

Response to OMB's "PART" Report on Federal Administration of the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program

The Cuts and Consequences

The President's budget proposal for Fiscal Year (FY) 2007, once again, recommends ending funding for the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program. For FY 2006 and FY 2005 the President also requested eliminating the funding. The program is currently funded at \$99 Million.

If funding for Even Start ends, 44,000 families, including 47,000 parents and 67,000 children living in poverty will have fewer opportunities to participate in education services to increase basic skills leading to additional education, English proficiency, and self-sufficiency. More than half are Hispanic immigrant and refugee families.

OMB's PART Report on Even Start

The Administration cites a 2002 OMB Performance Assessment Rating Tool (PART) report on the Even Start Family Literacy Program as justification for eliminating funding. The PART report, however, provides no substantive justification for denying education to the Nation's most vulnerable families. The OMB does not claim to be proficient in the best practices of scientifically based, research-driven education policy or fulfillment. Its primary function in undertaking the PART process is to evaluate the Administration's own management performance. In this case it has found that performance wanting. These OMB findings are suspect and self-fulfilling attempts to cut federal spending across the board. PART does not provide an independent rationale for denying the continuing education to the thousands of vulnerable families currently served through Even Start.

The following analysis reviews PART criticisms of Even Start and questions their validity.

Response to OMB's PART Report on Even Start

*The PART report states that Even Start is duplicative of other programs. **However...***

- Even Start is not duplicative of other education programs. Local programs must build on high quality existing educational services. Even Start grantees provide educational services only when they do not have access to a required education partner in their service area or if those services are not of high quality.
- Local Even Start programs must "integrate early childhood education, adult literacy, and parenting education into a unified family literacy program" that, in turn, reaches "families most in need of services as indicated by a low level of income, a low level of adult literacy, or English language proficiency of the eligible parent or parents..."
- Legislative language that "allows" family literacy does not mean that those services actually are offered.
- Even Start is the only program in the Department of Education that serves children from birth to three; ages that comprise the most important period for brain development and for the foundation for learning.
- 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.
- The U.S. Department of Education website states that, "no other education program serves a comparable population." They are poorer than those served in Head Start, with four times as many families below the poverty level¹ and all Even Start families have parents with limited basic and/or English language skills.

¹ Even Start Facts and Figures located at: www.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/sasa/esfacts.html

The PART report states that Even Start is not effective based on national evaluations, regardless of state evaluations that show otherwise and that changes in funding levels would have not have any impact.

However...

- The National Evaluations of Even Start are based on data collected prior to improvements requiring scientifically based practices and accountability legislated in the LIFT and No Child Left Behind Acts of 2000 and 2001, respectively. A Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy analysis identified shortcomings in implementation of the Third National Even Start Evaluation and its underlying assumptions concerning Even Start's operation at the local level.
- Given the level of need and the mandated improvements to the program since 2001, the PART Even Start report might more accurately acknowledge that Even Start performs as well as the other programs cited, as opposed to taking the negative point of view that, "*None of the studies could show that the parents or children who received these services (Even Start) made greater gains than those who do not.*"
- To counter the conclusion that changes in funding would have little impact would require post-reform Even Start evaluations that, to date, have not been implemented.

*The PART report states that Even Start lacks sufficient data from states to set numerical targets for long-term and annual performance so cannot assess progress toward meeting them or the impact of Federal funding. It also is criticized for lacking a strategic planning network and an appraisal system that holds Federal managers accountable for grantee performance, and for not implementing measures and procedures to improve cost-efficiency. **However...***

- At the time of the PART review (2002) the Department of Education had not successfully implemented the federal Government Performance Review Act (GPRA) and, therefore, did not have a system in place for evaluating its programs, including Even Start. Since that time, the Even Start GPRA initiative has established processes to collect baseline data and set numerical targets.
- The lack of measurements does not advance, in and of itself, the conclusion that the program is "ineffective." States are expected to and are implementing policies and procedures that hold local Even Start grantees responsible for improving the participant outcomes and using related performance indicators to make funding decisions, thereby holding local grantees accountability.²
- Most of these criticisms of Even Start are Federal agency tasks and Administration responsibilities that have contributed to the inability of Even Start programs to aggregate data and document effectiveness at the national level. These are administrative issues outside the control of program providers or participants and do not reflect the program's effectiveness in practice.
- Budget decisions that weaken Even Start programs' ability to be effective are being made without the Department of Education fully implementing long-sought measurement instruments.

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March 2006

² See, for example, Colorado Even Start Progress Report 2004-2005; Statewide Evaluation of Pennsylvania Family Literacy Programs 2004-05 (in draft); Nebraska Even Start Family Literacy Programs 2004-2005.