



Head Start Children More Prepared for Kindergarten

New Research Shows Significant Gains in Children Enrolled in S.B. County Programs

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The [Community Action Commission \(CAC\)](#) of Santa Barbara held its first educational forum last Friday at the Goleta Valley Library to discuss new research showing immediate gains in kindergarten readiness for children who participate in Santa Barbara County Head Start programs.

The report, which analyzes research conducted by the UCSB Gervitz Graduate School of Education and local school districts, tracks the progress of children in the Santa Maria Bonita school district from preschool through the fourth grade. Students who rated high for kindergarten readiness were more likely to perform well on standardized testing, and performed better than students with no preschool experience. Eighty-one percent of Head Start children ranked within the top two levels of kindergarten readiness criteria, compared to 36 percent of the no preschool group. The criteria assesses physical and health readiness, social-emotional readiness, and school-ready knowledge.

With 75 percent of Head Start children born into families in poverty, the research also looks at specific challenges that face children enrolled in the program. For example, 15 percent of Head Start children have a diagnosed disability compared to 5 percent of other children in county school districts. Thirty-three percent of Head Start children are overweight for their age, compared to 11 percent of other children.

Faced with these challenges, CAC management specialist Holly Carmody emphasizes the program's comprehensive services as a key to helping children in need prepare for kindergarten. County Head Start not only offers on-site medical, dental and developmental screenings, but also encourages parent volunteering and participation in ESL classes.

"Headstart students do start out behind other students, but they leave the program ready for success," Carmody said, mentioning one toddler who came into Early Head Start with behavior and aggression problems. A teacher had her screened for a hearing problem and the child turned out to be completely deaf. "She was put into a program for children with hearing impairment and quickly caught up...no more behavior problems, no more learning disability. The screenings literally changed her life and the life of her family."

Often going door-to-door, posting fliers in apartment laundry rooms and spreading the program by word-of-mouth, the program's strong community involvement and support is the result of a hands-on approach that makes Head Start a feature in families lives, says Child Services director Mattie Gadsby.

With 83 percent of parents reporting at least one positive family impact as a result of their child's enrollment, she believes a bilingual approach is essential to long-term involvement and making parents feel welcome.

"We actively promote development of a home language at the same time that we work on English acquisition. When the home language is not honored...children grow up without being able to talk to their parents," Gadsby said.

Beyond preschool, the challenge of building on parent involvement with Head Start is often left up to under-equipped elementary schools. "From what I know from talking with parents, we're trying to work more on helping parents with what to expect," Gadsby said. "A lot of elementary schools aren't really prepared to welcome parents...even [for] parents who are motivated to get involved."

Head Start is supported by a combination of federal and state funds, often working with organizations like the county mental health services to expand on the resources available to families. "The feds give you the framework," said executive director Fran Forman. "What makes us unique, is that we've really leveraged [Head Start] with a lot of different places to give a much higher quality of program."

Although 1,152 children were enrolled in Head Start last year, the program has a waiting list of nearly 1,671 as of May 2011. And with federal funds for Head Start frozen and a state budget yet to be passed, the county's ability to expand, or even maintain, its services is uncertain.

"Fortunately we do have great foundation support in Santa Barbara county, but it's a moving environment, and everyone's trying to figure out how we work together to provide the most services," Gadsby said. "So not exactly are we going to expand, but we're trying to defend what we have, and then continue to advocate with the public so they understand its value."

Fran Forman, executive director at CAC, hopes that this latest research will only strengthen public support to continue, and possibly increase, funding for early childhood education programs.

"This is a very timely presentation, because everything is under the microscope that has any federal or state funding. And Head Start is not above that," Forman said. "We'd love to serve more children, but we just don't have the increased capacity to serve those children."