosage that different children receive across geographic areas and racial/ethnic groups demonstrates that Head Start is clearly not a standardized intervention, which has ramifications for evaluating an 'average' Head Start experience. For more information on assessing Head Start effectiveness within the context of program variation, see the diversitydatakids.org Research Evidence section.

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Table 4. Operating Schedules of Head Start Center-Based Programs, by State, 2010-2011⁹

	Type of Operating Schedule			
	5 Days Per Week, 6 or More Hours Per Day	5 Days Per Week, Less Than 6 Hours Per Day	4 Days Per Week, 6 or More Hours Per Day	4 Days Per Week, Less Than 6 Hours Per Day
	Alabama	92%	8%	0%
Alaska	4%	11%	9%	76%
Arizona	11%	20%	26%	43%
Arkansas	94%	6%	0%	0%
California	32%	38%	0%	29%
Colorado	22%	3%	12%	63%
Connecticut	60%	37%	0%	3%
Delaware	18%	82%	0%	0%
District of Columbia	99%	1%	0%	0%
Florida	91%	9%	0%	0%
Georgia	94%	6%	0%	0%
Hawaii	36%	58%	0%	6%
Idaho	26%	9%	8%	57%
Illinois	36%	27%	1%	35%
Indiana	23%	10%	2%	65%
Iowa	37%	15%	4%	44%
Kansas	30%	17%	2%	52%
Kentucky	31%	9%	27%	32%
Louisiana	79%	20%	1%	0%
Maine	21%	12%	4%	63%
Maryland	49%	29%	1%	21%
Massachusetts	34%	60%	0%	5%
Michigan	10%	1%	14%	75%
Minnesota	21%	4%	11%	64%
Mississippi	82%	18%	0%	0%
Missouri	40%	5%	9%	46%
Montana	26%	16%	10%	48%
Nebraska	28%	17%	9%	46%
Nevada	24%	1%	3%	72%
New Hampshire	13%	69%	0%	18%
New Jersey	86%	8%	0%	5%
New Mexico	41%	21%	1%	37%
New York	60%	23%	3%	14%
North Carolina	78%	18%	1%	4%
North Dakota	19%	3%	18%	60%
Ohio	21%	4%	3%	72%
Oklahoma	64%	35%	0%	1%
Oregon	36%	5%	2%	57%
Pennsylvania	41%	31%	3%	25%

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Rhode Island	18%	82%	0%	0%
South Carolina	81%	19%	0%	0%
South Dakota	27%	8%	8%	57%
Tennessee	71%	18%	4%	8%
Texas	79%	20%	0%	0%
Utah	12%	3%	2%	82%
Vermont	43%	7%	0%	50%
Virginia	71%	19%	4%	6%
Washington	34%	6%	2%	58%
West Virginia	19%	3%	51%	28%
Wisconsin	16%	15%	4%	66%
Wyoming	5%	3%	47%	46%
United States	52%	19%	4%	25%

Sources & notes:

- ¹ The HighScope/Perry Preschool program was a single-site intensive early childhood education intervention in the early 1960s that used the HighScope participatory learning approach. Evaluations of the experiment found significant short- and long-term cognitive benefits as well as long term social benefits such as reduced crime and increased homeownership. The intervention did not include any Head Start centers. *Source:* Promising Practices Network. *HighScope Perry Preschool program*. Programs that work. Retrieved from <http://www.promisingpractices.net/program.asp?programid=128>.
- ² What Works Clearinghouse. (2013). *The Creative Curriculum for preschool, fourth edition*. Institute of Education Sciences, U.S. Department of Education. Retrieved from <http://ies.ed.gov/ncee/wwc/interventionreport.aspx?sid=512>.
- ³ Zill, N., Resnick, G., Kim, K., O'Donnel, K., Sorongon, A., Hubbell, R....D'Elio, M.A. (2003). *Head Start FACES 2000: A whole child perspective on program performance*. Washington, D.C.: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Retrieved from <http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/resource/head-start-faces-2000-a-whole-child-perspective-on-program-performance>; McKey, R.H., Pai-Samant, S. & Sorongon, A. (2002, June). *Curricula being used in Head Start programs: Who gets what?* Presentation at the Sixth National Head Start Research Conference, Washington, D.C. Retrieved from http://www.acf.hhs.gov/sites/default/files/opre/curriculum_being.pdf.
- ⁴ Aikens, N., Hulsey, L. K., Moiduddin, E., Kopack, A., Takyi-Laryea, A., Tarullo, L., and West, J. (2011). *Data Tables for FACES 2009 Head Start Children, Families, and Programs: Present and Past Data from FACES Report (OPRE Report 2011-33b)*. Washington, DC: Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, Administration for Children and Families, U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Note: Statistics are weighted to represent all classrooms serving children entering Head Start for the first time in the cohort year.
- ⁵ In 2003, 2006, and 2009 the "Widely Available Curriculum" category includes High Reach, Let's Begin with the Letter People, Montessori, Bank Street, Creating Child Centered Classrooms – Step by Step, Scholastic Curriculum, and Curiosity Corner – Johns Hopkins. In the 2000 data, Let's Begin with the Letter People was not directly identified and, thus, could not be folded into the "Widely Available Curriculum" category.
- ⁶ Aikens et al. (2011), op.cit.
- ⁷ CLASP DataFinder, program year 2010-2011. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/data>.
- ⁸ Diversitydatakids.org calculations of Head Start Family and Child Experiences Survey (FACES) 2009 data.
- ⁹ CLASP DataFinder, program year 2010-2011. Retrieved from <http://www.clasp.org/data>. U.S. totals include territories.