



National Coalition For Literacy

William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program Reauthorization

What is Even Start?

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 interactive literacy activities. 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.

Even Start Reauthorization Recommendations

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

RATIONALE: The science is clear. 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, 77% of the children participating in Even Start are ages birth to five.

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

2. Strengthen program monitoring and accountability.

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

RECOMMENDATION: Even Start reauthorization 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.

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

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

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 provides benefits (i.e., 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 identifies as most effective for teaching children and adults to read and learn English.