

Head Start CARES (Classroom-based Approaches and Resources for Emotion and Social Skill Promotion) Project Overview

The Project. Head Start CARES is a large-scale national research project designed to test the effects of social-emotional program enhancements in Head Start settings. Head Start is designed to “narrow the gap” between disadvantaged children and their more affluent peers through comprehensive programming during the pre-school period designed to improve children’s social competence and academic readiness for school. Research has consistently shown relationships between children’s early social-emotional development and their academic and social success in school. Because children in poverty are exposed to a wide range of psychological and social stressors, they have been found to be at a greater risk for developing emotional and behavioral difficulties compared with their middle-income peers. Studies have documented prevalence rates of emotional and behavioral problems among preschool children as high as 20 to 40 percent. Accordingly, Head Start and other pre-school programs in low-income communities report a pressing need for effective tools to build children’s social-emotional skills.

Although policy makers and pre-school program operators are increasingly focused on the role of early childhood education, including social and emotional development, in promoting children’s readiness for school, there is little large-scale rigorous research on which classroom practices are most effective at supporting this critical goal. Program development generally occurs in phases, beginning with pilot studies of promising interventions (Stage I), followed by evaluation of programs that have demonstrated some preliminary effectiveness but need more and better evaluation to speak to program effectiveness (Stage II), then by the field test stage, which examines the impact of a program when implemented on a wide scale across a sample of programs representative of the population of interest (Stage III). Stage III research examines for whom the specific program option is most effective and focuses on implementation in a variety of settings.

This project will design and implement a Stage III evaluation of classroom-based strategies that are specifically designed to improve children’s social-emotional competencies. In doing so, it will provide information that can help decision-makers within the Office of Head Start and in local Head Start communities implement practices with proven effectiveness for meeting the needs of the Head Start Population.

The Study Design. The study will be a large-scale evaluation that will test different *strategies* to enhancing social-emotional development. These strategies build on distinct theories of change about how to intervene effectively to support children’s social and emotional development, but the ultimate goal of each is the same: they all are targeted at promoting

children's social-emotional competence in the classroom setting. In each case, teachers are trained in the new approaches and then are provided with mentors to implement the new strategies in the classroom context.

To date, these strategies have been tested in limited circumstances (e.g., single cities, programs that chose to adopt the intervention). The study will randomly assign 120 Head Start centers to either one of the social-emotional interventions or a control group that will offer "business as usual" programming. One or more classrooms within each center may be invited to participate.

This rigorously designed study has the potential to promote the policy, programmatic and academic research fields' understanding of:

- Promising approaches to building children's social and emotional development
- The processes by which the largest and most sustained effects on children's social and emotional development are likely to occur
- The features of Head Start settings and families that contribute to successful implementation of these program models.

It will ultimately provide information that federal policy makers and Head Start programs can use to increase the program's capacity to improve the social-emotional skills and school readiness of pre-school aged children.

Project Timeline. The Head Start CARES project will operate from fall 2007 through mid 2013. Centers will be recruited during the 2008-2009 academic year. Training of teachers in the new programs will begin in summer 2009. The interventions will begin in fall 2009 in the selected centers.

Key Partners. This project is sponsored by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families. It will be conducted by MDRC and its partners, The Lewin Group, Survey Research Management, and a team of academic experts.

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