

Changing the Course of Family Literacy

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Introduction

Family literacy programs have existed for decades. These programs typically provide an array of services and activities to parents and their children that help them build language and literacy skills, increase education levels, and improve their overall economic well-being. Family literacy emerged in the late 1980s and early 1990s with the federally funded Even Start Family Literacy Program, which was designed to “integrate early childhood education, adult literacy (adult basic and secondary-level education and instruction for English language learners), parenting education, and interactive parent and child literacy activities for low-income families”.¹ Unfortunately, Even Start funding decreased steadily in the new millennium and finally ended in FY 2011-2012 after several national research studies reported mixed results. Due to the cessation of Even Start funding, the number of programs has diminished considerably. Despite this significant lack of federal and state financial support, a committed family literacy community remains. This community has been inventive in cobbling together scarce resources to sustain vibrant family literacy initiatives and programs.

Today at least 18 federal programs (11 in the U.S. Department of Education, six in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, and one in the Bureau of Indian Education) include family literacy in the legislation as an allowable expenditure;² however, most of the funding is passed through to the states, which have some

discretion regarding how the money is spent for programs that are “allowable” rather than required. Thus, it is difficult to discern how much public money is available for or spent on family literacy and what shape programming takes as a result. Given the important role that family literacy can play, the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy began to explore the status of family literacy across the nation through the lens of the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) in July 2015. Since states have the authority to spend AEFLA funds on program priorities other than family literacy, the Institute wanted to know which states continued to fund family literacy after the loss of Even Start. All 50 states and the District of Columbia were contacted about their efforts to fund family literacy; 47 states and the District of Columbia responded. Individual family literacy programs were also surveyed to find out about their funding and the kinds of services they provided. In addition to reporting the findings from states and local programs, this policy brief establishes the

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importance and traces the history and the current landscape of family literacy, and makes the case for continued and enhanced funding for family literacy.

Widening Disparity in Educational Attainment

Diminished funding for family literacy is both a result of the demise of Even Start and the continued depletion of resources for adult basic education. This disinvestment could be quite costly for our nation. According to the Program for the International Assessment of Adult Competencies (PIAAC), the United States is now lagging behind most industrial nations in numeracy (16 countries ranked above, two on par, and three below) and problem solving in technology-rich environments (ranked lowest along with one other country).³ The U.S. fared better in literacy, falling only one point below the international average score (273); seven countries ranked above, nine on par, and six below the U.S.⁴ Further, PIAAC data demonstrates the relationship between parental education (a proxy for socio-economic status) and literacy score. The higher the parent's educational attainment, the higher the respondent's literacy and numeracy score is likely to be; conversely, the parents of respondents with lower numeracy and literacy skills had significantly lower levels of educational attainment. The U.S. is one of two countries wherein the parents' educational attainment has the strongest association on the respondent's literacy score; in other words, in the U.S. a parent's educational attainment heavily influences the next generation's literacy skills. This finding indicates that the U.S. has one of "the most entrenched multigenerational literacy problem[s] among the countries in the PIAAC survey;"⁵ thus, it is harder for low-socio-economic status children in the U.S. to overcome education and income inequality. Goodman, Sands, and Coley write: "the large gap in skills between U.S. millennials whose parents have the lowest and highest levels of educational attainment points to social and

economic inequality between advantaged and less advantaged members of our society that has a multiplying effect over time."⁶ Other research also demonstrates the relationship between parental education and children's school readiness and success.⁷ Furthermore, high-income families are able to and do invest in their child's development at a much higher rate than low-income families.⁸ Providing early childhood education experiences that involve parent learning can help mitigate the disparity of resources available to socio-economically disadvantaged families.⁹

To diminish the achievement gap we must invest in the education of all children, particularly those with low literacy and numeracy skills. It is also imperative to build parents' education skills to support their and their children's literacy and numeracy development, since educational attainment influences educational outcomes and human and social capital. Moreover, family literacy programming that incorporates adult and early childhood education may be the only educational option for many adult learners, given the paucity of affordable childcare and preschool education. This lack of investment in parents and their children helps to perpetuate the widening racial and class disparity in educational attainment in the U.S.

The Rise and Fall of Family Literacy

During the 1980s, heightened attention to literacy skill development for adults and children progressed along parallel paths. Adult literacy programming was designed to assist adults to develop basic literacy skills and increase economic independence. Simultaneously, for children, the emphasis centered on early childhood education and the importance of school readiness. In the mid-1980s, a shift from family engagement to family literacy took place. Driven by the report *A Nation at Risk*¹⁰ and studies that claimed that the mother's education was the best predictor of children's school achievement,¹¹ responsibility for children's early literacy learning shifted

from the schools to the parents.¹² Family literacy programming that supported children's development and literacy skills, while also enhancing parents' literacy and parenting skills to fulfill their role as their child's first teacher, was viewed by policymakers as a solution to help children of low-literate adults succeed academically.

The federal legislation for family literacy, championed by former Congressman William F. Goodling, was first authorized in 1988 as a small demonstration project under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA). Even Start's goal was to "improve the educational opportunities of the nation's children and adults by integrating early childhood education and adult education for parents into a unified program."¹³ In other words, while parents and children engage in literacy activities through shared storybook reading, play, language games, and other activities, parents practice their own language, writing, and reading skills. The Kenan model, the well-known four-component family literacy intervention, became the foundation for Even Start. Family literacy services were defined in the ESEA as:

services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family, and that integrate all of the following instructional activities:

- Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children.
- Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children.
- Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences.¹⁴

Even Start began as a federally administered program in 1989 with an appropriation of \$14.8 million.¹⁵ In 1992 funding reached \$50 million and states became responsible for administering Even Start programs. Peak funding was reached in 2001 and 2002 with total funding at \$250 million.¹⁶ After 2002, funding steadily decreased and the program was eliminated in 2011.

Even Start was defunded largely due to poor program outcomes reported in a series of national evaluations. In particular, the results of the third national evaluation found similar gains for Even Start participants and those in a control group.¹⁷ The results led the authors to "question the theoretical model underlying Even Start and most other family literacy programs."¹⁸ However, analyses of the national evaluation indicated that the evaluation design was flawed. Findings were based on a convenience sample (programs volunteered to participate) of 18 programs that met a variety of criteria (e.g., met Even Start legislative requirements, provided programming for at least two years, offered services of moderate to high intensity).¹⁹ About 750 programs were operating during this time; 115 met all the established evaluation design criteria. The 18 programs studied represented only 16% of the eligible programs and 2% of all programs. Although sampling parameters were set, participating programs were never tested or evaluated for fidelity to the Even Start model.²⁰ In addition, neither the quality of services provided to families nor the level of family engagement were clearly determined,²¹ undermining the validity of the evaluators' rejection of Even Start's theoretical model. Furthermore, the final number of families on which data was reported is small and therefore questionable as an accurate representation of the Even Start population: Even Start children, n=97; Even Start adults n=149; Control Group children n=44; Control Group adults n=65.

Data collection was also suspect. General outcomes were reported using Even Start Performance Information and Reporting System (ESPIRS) data; however, this was a non-representative data sample. Few programs

reported parent and child outcomes in ESPIRS because they were not required to do so. Moreover, programs were unable to review the data for accuracy.²² In addition, language and reading gains were reported only for parents and children who were assessed in English, thereby omitting 25% of the Even Start population from the data sample. It is possible that the results were further compromised as the authors do not explain how participants were presented with the choice of testing language; researchers stated that “the English version of each measure was administered whenever possible.”²³ Literacy and academic gains could be disputed given that gains, or lack of gains, represent the participant’s English fluency rather than literacy or academic ability.²⁴

The flawed evaluation study results unraveled support for Even Start, even though over the program’s 20-year span, it served more than 40,000 economically vulnerable families.²⁵ After 2010, many family literacy programs were eliminated. Those that continued have been sustained through a variety of funding sources such as foundations, state governments, school districts, and community action agencies.

Current Family Literacy Programming: Legislation and Philosophies

Despite the elimination of Even Start funding, the idea of family literacy remains strong; however, the concept has expanded in terms of nomenclature, definition, and implementation. Legislation for family literacy continues to exist within a disconnected and fragmented framework of various acts and bills,²⁶ including Indian Education, Education of Migratory Children, Ready to Learn Television, Head Start, and Community Services Block Grant. Two major federal family literacy funding sources, Title II of the Workforce Innovation and Opportunity Act (WIOA)—the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA)—and Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA)—the reauthorized version of Elementary and Secondary Education Act—

reflect shifts in the emphasis of family literacy. AEFLA continues to refer to family literacy programming and the four-component model; program requirements remain relatively similar to the earlier Workforce Investment Act (WIA) AEFLA, Title II regulations. However, following the policy emphasis on career pathways and employment, family literacy has shifted to intentionally and explicitly include programming that can lead to jobs and/or postsecondary education. This is reflected in the subtle but important additions to AEFLA HR 803—186, Sec 203 (9): “Parent or family adult education and literacy activities that lead to *readiness for postsecondary education or training, career advancement, and economic self-sufficiency*” (emphasis added). Similarly, new performance measures heighten the focus on employment outcomes or transition to postsecondary training and education.²⁷

Although these are important goals for families, the foregrounding of employability goals (e.g., obtaining employment, increasing wages, participating in education that leads to employment or recognized certificate) subjugates other important, non-economic goals, including building adult and child literacy, parenting, and advocacy skills. This shift is shortsighted, given the prevalence of failing schools and working-poor families who have little time to support parents’ or children’s schooling.

In a different vein, the Every Student Succeeds Act (ESSA) supports family engagement via a minimum set-aside of funds in Title I, known as the Statewide Family Engagement in Education Programs, and an emphasis on family literacy in migrant education. This law gives importance to family engagement by using funding “to engage [parents] in activities that will improve student academic achievement, including understanding how parents can support learning in the classroom with activities at home.”²⁸ Although schools may indicate that they offer family literacy, programming often focuses on early childhood education, K-6 curricula, and parenting, with little emphasis on adult literacy.²⁹

The Mosaic of Family Literacy: Innovations and Changes

The change in funding has prompted a retooling of family literacy, creating an assortment of programming designs. Many providers now collaborate with other organizations or cobble together multiple funding streams to support variations of the four-component model. For example, a community-based organization may offer adult ESL classes, while a Head Start program provides early childhood education. Depending on which agency is the lead, programming can favor one component over another, or lose the integrated nature of family literacy activities. In other words, a provider may choose to focus on early childhood education and hold adult education classes in a separate building, with few activities connected to supporting children's learning. Alternatively, a school district might run a family literacy program that targets a particular initiative, such as parent engagement or leadership, as opposed to an emphasis on interactive literacy activities or adult education classes. However, a more common format is to offer family literacy programming as a stand-alone family event, such as a family reading night, instead of a longer-term, sustained learning experience for families.

A few key organizations, such as The National Center for Families Learning (NCFL) and the Barbara Bush Foundation, continue to promote and support four-component programming with an updated emphasis on employability skills, technology, and transitions to college, training, or employment. New initiatives have brought a different perspective on family literacy. Library initiatives, such as *The Family Literacy Focus*, Complementary Learning (e.g., Children's Zone, Beacon Schools), and Intergenerational Family Learning (e.g., *Museums as 21st Century Partners*) are some examples of programming that reflects family literacy principles. However, these programs primarily offer child-centered programming with peripheral inclusion of adults.

“Two-generation” programming has gained momentum as another approach to address the needs of vulnerable families. Leaders in this arena are the Aspen Institute's Ascend initiative and the Annie E. Casey Foundation. These organizations highlight strategies that “give families more opportunities to succeed” through “an intentional, coordinated approach.”³⁰ Although these strategies do not exclude parents and children learning together, programming tends to focus on supporting children and parents independently rather than as a family unit. In addition, “two-gen” strategies primarily center on post-secondary educational opportunities, which often overlooks the adult basic education learner for whom these opportunities may be out of reach. Parents who already have a high school or GED diploma are in a much more advantaged position than those who lack one. As such, the exclusion of non-high school graduates from most two-gen initiatives could limit these parents' access to career pathways or sectoral employment training. Furthermore, two-gen programming does not typically include intergenerational learning using the family as the central context.

The Current Status of Family Literacy

From spring 2015 to spring 2016, the Goodling Institute contacted all fifty states and Washington D.C. to determine how, if at all, Adult Education and Family Literacy Act (AEFLA) funds were used to continue family literacy programming after Even Start funding was discontinued.³¹ Information was gathered from state directors or their representatives via email and/or phone calls. We gathered information from 47 states and found that 11 states and the District of Columbia were funding family literacy programs in 2015-16. Seventeen states were aware that some of their local programs were using AEFLA funding for portions of family literacy programming and 19 states were not aware of AEFLA funds being used to support family literacy programs. The states that made specific efforts to keep family literacy programs operating—Connecticut, Delaware, Illinois, Louisiana, Maryland,

Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Wyoming and the District of Columbia—had varying funding levels and strategies and used different approaches to programming, and most were passionate about the need to sustain family literacy.

Most States Use Braided Funding Strategies to Support Family Literacy

Although Illinois, Pennsylvania, and Wyoming used specially legislated state funding rather than AEFLA resources to support family literacy programs, most of the other states blended state and federal dollars to provide family literacy services. In 2015-16, these 11 states and the District of Columbia each funded two to 49 programs. **Table 1** (see page 8) highlights their efforts to fund family literacy programs in 2015-16 and 2016-17.

Illinois and Pennsylvania have state allocations to fund family literacy. Illinois began funding family literacy in 1989 through the Office of the Secretary of State, which was a strong supporter of literacy. Pennsylvania has had an annual appropriation of at least 25% since 1998, when the state legislature began earmarking funds for family literacy education services through Act 143 of 1986, Title 24, Chapter 31, the Adult and Family Literacy Education Act.³²

After the demise of Even Start, advocates in Wyoming approached the state legislature to seek alternative funding for four programs. The state continued to fund these programs in part because proponents were able to provide longitudinal data indicating that high school graduation rates for students involved in family literacy programs were higher than for students with no family literacy engagement. In addition to funding the original four programs, the legislature increased funding for four more family literacy programs. State leaders hoped to increase that number; however, despite efforts from providers to offer data reflecting the efficacy of programs and support for continuation from the governor, this family

literacy funding was eliminated by the legislature in 2016 due to a shortfall in the state budget.

Connecticut and Delaware also use general state funding to supplement their AEFLA resources for family literacy programming. As in Wyoming, Even Start advocates in Connecticut appealed to their legislature to maintain funding for family literacy. Connecticut was able to obtain a state award that supplements AEFLA funds to fund family literacy programs. Programs that partner with community agencies to provide services are given funding preference in Connecticut. Delaware continues to secure general funding for family literacy from the Lieutenant Governor's Office to supplement AEFLA funds.

In South Carolina, school districts may use revenue from the Early Childhood Development and Academic Assistance Act of 1993 (Act 135) and Education Accountability Act of 1998 in addition to AEFLA funds to support family literacy programs.

Although funding practices and sources vary in DC, Louisiana, Maryland, Massachusetts, New York, and Rhode Island, the adult education and parenting components are often funded through AEFLA, and the children's education and interactive literacy components through arrangements with partners such as school districts, private foundations, workforce agencies, and community action programs. For example, AEFLA funding may be used primarily for the adult education component or it may fund both adult education and parenting activities with partners funding the other components. Nevertheless, it is common practice across all states and DC for local programs to partner with other agencies to offer the range of services needed to provide family literacy programs.

States Use Varied Approaches to Programming

Although most of the states that still fund family literacy use some variation of the four-

component Even Start model—adult education, early childhood education, parent-child interactive literacy activities (ILA), and parent education—states’ programming structures differ somewhat, with two states, New York and Massachusetts, departing considerably from the four-component model. New York funds Literacy Zones that provide “a continuum of literacy from early childhood through adulthood, including strong support for parents’ involvement in their children’s literacy development at home and engagement with the school system.”³³ Literacy Zones provide a range of supports, from family literacy to services for out-of-school youth; grant recipients must demonstrate that they are serving individuals “characterized by significant poverty and deficits in literacy and English language proficiency.”³⁴ Literacy Zones must also partner with a Family Welcome Center that offers assistance with family needs such as employment services, transportation, school-home connections, and case management.

In Massachusetts, family literacy services are provided by a range of grantees, including municipalities, local school systems, community-based agencies, faith-based organizations, community colleges, libraries, volunteer organizations, correctional facilities, labor organizations and foundations. Many grantees provide services at Community Adult Learning Centers (CALCs). Four options for providing services based on community needs are in place: (1) dedicated ABE and/or ESL classes for parents; (2) curriculum contextualized to parents’ needs and interests; (3) family action plans (i.e., individual plans, developed jointly with staff, that include family goals for students who are parents); and (4) family and community engagement as a focus of local collaborations and partnerships. Programs are allowed to provide intensive and/or short-term services to families. Intensive services require a minimum of five hours per week, 32 weeks per year; short-term activities (i.e., ILA,

family engagement) do not have a required minimum of hours or duration.

Since 1989, Illinois has funded family literacy programming through the Secretary of State (also the Secretary of Libraries.) Programs use the Even Start model with the addition of a fifth library component, through which programs introduce families to the library, help them become familiar with library services, and provide specific programming for families such as story time. Programs are required to have a library partner, adult literacy provider, and a “child at risk” agency, but the state is not prescriptive about who delivers the components. However, they do encourage integrated delivery of all of the components.

Pennsylvania implements a family literacy initiative to support the four-component model. Agencies use the Family Risk Index (based on the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s *KIDS COUNT* Data Book) to determine if they are serving families most in need. As in Even Start, home visits are allowed, but not required. Programs can use state-approved distance learning options for instructional activities to support the ILA component. In addition to program funding, the state also funds a leadership project that provides technical support and professional development for family literacy programs.

In 2015-16, the Community College Commission administered Wyoming’s family Literacy programs. They used the four-component model and offered career pathways services. Local programs had the autonomy to make decisions about policies and practices. For example, in one area the family literacy program served newborn to 12-year-olds, allowing after-school programming as part of the program. A focus on evidence-based practice centered Wyoming’s work; the state built a participant database to collect information on student attendance, hours, duration, and case notes to help inform what might influence student

Table 1: Overview of State Efforts to Fund Family Literacy (FL) Programs in 2015-16 & 2016-2017

| STATE (# Programs) | FAMILY LITERACY FUNDING* | | | | |
|-----------------------------|--------------------------|----|--|--|--------------------------|
| | 4 Components Required | | 2015-2016 | Other Funding Information | 2016-2017 |
| | Yes | No | | | |
| Connecticut (17) | X | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$1,287,713 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ \$437,713 Specially legislated state funds for 3 ES Programs ○ Total of \$850,000 AEFLA funds <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ \$700,000 (\$50,000 per program) in AEFLA funds to supplement 14 providers with FL programs; \$50,000 for 3 ES Programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds the AE component | Same as 2015-16 |
| Delaware (2) | X | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$293,300 Lieutenant Governor's Office General State Funds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds the AE component • State funds child services and intergenerational work | Same as 2015-16 |
| District of Columbia (2) | X | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$538,383.95 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Office of State Superintendent of Education(OSSE): Adult and Family Education & OSSE: ECE | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds the AE and PE component • DC Department of Employment Services (DC DOES) • DC Office on Latino Affairs • Other foundation and private funding | Same as 2015-16 |
| Illinois (24) | X & Library | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$772,769 • Secretary of State/Secretary of Libraries | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Other public, foundation and private funding • Programs required to have 3 partners: AE, ECE and library | \$567,000 17 programs |
| Louisiana (4) | | X | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$150,000 AEFLA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds AE component • Work with various partners such as local workforce development boards, agencies, and/or schools for PE, ECE & ILA components | \$47,317 |
| Maryland (13) | X | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$465,000 AEFLA | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA used for AE and PE components • Programs must partner with organizations for ECE and ILA, must have MOU with partners | Same as 2015-16 |
| Massachusetts (22) | | X | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$358,180 AEFLA • \$68,592 in local matching funds | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds AE and PE components • Encourage school districts to provide the ECE component • Level of funding based on family service hours | Same as 2015-16 |

| STATE (# Programs) | FAMILY LITERACY FUNDING* | | | | |
|--|-----------------------------|----|--|--|-----------------------|
| | 4 Components Required | | 2015-2016 | Other Funding Information | 2016- 2017 |
| | Yes | No | | | |
| New York 49 Literacy Zones | | X | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Over \$35 million in AEFLA and state funds • \$5 million Literacy Zone (approximately \$100,000 per zone) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds AE and ILA component • Literacy Zone funding is in addition to AEFLA funding • Core literacy instruction is funded out of WIOA AEFLA, which providers must have to get Literacy Zone funding • Literacy Zone funding cannot be used for ECE, it is used for case management and community outreach and partnerships • Not all Zones provide FL | Same as 2015-16 |
| Pennsylvania (20 + 1 TA project) | X | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$4,202,497 • 36% of state funds (Legislative Mandate Act 143 requires at least 25%) | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • No AEFLA funding used for adult education • Act 143 money used for AE first, then PE, ILA, and ECE • Most programs partner for some PE, ILA and ECE | Same as 2015-16 |
| Rhode Island (4) | | X | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$312,998 AEFLA and state funding | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds AE component and programs partner with school district • Community Action Program (CAP) funds PE, ILA & ECE. | Same as 2015-16 |
| South Carolina (37) | X** | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$465,000 of AEFLA funds are set aside for FL activities. • \$5,000 - \$10,000 awarded per program by an application process, (funds can be more or less depending on program needs or if the FL activities are a pilot). | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • AEFLA funds support the AE and PE components. • Programs must partner for funds to support ECE and ILA. Funds count in the one-to-one match that is required by the initiative. • Funding priority for programs that have a high number of low-income, and/or low literacy students. | Same as 2015-16 |
| Wyoming (8) | X | | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • \$3,271,157 (biannually) • \$150,000 set aside to pilot new programs | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • General state fund • Administered by Community College Commission | Program eliminated |

* KEY: ES = Even Start; AE = Adult Education; ECE = Early Childhood Education; ILA = Interactive Literacy; PE = Parenting Education

** If an AE program would like to offer FL and does not have the infrastructure to offer the required four components, special consideration may be given.

outcomes. As stated above, due to a state budget crisis in 2016, this funding was eliminated.

In South Carolina, the four components are required. However, if the program does not have the infrastructure to support the four components, the state works with the organization to develop a plan that will lead toward implementing a four component program.

In sum, the four-component Even Start model is still required in Connecticut, Delaware, the District of Columbia, Maryland, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina, while Illinois requires five components.

States Believe in the Importance of Teaching Children and Parents Together

Several state representatives indicated that family literacy programs continued to be funded after Even Start ended because of a belief in the importance of literacy programming that engages children and their parents in shared, interwoven instructional activities. Several state administrators commented that family literacy adds value to their adult education offerings because it allows parents to spend time on their own learning while their children are participating in activities that enrich their lives. As one administrator indicated:

We continued to fund family literacy programs because we recognized that often times there are barriers to parents' participation in education activities and that the ability to provide early childhood services or after-school literacy tutoring program or any type of programming to children while parents are also engaged in instructional activities is a blessing.

Helping parents to help their children with school and homework was also seen as a critical benefit by several state administrators. A number of state officials reported that they

believe family literacy is effective in terms of increasing both academic skills and opportunity for children and parents, especially those who live in poverty or have low levels of literacy, limited English proficiency, or barriers to learning. In Louisiana, New York, and South Carolina family literacy is viewed as a strategy to help boost the economic prospects of low-income families. These states are not alone in this thinking: The Center for Law and Social Policy lists family literacy programming as a strategy to reduce child poverty.³⁵

States Have Mixed Capacity to Collect Outcome Data

The challenge of collecting data was mentioned by some state officials. One official noted that they collect data on six measures for adult education under AEFLA Title II, yet there are no specific metrics for family literacy. Although there is a table to report family literacy information in the National Reporting System (NRS), data collection is not required and therefore the extent to which this data reflect family literacy programming is unclear. A few states also cited structural challenges in separating data for family literacy versus other adult education participants in their reporting systems. For example, some states may not be able to determine which adults attended family literacy programs.

Delaware, Louisiana, Massachusetts, New York, Pennsylvania, and South Carolina collect and manage family literacy-specific data, though in varying forms. New York reports extensive data collection in connection with its Literacy Zone programming. A New York administrator indicated that data from the Literacy Zones programs show educational gains for adult students, higher attendance and reduced discipline issues for school-age students, and increased parental ability to support their children in school. South Carolina reported that parent-child interactions have increased based on state-gathered data.

The lack of systematic data on family literacy programs and outcomes minimizes the ability to make informed decisions and measure the effectiveness of programming. One official commented that the lack of common outcomes for family literacy is critical because programs are unable to demonstrate their worth.

States Experience Challenges Implementing Family Literacy Programs

Although 10 states and the District of Columbia continued to fund family literacy programs (Wyoming lost funding in 2016-17), a few state officials commented on the challenges they have faced. In addition to data collection, mentioned above, insufficient resources were a common challenge both because of reduced funding with the loss of Even Start and because the four-component model can be costly to implement. As noted, some states have required programs to partner with other agencies to provide the early childhood and interactive literacy components as a cost-sharing measure. Although this strategy may alleviate strained budgets, a few state representatives noted differing reporting requirements for partner agencies, resulting in individual organizations being more concerned about their own numbers. For example, one official mentioned that the varied accountability requirements can lead to situations in which participants, particularly parents, who are seen as “high-risk” are not as desirable to partner programs because they may take longer to meet required outcomes. State officials also indicated that enrollment and consistent participation were challenging because of parents’ conflicting work schedules, family responsibilities, children’s busy school calendars, and lack of transportation.

Many Family Literacy Programs Operate Independently

After gaining this state-level perspective, we surveyed targeted programs identified by state officials and the constituents of the National Center for Families Learning via their

Aggregator to learn more about local family literacy programming and funding.

Eighty-seven programs across 28 states responded to the survey, representing a range of providers such as school districts, community-based organizations, libraries, Head Start, FACE, migrant programs, literacy councils, charter schools, adult learning centers, and community and technical colleges. Over half (54%) of the programs had operated for 11 years or more. Programs size varied considerably, with 15% serving 20 or fewer families and 34% serving more than 100. Two-thirds (67%) of programs had never received Even Start funding and drew on multiple funding streams to support family literacy programming.

Over half of the programs (56%) offered services or partnered with another agency to help parents find a job; however, only about one-third of programs included employability skill development or other opportunities to transition to employment or postsecondary education. Programs varied in the kinds of outcomes they tracked; there was only one common outcome (literacy and numeracy gains) that was reported by more than 50% of programs. By contrast, there were two common measures for adults (educational functioning levels and English language gains).

Policy Recommendations

During the 2015-16 fiscal year, 11 states and Washington DC continued to emphasize family literacy through AEFLA after the demise of Even Start.³⁶ Although this is not a large number, it is notable given decades of decreased AEFLA funding and additional requirements for services such as transition to employment or postsecondary education and training. The Workforce Innovation and Opportunities Act (WIOA) prioritizes serving low-income individuals and adults with barriers to employment—the population targeted by family literacy programs. WIOA also emphasizes greater involvement by adult education providers with workforce partners,

programming focused on career pathways and Integrated Education and Training (IET), and heightened performance measures related to employment retention and median wages. These increased expectations are important to adult learners, including those who are parents. However, for many of these parents, family literacy programs are the only viable educational opportunity that addresses their multiple goals and needs, which may include immediate employment or postsecondary education. For example, parents can attend class while their young children receive early childhood education, mitigating the childcare barrier. Parenting classes encompass multiple strategies such as building positive education trajectories, enhancing community engagement and advocacy skills, fostering academic success, and planning for postsecondary education for both parents and their children. Furthermore, when parents and children learn together in interactive literacy activities, a cohesive family learning environment is modeled and supported.

Although it may seem costly to fund this multifaceted model, the reality is that the components are often funded and delivered as standalone programs because they each have value. However, this practice of separating the four components undermines a coherent strategy to support low-income and marginalized families and reduces efficiency and effectiveness. Funders should revisit offering and integrating the four components to reduce duplication of effort and maximize resources as well as help parents realize the interconnectedness of their and their children's education. These findings have important implications for policy, outlined below.

Increase Funding

It is critical to invest in the education of children and adults learning together, particularly those with low literacy and numeracy skills, to diminish the K-12 achievement gap and improve the economic prospects of low-income families. Since 2010, federal funding for adult

education has decreased 17%³⁷, requiring states to do more with less. Furthermore, according to our analysis, the reduction of adult education funding and the elimination of Even Start funding influenced some states' decisions not to use resources for family literacy programming. This decision is shortsighted given the importance of parent's educational attainment as demonstrated by the PIAAC results. Reinvesting in adult basic education and family literacy is more important now than ever.

- Re-establish dedicated funding to provide a four-component family literacy model that enables parents to increase educational attainment, employability and occupational skills, parenting skills, community engagement, and social capital, along with children's academic development.
- Increase AEFLA funds so that family literacy is a targeted program that includes the four components and require states to use a percentage of AEFLA funds for family literacy—federal, state match, or both.
- Require a percentage of ESSA funding to be earmarked and combined with AEFLA to help fund a four-component family literacy model.
- Provide planning grants to help local areas—particularly where there are high concentrations of low-income and immigrant families—braid funding so that resources can be strategically used to offer integrated family literacy services.
- Increase support for family literacy services in Head Start as defined by the Improving School Readiness for Head Start Act of 2007 (Sec.637(4)(A)(B)(C) & (D) [42 U.S. C 9801]),³⁸ which follows a similar four-component family literacy model, to require parent literacy training.

Build Evidence and Document Accountability

Family literacy programs have not received adequate guidance and opportunity to establish

their value and effectiveness. The Even Start program was dismantled based on limited and questionable research. Furthermore, outcomes for family literacy programs have never been clearly defined, nor have data been collected to help programs demonstrate their worth. WIOA provides a starting point for identifying viable measures for family literacy participants through interim progress measures, known as the Measurable Skills Gains. The following recommendations will help determine program outcomes and inform systematic data collection that relates to the multi-dimensional goals of the four-component family literacy model:

- Establish a federal discretionary grant program that funds research related to effective practice, long-term results and impacts, and the return on investment of family literacy programming.
- Identify shared performance measures and outcomes to adequately document the results and benefits of family literacy programming to inform local, state, and national program improvement and policy.
- Provide technical assistance to family literacy providers to collect and use data for continuous program improvement.

Support Economic and Family Prosperity

Over ten million families make up the working poor in the U.S., relegating 24 million children to living in poverty or near-poverty.³⁹ Parents in these families, in addition to non-working and underemployed parents, would benefit from family literacy programs that incorporate an intentional focus on employability skills, occupational skills training, transitions to postsecondary education, and English language development. Each of these strategies is key to helping adults to access better and more stable jobs, which in turn can offer a more secure life for children.

- Establish models and best practices that combine family literacy programming with employability programming such as service learning, sectoral employment training, and/or career pathways. Ensure that such programming leads to industry recognized credentials and/or licenses and family-sustaining wages.
- Provide supportive services (e.g., child care) that address barriers to participating in family programming and also enable parents to build employability skills.
- Explore instructional strategies that help parents and their children to learn about and plan for educational opportunities that lead to family-sustaining careers.

Conclusion

Although funding for adult education and family literacy has decreased substantially over the years, a small, yet dedicated, group of states and local programs continues to offer family literacy services to adults and their children. These states and local programs have fostered partnerships and braided funding to preserve and support family literacy programs and services. For many adults, family literacy programming is an important educational opportunity to develop their own skills and to help their children progress in key academic skills. From a broader perspective, family literacy offers a program model that can enhance parents' literacy and employability skills as well as lead to postsecondary opportunities and family sustaining employment. The PIAAC data demonstrate the widening achievement gap and assert the crucial relationship between parental education and the survey respondent's literacy ability in the U.S. Education for parents and their children is vital for the success of families and the nation. This paper poses a rationale and recommendations to support family literacy programs as an essential strategy for assisting low-income families to improve their education and employment prospects.

¹ U.S. Department of Education (2014), Even Start Purpose [Webpage]. Retrieved from: <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula/index.html>, para 1.

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³ PIAAC is a large-scale, international assessment of literacy, numeracy and problem solving in technology-rich environments administered in 2011-12 in 23 countries with a population of 16- to 65-year-olds who were non-institutionalized, residing in the country—irrespective of nationality, citizenship, or language status,

⁴ The "Skills of U.S. Unemployed, Young, and Older Adults in Sharper Focus" report, available on the NCES website, provides many more details. For more information on PIAAC and the 2012/2014 U.S. results, please visit the PIAAC website at <http://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/>.

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¹³ Augustus F. Hawkins - Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. 101-297, 102 Stat. 130, 20 USC 2701, § 1051.

¹⁴ No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, 1 C.F.R., pt. 34 (2002).

¹⁵ US Department of Education. (2014). Even Start (Archived Information). Retrieved April 1, 2016, from <http://www2.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula/index.html>

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