

and one of the founders of the Head Start program, says that the confusion over what Head Start is supposed to accomplish makes it easy to misinterpret the results of the Impacts study.

“Over the years, scientists, policymakers, and the public have developed unreasonable expectations that Head Start should raise IQ scores, lift children and families out of poverty, and close the achievement gap between poor and more affluent children,” he wrote in a briefing paper for the National Head Start Association a few months after the study was released. But Zigler and others believe that Head Start does measure up if one applies the more modest yardstick of improved school readiness, which combines health, social, and emotional factors as well as early learning skills. “Although the initial findings were not as robust as hoped,” he wrote, “they clearly indicated that, by the end of the Head Start experience, children were more ready for school entry than those in the control group.”

Recent changes to Head Start, some already on the books and others in the works, are moving the program in the right direction, according to many experts. A 2007 law, for example, requires by 2013 that half of Head Start teachers hold bachelor’s degrees, and last year the Obama Administration proposed new rules to increase accountability, including forcing low-performing programs to re compete for funds and grading teachers on their interactions with students. “Head Start has never been subjected to the kind of scrutiny that the Obama evaluation promises,” early childhood advocates W. Steven Barnett of Rutgers University in New Brunswick, New Jersey, and Ron Haskins of the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., declared in an op-ed last year in *The Washington Post*. “Now it seems likely that, within a few years, the worst Head Start programs will be shut down.”

However, others insist that Head Start will never attain the level of quality instruction and care provided children in the Perry, Abecedarian, and Chicago studies. One prominent critic, Douglas Besharov, a public-policy expert at the University of Maryland, College Park, wants the government to declare that Head Start is broken and then experiment with alternative approaches. His choices would be to focus on the neediest children and families—“teen mothers, largely African-American, who have been held back by years of exploitation and discrimination”—and to give parents a bigger role in both policy and

management decisions.

But Besharov, who regards the Perry and Abecedarian studies as outliers rather than evidence of what high-quality early intervention can achieve, says he understands why supporters are reluctant to take such a drastic step with a program that serves an important government function. “If the president were to stand up and say, ‘Hey, I’ve read Besharov’s stuff and now I realize that Head Start doesn’t work,’ the long knives would come out and Congress would try to defund it.”

Head Start can’t be fixed without looking at the larger question of what services these children need from birth through age 8, says J. Lawrence Aber, a professor of psychology and public policy at New York University and a member of an expert panel advising the Department of Health and Human Services on how to follow up the 2010 Impacts study. “The real question is how to provide these children with the most developmentally

nutritious experiences,” says Aber, who would like the 2002–03 Head Start cohorts to be tracked through adolescence. The nation’s \$600 billion investment in elementary and secondary school actually helps low-income children keep up with their peers during their school years, he notes. “But they are at a comparative disadvantage during the first 3 or 4 years, as well as after high school, because their parents can’t compensate for what the other children are getting.”

Some observers believe that the fade-out effect says more about the quality of the nation’s public schools that the children attend once they leave Head Start than about the efficacy of the program. “Perhaps the question should be reversed,” says Lisa Guernsey, who monitors early education efforts for the nonprofit New America Foundation in Washington, D.C. “What can we do to help elementary schools maintain the momentum that children receive from Head Start?”

—JEFFREY MERVIS

NEWS

A Passion for Early Education

Joan Lombardi brings experience and energy to the Obama Administration’s efforts to better coordinate federal children’s health and education programs

J. LAWRENCE ABER MEANS IT AS a compliment when he calls Joan Lombardi “short and loud.” Aber, a professor of psychology and public policy at New York University, says the 5’1” (1.5 m) Lombardi has stood tall across three Administrations to improve services for young children and their families. And, he adds, sometimes it helps to be pushy.

“She’s enormously savvy, both policy-wise and politically,” says Aber, a member of a panel reporting to Lombardi on how to improve ongoing evaluation of the Head Start preschool program. “She’s passionate but no wide-eyed idealist. She’s profoundly pragmatic.”

Lombardi, the deputy assistant secretary of the Administration for Children and Families within the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services (HHS), has served under all three Democratic presidents since Lyndon Johnson, whose domestic policy agenda laid the cornerstone for some



of the programs she now oversees, notably Head Start. But she says it’s the second part of her title—interdepartmental liaison for early childhood development—that was the biggest drawing card this time around. The phrase, she says, reflects President Barack Obama’s endorsement of the idea that “health and education go together”—a concept that took a hit when her first boss,



Jimmy Carter, decided to create a separate Department of Education, splitting it off from HHS.

The two departments are expected shortly to lay down the rules for the Early Learning Challenge (ELC), a new \$500 million competition that is intended to improve the current patchwork of early education services across the country. ELC was carved out of a \$700 million allocation in the 2011 budget, approved belatedly by Congress in April. The competition is modeled on the Education Department's \$4 billion Race to the Top program that awarded money to 12 states to improve their elementary and

30 June. Lombardi had plastered on her office door the "visitor" pass she had been issued for every meeting with her Education Department colleagues in the past 6 weeks; the tally stood at 40. —JEFFREY MERVIS

Q: What are the active ingredients in a high-quality early education program?

J.L.: Qualified teachers and a focus on the child and the family are certainly important. The findings say it's better to start early and continue through the early years. We've also learned that standards matter and how the variation in quality affects outcomes. Programs that adhere to the standards were

getting better outcomes. ... Obviously, the country's demographics have changed a lot [since the Perry, Abecedarian, and Chicago studies; see p. 952], and the conditions have changed a lot. Poverty has changed. We have a diverse population, with more working families. Half-day programs fit into their lives, so hours matter.

Q: What is it about this population that's different?

J.L.: We're studying them now, and we need to continue to do more research. We're hearing a lot about maternal depression and how that

you can intervene and make a difference. ... But I think that we need to be realistic, too. One child could be involved in multiple programs over the course of her first 5 years and even within the course of a single day. They could go to a Head Start program in the morning, then go to a child-care program in the afternoon, or go to a pre-K [kindergarten] program in the morning and Head Start in the afternoon. So which is the program that is having the impact?

Q: Why is it important to start young?

J.L.: We have the data about what children look like when they come into Head Start. And they are already behind [developmentally] by as much as a standard deviation. So by age 3 you're already playing catch-up.

We also know that the quality of infant-toddler care requires more attention. So why not build it in? If you look at what we administer here, in addition to Head Start, we do the Child Care and Development Fund. And we serve many more children under 3 in the child-care system than we do in Early Head Start, but with very little focus on standards or on instructional supports or on what the workforce should look like.

Q: Is there a lot of reinventing the wheel?

J.L.: There's so much going on. This is what I'm saying to the research community. Help us sort through what we're learning so that we can translate that into what people should do on the ground. And we need to do a much better job of that.

When I first came to this agency—in 1978, as a HEW fellow during the Carter Administration—I worked on a report on how to put research into action. And I think we need a lot more of that. That's the spirit that we're bringing to the advisory committee: synthesize the research and tell us how to put it into practice. We also do need more longitudinal studies. And we need short-term studies—up to grade 3, perhaps—that tell us what will contribute to a more successful third- or fourth-grader.

Q: What's the biggest political obstacle that you face?

J.L.: I think that people want to invest in something that works. And we think that Head Start works. ... Money matters, but so does good management and oversight. ... We want to make sure that Head Start works well for all children and that the gains are sustained.



Jump start. Joan Lombardi reads to children during an early literacy event at the U.S. Capitol.

secondary schools. States can win up to \$100 million for proposing ways to tackle problems such as tracking and assessing the progress of children from their earliest years through high school and providing parents with more information on the quality of publicly funded child care and early education programs.

ELC aims for results, says Lisa Guernsey, who monitors early education issues for the nonprofit New America Foundation in Washington, D.C. "Joan Lombardi's focus on improving the *quality* of child care and Head Start programs has been instrumental in pushing the early childhood field to recognize its responsibility to up its game, to focus on teaching, and to professionalize the workforce," she says.

Once the money was in place—attempts by the Obama Administration to get it funded in 2009 and 2010 came up short in Congress—Lombardi pushed hard to get ELC off the ground. That energy was visible when *Science* interviewed her on

factors in. We're learning more now about the things we can do—and what's impressive about the early studies is how much they did right—and one of them is to make sure that there are enough instructional supports in the classroom, to get more intensive outcomes. ... We're putting a lot of focus on the classroom interactions between the teacher and the child, and the social and emotional environment in the classroom, because we know that those things are predictive of later success.

Q: Do we know which factors have the greatest impact?

J.L.: We're looking at all the research. One question is whether there's a threshold effect, that is, a minimal level that you have to reach in order to have a positive impact. I think this is, in many ways, the agenda for the next decade. The program-evaluation data are telling us that, across all the studies—and it's pretty amazing that they are all going in the same direction—that