



The William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program

Elementary and Secondary Education Act Reauthorization Recommendations

BACKGROUND: The William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy program (Even Start) is a highly valuable program that gives economically and educationally disadvantaged parents the tools necessary to support early literacy and language development for their young children. This is accomplished in two key ways: (1) Even Start coordinates with early childhood education programs to provide literacy and language development services; and (2) Even Start assists parents to fulfill their role as their child's first teacher by providing them with adult and parenting education, English as a second language instruction, and structured parent-child joint literacy activities. Even Start is the only early literacy program that works with parents to serve children during the infant and toddler years, a developmental period that research shows is critical for building later reading proficiency. Moreover, Even Start has been shown to be highly effective in helping low-income parents support their children's education and breaking the cycle of illiteracy.

During recent years, Even Start has been plagued by a pervasive misconception that the program is ineffective. This has resulted in drastic funding cuts. To date, many Even Start programs have closed down and thousands of vulnerable families have lost services. The criticisms of Even Start have been largely based on the findings from the U.S. Department of Education's national evaluation released in May 2003. However, this study contained serious methodological flaws that call into question the accuracy of the findings. For example,

- ☞ The study's sample *was not representative of the Even Start population*. Thus, findings cannot be generalized to all of Even Start, particularly Even Start participants in rural communities or special populations, such as migrant and Native American families.
- ☞ Experts in assessment of limited English proficient (LEP) individuals caution that the findings for LEP individuals, who represent 75% of those assessed in the study, are flawed due to *inappropriate assessment protocols and measures*.
- ☞ Of the 118 Even Start projects eligible to participate in the study in 2003, only 18 programs self-selected. This means that (1) researchers *included programs largely based on who volunteered rather than using random selection*; and (2) such a small pool of programs overall does not allow for the study's findings to be generalized to all of Even Start.

RECOMMENDATIONS: The proposed changes to Even Start take into account recommendations from Even Start grantees, experts in child development, adult literacy and education, second language acquisition, and several national, constituency-based organizations. To this end, we believe that the reauthorization of Even Start should accomplish the following:

1. Strengthen program monitoring and accountability.

RATIONALE: Even Start has fallen under criticism, in recent budget proposals, in part, due to a lack of uniform, annual information on Even Start's accomplishments.

RECOMMENDATION: The reauthorization of Even Start should align with the federal Adult Education performance accountability system, which allows for uniform data collection across states. In the case of children, programs should be required to report to the Secretary, on an annual basis, on indicators of program quality, including, the degree to which they use highly qualified staff and scientifically valid curricula. The Secretary should be required to make all of this information available to Congress in a timely manner.

2. Allow for a longitudinal evaluation of Even Start's Impact.

RATIONALE: Given that the most recent national evaluation of Even Start (May 2003) contained serious methodological flaws, a better study is needed, particularly one that allows for comparisons of Even Start participants' gains over a longer period of time.

RECOMMENDATION: The reauthorization of Even Start should allow for a robust, improved national evaluation that provides longitudinal data on how Even Start makes an impact in the lives of children and adults. To achieve this, the Secretary should be required to form an independent panel of experts to advise on the design and methodology of the study that includes experts from a variety of disciplines.

3. Provide for research in family literacy and the dissemination of such research.

RATIONALE: Although there is a research section in existing law, it is narrow in focus, and is often not as valuable for informing the practice and delivery of family literacy services to children and adults.

RECOMMENDATION: The Even Start reauthorization should allow for input from the family literacy community on the Even Start research agenda, so that it accurately reflects current needs and informs practice. Results of such research should be disseminated to appropriate federal education programs.

4. Ensure the long-term stability of Even Start by preserving the federal share of program funding.

RATIONALE: Current law reduces the federal share provided to Even Start programs to 35 percent after the eighth year of operation. Unfortunately, this decline in federal support can often result in program closures because grantees have great difficulty in coming up with 65 percent of costs.

RECOMMENDATION: The reauthorization of Even Start should modify the federal share limitation so it does not fall below 50 percent of the cost of the project.

5. Support meaningful parental involvement and education.

RATIONALE: Even Start programs have demonstrated much success in providing severely economically and educationally disadvantaged parents with the tools to support their children's learning both at home and in school.

RECOMMENDATION: Even Start reauthorization should amend the statement of purpose to include an emphasis on supporting parental involvement to better reflect the current practices of Even Start grantees.

6. Strengthen access to linguistically and culturally appropriate literacy instruction.

RATIONALE: There is mounting research demonstrating that literacy instruction in a child's native language affords them many benefits, including facilitating acquisition of the English language and sustaining reading gains over time.

RECOMMENDATION: The reauthorization of Even Start should require programs to outline how they will provide linguistically and culturally appropriate literacy instruction that is based on what research says is most effective for teaching children and adults to read and learn English.

7. Focus services on young children with continuing services to school-age children.

RATIONALE: The science is clear in that the foundation for language and literacy development is established in the earliest years of life. As such, the Even Start community has sought to reach families with very young children. Today, nearly half of the children participating in Even Start are under the age of five.

RECOMMENDATION: The reauthorization of Even Start should allow programs to focus on reaching and providing services to children from birth to the age of five and allow for the continuation of services to children during the elementary school years.

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