



I urge Congress and the Administration to check facts and take an unbiased look at the Even Start Family Literacy Program before eliminating an effective educational program that changes families' lives.

Many legislators, their staff, and members of the press seemingly have enjoyed describing the Federally funded William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program as a program — an ineffective one — meant to teach parents who cannot read in English and their children to read at the same time. The belief that this program is simply for parents who cannot read in English is inaccurate as is the claim that the program is ineffective.

First, the Congressional Research Service (CRS) produced a report on Even Start for Congress in 2006 that stated accurately that the purpose of the program is to “integrate early childhood education, adult basic education, and parenting skills education into a unified family literacy program.” Targeted to low-income families, a little over half of the families that enroll in Even Start do not speak English as their first language; however, the rest do speak English and are eligible for services due to parents' limitations in reading, writing, and/or math skills.

Second, this program builds on existing, high quality services in a community to integrate educational services for parents and their young children who are living in poverty. The U.S. Department of Education reported in 2008-2009 that 90% of Even Start families were living at or below the Federal poverty, 87% of the parents did not have a high school credential, and in fact, over half had not gone beyond 9th grade. Of the children served in these families, 78% were under 6 years old, with 40% under 3 years old.

Third, 20 years of solid research has consistently reported that parents are critical to their children's language and literacy development. For example, in a National Institutes of Child Health and Human Development study (2010) conducted in the Los Angeles area, researchers concluded that, “mother's reading scores and average neighborhood levels of income accounted for the largest proportion of inequality in children's achievement.” Other research also has concluded that education provides a way out of poverty. This research provides the foundation on which Even Start programs build their instructional practices and community partnerships.

Educational programs that build mothers' basic skills and teach them strategies to help their children build language and literacy skills have the potential to help families begin to move out of poverty and also improve educational outcomes for children. This is family literacy. This is Even Start. No other federal education program requires parents to commit to developing their academic and literacy support skills while their children receive early childhood education services — not Head Start, Early Head Start, or Title I schools.

Detractors cite three Even Start evaluations as proof of the program's ineffectiveness, and they have been widely criticized. Notably, the Senate Committee Labor/HHS/ED Appropriations Report (2004) stated, “The Evaluation does not reflect improvements to Even Start ... after changes in federal law in 2000 and 2001 and, therefore, is not currently applicable.” In the evaluation itself, the evaluators even noted that, “Care should be given in applying the findings to Even Start projects as a whole.” This, obviously, has not happened.

Why should we support Even Start and other comprehensive family literacy programs? Educated adults — including school personnel and our elected leaders and their staff — make assumptions. They assume that all parents know the importance of talking with and reading to children. They assume that all parents are willing to volunteer in their children's schools and attend parent-teacher meetings. They assume that all parents have opportunities, if they so choose, to pursue educational activities so they can apply for higher paying jobs.

These assumptions are false. With few exceptions, parents want better lives for their children. Unfortunately, not all parents have the skills and knowledge — and previous experiences — the parents mentioned above have at their disposal. Not all parents had parents or other relatives who talked to them, read them books, or told them stories. Not all parents feel confident that their children's schools will welcome them, so they choose not to volunteer or attend parent-teacher meetings. Not all parents have had positive experiences in the past with school personnel. Not all parents have the basic academic skills they need to pursue further education or training that would result in a better job — or a job at all — with family-sustaining wages. These families need the services that only a comprehensive family literacy program, such as Even Start, can provide.

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