What is this study about?
This study examined the effects of offering Head Start to 3- and 4-year-olds. Head Start is a federal program aimed at boosting the school readiness of low-income children by providing preschool education and health and nutrition services.

The study analyzed data on about 4,700 preschool-aged children who applied for enrollment for the 2002–03 program year at one of about 380 Head Start centers randomly selected for the study. The study followed the students through first grade.

The study compared the outcomes of children who were offered enrollment in Head Start to the outcomes of children who were not offered enrollment.

School-readiness outcomes, which are the focus of this quick review, were measured using standardized cognitive assessments of language and literacy, pre-writing, and math skills administered at the end of each year through first grade.4

What Groups of Children Were Contrasted?
Students were selected from a nationally representative sample of Head Start centers in 2002–03.

The number of applicants exceeded the number of available slots, so enrollment offers were granted randomly to a cohort of 3-year-olds and a cohort of 4-year-olds. Those in the treatment group could access Head Start services in 2002–03.

Families of children not offered enrollment could seek services from other center-based care providers or neighboring Head Start centers not involved with the study (about 43% of 3-year-olds and 49% of 4-year-olds did this).

Among 3-year-olds, all study children were eligible to apply for Head Start as 4-year-olds in 2003–04.

Although some students offered enrollment did not attend Head Start (about 15% of 3-year-olds and 20% of 4-year-olds), and some students in the control group received either Head Start or other similar services, all were included in the analysis as members of the group to which they were randomly assigned.

(continued)
What did the study find about effectiveness at the first follow-up?

The study found that children offered the chance to enroll in Head Start as 3-year-olds had higher scores on four of eight measures of language and literacy, the single measure of pre-writing, and one of two measures of math skills at the first follow-up, than children not offered enrollment as 3-year-olds.

Children offered the chance to enroll in Head Start as 4-year-olds had higher scores on six of eight measures of language and literacy at the first follow-up than children not offered enrollment as 4-year-olds. There were no significant differences between the groups in pre-writing or math skills.

However, the WWC has reservations about these findings because the groups of students compared in the analysis may have differed from each other in ways not accounted for in the analysis.

What did the study find about effectiveness at the later follow-ups?

The study found no significant differences between the children offered and not offered the chance to enroll in Head Start as 3-year-olds on language and literacy, pre-writing, and math skills measured at the second, third, and fourth follow-ups. These follow-ups corresponded to the ends of preschool, kindergarten, and first grade, respectively.

In addition, there were no significant differences between the children offered and not offered the chance to enroll in Head Start as 4-year-olds on language and literacy and math skills measured at the second and third follow-ups (there was no fourth follow-up for this cohort, and pre-writing was not examined). These follow-ups corresponded to the ends of kindergarten and first grade, respectively.