



Head Start Racked by Failure and Fraud

by John Gizzi ([more by this author](#))

Posted 03/16/2011 ET

At his news conference last week, the President continued to say that when it comes to budget-cutting, the federal [Head Start program](#) is untouchable.

“There are going to be certain things that House Republicans want that I will not accept,” Obama told the White House press corps. “The notion that we would decide that, under the Republican budget proposal, to eliminate 200,000 Head Start slots that also would mean the layoffs of 55,000 teachers—that doesn’t make sense.”

Cutting Head Start doesn’t make sense? What really doesn’t make sense is that at a time when the President has said, “We’ve got to live within our means” and “get serious about managing our budget,” he then draws a line in the sand over an agency on which, Congress, without seeing any solid results, has spent \$167.5 billion from its founding in 1965 as part of Lyndon Johnson’s Great Society until two years ago. Head Start, which was designed to boost disadvantaged children before they enter elementary school never had a thorough evaluation of its effectiveness until Congress mandated one in 1998.

“We are broke, everything the federal government does needs to be looked at for how cost-effective it is,” freshman Rep. [Joe Walsh](#) (R.-Ill.) told HUMAN EVENTS. “Head Start, as the vast majority of the research and evidence suggests, does not make an appreciable long-term difference in the lives of the children it works with.”

A former inner-city schoolteacher, Walsh knows what he is talking about. Begun in 2002 and completed last year, the evaluation of Head Start concluded that “the benefits of access to Head Start at age 4 are largely absent by first grade for the program population as a whole.” ([U.S. Department of Health and Human Services](#), Administration for Children and Families, “Head Start Impact Study: Final Report,” p. xxxviii, Jan. 15, 2010.)

So the program that the President seems to consider a holy grail in the budget-cutting process is found to be wholly ineffective at improving the academic outcomes for the children it was designed to serve. Indeed, the 2010 evaluation actually concluded that Head Start did not have a positive impact in 110 out of 112 outcomes that were measured.

'Babysitting Program'

“It’s a reasonable presumption that the Head Start program would be good if it were brought up to

speed, possibly voucherized,” said Bruno Behrend, director of the Center for School Reform at The [Heartland Institute](#), which has studied Head Start and other federal education programs, “but right now, we’re talking about little more than a federal babysitting program.”

It is not surprising, therefore, that in terms of management and cost-effectiveness, Head Start also gets a failing grade. A Government Accountability Office study (May 18, 2010) reported the program had “attempted to register fictitious children as a part of 15 undercover test scenarios in six states and the District of Columbia. In eight instances, staff at these centers fraudulently misrepresented information, including disregarding part of the families’ income to register over-income children into under-income slots. The undercover tests revealed that seven Head Start employees lied about applicants’ employment status or misrepresented their earnings. This leaves Head Start at risk that over-income children may be enrolled while legitimate under-income children are put on wait lists. At no point during our registrations was information submitted by GAO’s fictitious parents verified, leaving the program at risk that dishonest persons could falsify earnings statements and other documents in order to qualify.”

To those who have studied Head Start and are aware of its failings in terms of performance and management, it is almost dumbfounding that [President Obama](#) would consider this program off-limits in the budget-cutting process—particularly at a time when the President himself has repeatedly called on government to “live within our means.” Whether this Great Society-era program continues and whether it continues to be funded at current levels is sure to be a defining moment in the [budget process](#) of 2011.

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