



Response to Administration's Proposed Elimination of the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program

Administration Position From White House Website: "After three separate evaluations it has become abundantly clear that the program is not succeeding."

Response: The evaluations¹ cited by the President use only data from before new quality improvement legislation took affect; thereby the President's statement relies on 2001 out-of-date statistics to advance a 2005 point of view. *Families Involve Literacy Together (LIFT) Act* (2000) and *No Child Left Behind Act* (2001) require Even Start programs to provide stronger quality instructional content, including;

- Programs build on high quality community resources to provide better services to families.
- Strengthening elements requiring programs to:
 - improve the qualifications for instructional and paraprofessional staff;
 - use instructional programs based on scientifically-based reading research;
 - encourage participating families to attend regularly and remain in the program for a sufficient time to meet their goals;
 - include reading readiness activities for preschool children based on scientifically-based reading research; and
 - provide for an independent local evaluation of the program to be used for program improvement.
- States are now required to use a portion of the dollars allocated for State level activities for technical assistance for program improvements and replication.
- States are now required to develop an accountability system for program participants by developing indicators of program quality.

These legislative improvements have resulted in significant changes in the way Even Start Family Literacy is implemented at the local level. The indicators of program quality were in development during the time of the three studies, but they were not required to be submitted to the U.S. Department of Education until the summer of 2002, and were not implemented in most states, (even on a pilot basis) until the following year (2003). No national studies have been undertaken since these new requirements have been in place.

The cited evaluations are based upon findings that occurred prior to the implementation of new legal requirements for stronger state accountability systems and a mandated increased emphasis on higher quality, research-based instruction to be implemented by the U.S. Department of Education.

¹ St. Pierre, R.G., J.P. Swartz, B. Gamse, S. Murray, D. Deck & P. Nickel (1995). National evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: Final report. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates. Prepared for the US Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service.

Tao, F. B. Gamse & H. Tarr (1998). Second national evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: Final report. Cambridge, MA: Abt Associates. Prepared for the US Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service.

US Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, Elementary and Secondary Education Division (2003). Third national Even Start evaluation: Program impacts and implications for improvement. Washington, DC: Author.

Administration Position From White House Website: “People are not becoming more literate.”

Response: It is assumed the President is basing this conclusion on the prior cited studies, in which case it should be noted that the authors of the Third National Even Start Evaluation² acknowledge that their results cannot be generalized to the population as a whole, “...we cannot generalize to the Even Start population on a strict statistical basis.”

Additionally, Statewide data³ indicate that parents take this concept seriously and Even Start is helping families become better community members. The data from statewide evaluations provide evidence of the following:

- Parents read more to their children, have more books at home, and take their children to the library more often than before participating;
- Parents are more informed about children’s development and age appropriate expectations;
- Parents are more active in their children’s classroom, volunteer more and talk more with teachers;
- Parents take better care of their children’s medical and dental health;
- Parents have registered to vote or voted for the first time;
- Many parents obtained a driver’s license; and
- Parents are more active in their community.

State and local evaluations reveal that Even Start is successful in increasing parents’ and children’s educational levels. For example, the 2002-2003 *Statewide Evaluation of Family Literacy in Pennsylvania* revealed that native English-speaking adults made significant gains on the standardized pre- and post-tests⁴ in reading, math, and GED subtests, while the non-native English speakers made significant gains in oral language and total literacy on the Basic English Skills Test (BEST).

Administration Position From White House Website: “Families in Even Start have made no progress toward literacy -- no more progress than a similar group of families outside the program.”

Response: Even Start serves a very disadvantaged population. These are the statistics:

- 84% of Even Start’s families are at or below Federal poverty levels;
- 84% of Even Start adults have no high school diploma or GED; 44% of the parents have not gone beyond the 9th grade;
- Even Start families are significantly poorer than Head Start families. Nearly half of Even Start families have an annual household income under \$6,000 contrasted with only 13 percent of Head Start families; and
- 90 percent of Even Start families are living below the poverty line compared to 25 percent of adults in regular education programs.

² Ibid.

³ Evaluations reviewed by the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at the 2003 and 2004 NESA and the 2004 NCFL conferences

⁴ Test Results from Tests of Adult Basic Education (TABE) in reading and math, Comprehensive Student Adult Assessment System (CASAS) in Life Skills reading, math, and listening and Employable Math, and the Basic English Test (BEST) – Total Core Oral And Literacy.

When beginning the program, Even Start children score at the bottom of income and education when compared to national standards. Even Start children begin the program with literacy levels far below their counterparts in any other federally-funded preschool programs. If both children and their parents start out at lowest levels, then they have the most to accomplish to make to reach the “norm”.

Even Start works with children from birth through age 7; but studies referenced by the President only looked at children above 2.5 years in age. Everyone agrees that the first three years of life are critical. Even Start is the only program within the Department of Education that focuses on this age group of learners; however they were omitted from the studies. The overlay of English language acquisition to the low literacy skills exhibited on assessments must also be considered in the outcomes.

Prior to the prior noted legislative changes to the program, the majority of Even Start sites depended on other programs for pre-kindergarten services. The new laws inserted “high-quality” in the requirement that Even Start build on existing community resources. This change in requirements, in conjunction with the federally-funded training, has had a dramatic impact on the quality of services provided to Even Start children.

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