



COMMENTARY EARLY EDUCATION

50 Years On, Head Start's Best Hope for the Future May Lie in an Idea from Its Past

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On May 18, 1965, a beautiful spring day, President Lyndon B. Johnson spoke from the White House Rose Garden to announce a new federal initiative designed to fight child poverty: Head Start. Today, exactly fifty years later, Head Start is the oldest and largest public preschool program in the country, enrolling nearly on million children nationwide.

In keeping with the mission to alleviate poverty, Head Start is known for serving a population that is almost entirely low-income. But when Head Start was just getting off the ground, one of the program's founders had a different idea about the best way for the program to help poor children.

Developmental psychologist Edward Zigler—known as the “Father of Head Start”—envisioned Head Start as a socioeconomically integrated program, offering low-income children the educational benefits of a diverse learning environment, while at the same time creating a broader base of political support for the program by serving middle-class families as well.

In the fifty years since its founding, this idea has been largely absent from the reality of Head Start. But the goal of a socioeconomically integrated Head Start program is an idea worth revisiting as we celebrate fifty years of Head Start and ponder the best ways to grow and strengthen the program moving forward.

The Original Vision for a Socioeconomically Integrated Head Start

Zigler wanted Head Start classrooms to be socioeconomically integrated, educating low-income and middle class students side by side. He writes in the 2010 book *A Hidden History of Head Start*, coauthored with Sally Styfco, about his efforts to build integration into the program:

Zigler wanted Head Start to enroll a 50-50 mix of low-income and middle-class children. In the end, he was only able to get agreement from the program's planners to allow Head Start programs to enroll up to 10 percent of students from families earning more than the poverty line. It was less than Zigler wanted, but, as he reflected, “at least the 10% rule sent a signal that the planners were aware that a socioeconomically integrated setting was a better developmental setting for children than segregated schooling.”

That 10 percent allowance remains in the law today, along with a provision for 35 percent of seats to go to students from near-poor families earning 100-130 percent of the poverty line. In practice, however, few Head Start programs have taken advantage of these options, in some cases because the need among unserved families in poverty remains too great.

Today, just 5.5 percent of children in Head Start come from families making 100-130 percent of the poverty line, and only 3 percent come from families earning more than 130 percent of poverty line. Moreover, the goal of integrated classrooms has all but vanished in the policy discussions around Head Start.

Returning to Integration to Strengthen Head Start's Future

This forgotten vision of a socioeconomically integrated Head Start should be more than an interesting historical factoid: integration should be a roadmap for Head Start's future as a key strategy for improving the quality of Head Start classrooms and broadening political support for the program.

Improving Quality

Longitudinal studies of Head Start children have shown significant gains in skills associated with kindergarten readiness and some impressive long-term outcomes, such as increased high school and college graduation rates, better health, and less likelihood of being arrested. But the quality of individual Head Start programs varies widely, and the early academic advantages associated with Head Start have been shown to fade out by the time students reach third grade.

We need to continue to invest in Head Start to expand enrollment: six in ten four-year-olds in the United States lack access to any public preschool programs. But it is also essential that we improve the quality of Head Start programs to ensure the best possible outcomes for children.

Creating integrated classrooms should be part of that strategy.

Preschool classroom diversity is an important component of program quality, as my colleagues and I explain in a recent report from The Century Foundation and the Poverty & Race Research Action. Research shows that preschool children in economically mixed classrooms learn more, on average, than peers in classrooms with concentrated poverty, controlling for students' individual backgrounds.

Building Political Support

Middle-class families enrolled in Head Start programs could also become important political allies when it comes to funding the program. In states and cities with universal pre-K programs, like Georgia, Oklahoma, and—most recently—New York City, popular and bipartisan political support for the programs has stemmed, in part, from the fact that families of all incomes stand to benefit. Seven in ten Americans favor federal funding for universal pre-K programs.

Making It a Reality

Moving to the 50 percent low-income, 50 percent middle-class enrollment model that Edward Zigler imagined would require a huge shift in Head Start policy that is unlikely to happen immediately. But we can create more opportunities for socioeconomically diverse Head Start classrooms by building on existing elements of the program in two key ways:

1. Increase Head Start funding to allow centers to expand enrollment, and encourage more Head Start providers to take advantage of the option to enroll a portion of students from above the poverty line.
2. Enable and encourage blended funding, allowing more Head Start providers to follow the lead of centers

like Rosemount Center in Washington, D.C., that blend funding streams to serve Head Start students alongside middle-class students who pay private tuition or are funded through state pre-K programs.

Low-income children deserve a better start, and integrated Head Start classrooms could be an important tool for achieving that.

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