

COMMENTARY

GUEST COMMENTARY

Despite scrutiny, Head Start is a wise investment

By CAMERON MOORE

It is difficult to argue that regular evaluations of taxpayer-funded programs aren't in the best interest of the public. Indeed this is a common mantra of the media, including The News-Gazette. Few, if any, publicly funded programs have had more scrutiny during the past several decades than Head Start.

We were disappointed that The News Gazette has referred to Head Start as a "fraud" twice in the past 14 months. This conclusion appears to be based on a single finding in the 2010 Head Start Impact Study (HSIS), but ignores other conclusions in this and numerous other evaluations.

Many questions have been raised about the validity of the Head Start Impact Study. For example, Georgetown University faculty characterized it as "poor scholarship and reporting of data." Due to the many questions raised about the validity of this study, further evaluation of it is

planned for later this year.

Head Start is fulfilling its 1998 Congressional mandate to promote children's school readiness by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children through the provision of educational, health, nutritional, social and other services. Even the HSIS that was relied on by The News-Gazette acknowledges this stating, "Providing access to Head Start has a positive impact on children's preschool experiences. There are statistically significant differences between the Head Start group and the control group on every measure of Children's preschool experiences measured in this study."

The truth about Head Start is that in addition to meeting the Congressionally mandated goal it also provides many additional long-term benefits for participating children and families as well as our society as whole.

Studies (Barnett, 2002; Ludwig and Miller, 2007) have found Head

Start children experience much better health, higher achievement-test scores, better academic progress and higher high school graduation rates.

Ludwig and Miller also reported reduced mortality rates for 5- to 9-year-olds that are 33 percent to 50 percent lower than comparable children not in Head Start.

Other studies found Head Start children were 12 percent less likely to be involved in criminal activity later in life, had higher average earnings as young adults (Garces, Thomas and Currie, 2002), and were at least 19 percent less likely to smoke (Frisvold, 2009).

Frisvold previously reported in 2006 that participation in full-day Head Start programming had a strong correlation to reducing obesity rates in Michigan children by 17.6 percent. In a recent Brookings Institution report (Hammond and Levine, 2010), the total cost of obesity in the U.S. alone may exceed \$215,

billion annually. Studies in 2004 and 2005 ranked obesity among adults as the second-highest cause of premature death in the United States (Mokdad et al., 2004; Flegal et al., 2005). Investing in early childhood education for disadvantaged children reduces the achievement gap and the need for special education, results in healthier lifestyles and lower crime rates saving taxpayers a bundle in the long term. Spending on early childhood education enables us to shape the future; failing to do so locks us into fixing problems — at a much higher cost.

James J. Heckman, Ph.D., is a Nobel laureate in Economics and Henry Shultz Distinguished Service Professor of Economics at the University of Chicago. Dr. Heckman advised the National Commission on Fiscal Responsibility and Budget Reform that, "The fiscally responsible thing to do is to invest more resources in early childhood education. It is something for which

we must find the dollars because it saves money as early as kindergarten and builds equity throughout the life of the child. Early childhood education creates a taxpayer who reduces his or her own tax burden through greater productivity, healthier living and stronger contributions to society."

Rather than being a fraud it turns out that numerous evaluations confirm that Head Start is a wise investment. We invite The News-Gazette, interested citizens and elected officials to contact me or Head Start Director Kathleen Liffick for a visit to Champaign County Head Start and see firsthand the quality programming that supports children, their families and our community. Head Start works; come see for yourself!

Cameron Moore is chief executive officer of the Champaign County Regional Planning Commission. Champaign County Head Start is a program of the Regional Planning Commission.