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Even Start: Funding Controversy

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Summary

The Even Start program provides education and related services jointly to disadvantaged parents and their young children. The purpose of the program is to integrate early childhood education, adult basic education, and parenting skills education into a unified family literacy program. Even Start program services must include adult literacy instruction, early childhood education, instruction to help parents support their child's education, participant recruitment, screening of parents, staff training, and home-based instruction. Even Start serves an extremely disadvantaged population. In 2000-2001, 85% of Even Start parents did not have a high school diploma and 84% of Even Start families lived below the federal poverty line.

The Even Start program, first authorized in 1989, grew rapidly in its first years, but it has been subject to increasing criticism in recent years and has seen its funding decline in FY2003, FY2004, FY2005, and most notably in FY2006. The Administration requested no funding for the program for either FY2005 or FY2006. In the FY2006 budget justification, the Administration argued that the program has not demonstrated that it has been effective in improving child and adult learning outcomes through the integration of the four core services of adult education, parenting education, parent-child activities, and early childhood education. The Administration argues that these conclusions are supported by data from three national evaluations of Even Start, as well as poor ratings on their Program Assessment Rating Tool system (PART).

Advocates of the Even Start program argue that the goal of providing integrated family literacy services to an extremely disadvantaged population is so important that the program should not be eliminated or have its funding cut. Furthermore, they argue that a thorough study of the impact of legislatively mandated quality improvements to Even Start is needed, as well as a concerted effort to improve the program through implementation of model programs and technical assistance.

The *Third National Even Start Evaluation* has suggested several areas in which the Even Start program could be enhanced to improve participant outcomes. First, it noted that the quality and content of language instruction provided in Even Start programs should be made the most important priority for programs, and that language instruction must be improved based on recent scientific research. Second, it found that families did not participate long enough or receive instruction of sufficient intensity to achieve program goals. Finally, it recommended that future research focus on identifying effective family literacy practices and instructional services to serve as models for improving Even Start projects.

This report will be updated periodically.

Contents

Background	1
Even Start Evaluations	2
Should the Even Start Program Be Eliminated?	4
Program Improvement	6

List of Tables

Table 1. Even Start Funding: 1989-2005	3
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Even Start: Funding Controversy

Background

The William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy program (Even Start), authorized by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) Title I, Part B, provides education and related services jointly to disadvantaged parents and their young children. The purpose of the program is to integrate early childhood education, adult basic education, and parenting skills education into a unified family literacy program. The U.S. Department of Education (ED) provides formula grants to states which then distribute them to eligible entities — consisting of a local education agency (LEA) in collaboration with a community based organization — for joint programs of education for children ages 0-7 and their parents.¹

Even Start program services must include adult literacy instruction, early childhood education, instruction to help parents support their child's education, participant recruitment, screening of parents, staff training, and home-based instruction. Five percent of Even Start funds is reserved for programs serving migrant children plus the outlying areas and Indian tribes;² and up to 3% is reserved for a national evaluation, technical assistance, and program improvement. Even Start programs must be coordinated with other programs with similar purposes, operate year-round, and be independently evaluated. The federal share of Even Start projects' costs is limited to 90% for the first year, gradually declining to 35% for the ninth and subsequent years.³

Even Start serves an extremely disadvantaged population. In 2000-2001, 85% of Even Start parents did not have a high school diploma and 84% of Even Start families lived below the federal poverty line. By comparison to Head Start families overall, Even Start families are considerably more disadvantaged. Data from 1997 indicate that 41% of Even Start families had an annual income below \$6,000, compared to 13% of Head Start families in the same year; and 13% of Even Start parents had a high school diploma or GED (high school equivalency degree) compared to 71% of Head Start parents.⁴

¹ Although services are for children up to age 7, they may be provided to children up to age 8, if they are provided in collaboration with an ESEA Title I, Part A program.

² The reservation is *six percent* if appropriations are more than \$200 million.

³ For more information on the program see CRS Report RL30448, *Even Start Family Literacy Programs: An Overview*, by Gail McCallion and Wayne Riddle.

⁴ U.S. Department of Education, Planning and Evaluation Service, Elementary and Secondary Education Division, *Third National Even Start Evaluation: Program Impacts and Implications for Improvement*, Washington, D.C., 2003.

The Even Start program was reauthorized in the 106th Congress by the Departments of Labor, Health and Human Services, Education and Related Agencies Appropriations Act for FY2001 (P.L. 106-554). ESEA Title I, Part B was renamed the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Programs, and was reauthorized for five years beginning with an authorization of \$250 million for FY2001. The legislation included several changes intended to improve Even Start quality and accountability. The reauthorizing language in P.L. 106-554 was largely the same as language contained in the Literacy Involves Families Together (LIFT) Act, H.R. 3222 (Goodling), which was passed by the full House on September 12, 2000. The reauthorized Even Start program was subsequently incorporated in P.L. 107-110 (The No Child Left Behind Act of 2001), and moved to Subpart 3 of Title I, Part B of ESEA.

The Even Start program, first authorized in 1989, grew rapidly in its first years, but it has been subject to increasing criticism in recent years and has seen its funding decline in FY2003, FY2004, FY2005, and most notably in FY2006. The Administration requested no funding for the program for either FY2005 or FY2006. The entire funding history for the program is illustrated and documented in **Table 1**, below. The rationale given for eliminating the program is the disappointing results from national evaluations of the program. Moreover, the Administration maintains that Even Start resources should be directed to other literacy programs it argues are potentially more efficacious. In addition, the Administration's Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) for 2004 rated the Even Start program as ineffective.⁵

Even Start Evaluations

There have been three national Evaluations of Even Start, the most recent based on 2000-2001 data. This latest evaluation, the *Third National Even Start Evaluation* (hereafter, the *Evaluation*) relied on two data sources — an experimental design study (EDS) that tracked 18 projects that agreed to randomly assign new families to Even Start or a control group; and the Even Start Performance Information Reporting System which tracks annual data from the universe of Even Start projects. Although families participating in the EDS were randomly assigned to either a control or an Even Start group, the 18 projects participating were not randomly selected. The EDS families were more likely than Even Start families as a whole to be Hispanic (75% versus 46%), and to be participating in Even Start projects in urban areas (83% versus 55%).

The national evaluation collected data on 41 different outcome measures for the families participating in the EDS study.⁶ The results indicated that the Even Start children and their parents did not perform better than the control group children and

⁵ PART is a system developed by the Administration to evaluate and improve program performance.

⁶ The *Third National Even Start Evaluation* was conducted for ED by Abt Associates Inc., and Fu Associates, Ltd.

Table 1. Even Start Funding: 1989-2005

Year	Funding amount
1989	\$14,820,000
1990	\$24,201,000
1991	\$49,770,000
1992	\$70,000,000
1993	\$89,123,000
1994	\$91,373,000
1995	\$102,024,000
1996	\$101,997,000
1997	\$101,992,000
1998	\$124,000,000
1999	\$135,000,000
2000	\$150,000,000
2001	\$250,000,000
2002	\$250,000,000
2003	\$248,375,000
2004	\$246,910,000
2005	\$225,095,000
2006	\$99,000,000

Source: U.S. Department of Education Justifications of Appropriations Estimates to the Congress.

Note: These amounts are not adjusted for price level changes.

their parents. Even Start children and their parents made gains in literacy and other measures, but so did control group parents and children:

The data show that children and parents in the control group made the same kinds of gains on literacy assessments, on parent reports of child literacy, on parent-child reading, on literacy resources at home, on family economic self-sufficiency, and so on, that were seen for Even Start families.⁷

The only area in which Even Start children did significantly better than control group children was in teacher reports of behavior problems for elementary school aged children. The evaluation indicated that the overall quality of services provided to children and families were equal to, but not better than, competing programs.

⁷ *Third National Even Start Evaluation*, p. 165.

In addition, a 2003 study of state implementation of Even Start titled *State Administration of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: Structure, Process and Practices* found very little consistency among states in the performance indicators submitted to ED or in the performance standards or subgroups evaluated by these measures. According to this study, implementation of these standards was just beginning at the time of this evaluation, and most states did not begin collection of these data until 2002.⁸

Should the Even Start Program Be Eliminated?

The Administration argues that data from the three national evaluations of Even Start, as well as poor ratings on the PART system, justify the elimination of the Even Start program. In its FY2006 budget justification it argued that the program has not demonstrated that it has been effective in improving child and adult learning outcomes through the integration of the four core services of adult education, parenting education, parent-child activities, and early childhood education:

The key premise underlying the Even Start program is that the integration of the four core instructional components of adult education, parenting education, parent-child activities, and early childhood education adds value to the individual components. This premise, while appealing, is largely untested. The extent to which family literacy programs (or adult education programs more generally) can enhance parent literacy and parenting skills is unknown. Assuming that it is possible to significantly alter parent literacy and parenting skills, it is unclear that these changes will translate into improved child development. These and many other questions about the family literacy model, and Even Start specifically, have yet to be answered.⁹

Advocates of the Even Start program contend that the goal of providing integrated family literacy services to an extremely disadvantaged population is so important that the program should not be eliminated or have its funding cut. Furthermore, they argue that a thorough study of the impact of legislatively mandated quality improvements to Even Start is needed, as well as a concerted effort to improve the program through implementation of model programs and technical assistance.

Data employed in the *Evaluation* were based on the program before full implementation of legislative changes passed in the LIFT Act and incorporated in the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLBA). The most significant of these changes to the Even Start program included new requirements that the services provided build on existing *high quality* community services; the program use its resources to improve the academic achievement of Even Start children and families; instructional services

⁸ U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary, *State Administration of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: Structure, Process and Practices*, Washington, D.C., 2003.

⁹ U.S. Department of Education, *Fiscal Year 2006: Justifications of Appropriation Estimates to the Congress*, p. A-42.

be based on scientifically based reading research; reading readiness activities be included for preschool children; Even Start staff meet more stringent qualifications; higher intensity and continuity of services be encouraged; and programs employ “continuing use of evaluation data for program improvement,” and provide information on how their plan “provides for rigorous and objective evaluation of progress toward” meeting the program’s stated objectives.¹⁰

States were also required to submit a plan for performance indicators of program quality for Even Start programs within the state by June 2001 to ED in order to be eligible for continued funding under the program. Most states had not yet begun collection of performance indicator data at the time data were collected for the *Third National Evaluation of Even Start* and the *State Administration of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: Structure, Process and Practices*. These indicators must include measures of adult achievement in the following areas: reading, writing, problem solving, numeracy, English language acquisition, high school graduation or GED, college entrance, and employment advancement. For Even Start children these indicators must include measures of achievement in reading readiness and ability to read at grade level, school attendance, and grade retention and promotion. These indicators could provide information on the program’s performance following the changes implemented in the LIFT and NCLB Acts, and might be used in guiding further program changes.

ED is currently conducting a peer review of state Even Start indicators and is providing technical assistance to states to strengthen performance indicators and their use by states. In addition, ED has begun an evaluation of new model interventions emphasizing high quality early literacy instruction in Even Start programs. The *Even Start Classroom Literacy Interventions and Outcomes Study (CLIO)* examines the efficacy of four enhanced early childhood and parenting education models in Even Start programs and compares the outcomes from these models to those of Even Start programs without these enhancements. All of the model programs include enhanced early literacy instruction with the following components: oral language, phonological processing, print awareness, and letter knowledge. In addition, two of the model programs also include an enhanced parenting education component that is linked to the early childhood education component: “conceptually and in instructional approach.” If model interventions prove successful, they have the potential, if widely adopted by local programs, to improve Even Start participant outcomes. However, interim results from these model interventions will not be available until September of 2006.¹¹

¹⁰ All changes to Even Start included in the LIFT Act are discussed in CRS Report RL30448, *Even Start Family Literacy Programs: An Overview*, by Gail McCallion and Wayne Riddle.

¹¹ CLIO interventions will be implemented in 2004-2005 and 2005-2006, and data will be collected from 2004-2005 through 2007-2008. Interim results will be available in Sept. 2006, and a final report will be issued by Sept. 2009.

Program Improvement

The *Evaluation* has suggested several areas in which the Even Start program could be enhanced to improve participant outcomes. First, it noted that the quality and content of language instruction provided in Even Start programs should be improved. Second, it found that families did not participate long enough or receive instruction of sufficient intensity to achieve program goals. Both are critical for improved program outcomes. According to the *Evaluation*:

If we expect children to learn more in Even Start than they would otherwise learn (by participating in a control group), then the overall quality of Even Start early childhood education, and especially the emphasis on language acquisition and reasoning, will have to be better than, not the same as, the instruction offered by competing programs. Currently, this does not appear to be the case.¹²

Looking at early childhood education programs that have achieved large short-term effects on I.Q. tests, such as the Abecedarian and Infant Health and Development Programs, the *Evaluation's* authors concluded that Even Start families were not receiving sufficient early childhood education to meet their goals. In 2000-2001 Even Start children between the ages of 0-5 received an average of 220 hours of instruction; 20%-25% of the amount of instruction received by recipients in the Abecedarian and Infant Health and Development Program. The *Evaluation* concludes that:

The implication is clear — the early childhood programs that have produced the largest effects on child development are those that are able to engage children in full-time, year round center-based instructional services using a single curriculum. Given the great needs of Even Start families, the best possible family literacy program would be able to engage families intensively for a very substantial period of time.¹³

However, succeeding in achieving greater intensity and duration of Even Start services will not be easy to accomplish given the economic and social constraints experienced by Even Start families. In 2000-2001, although an average of only 220 hours of instruction were received by children aged 0-5, an average of 591 hours was offered by Even Start programs. And, although Even Start programs strive to provide multi-year services to participants, the average tenure of an Even Start family is only 10 months. Barriers to participation are great for Even Start families: “These barriers are myriad, from dispositional (fear of schooling, lack of self-confidence), institutional (location of services or schedule), and situational (lack of child care, transportation).”¹⁴

¹² *Third National Even Start Evaluation*, p. 8.

¹³ *Ibid.*, p. 12.

¹⁴ Diane Weirauch, *Even Start Revisited: A Counter to the Third National Even Start Evaluation Program Impacts and Implications for Improvement (2003)*, The Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy, College of Education, Penn State University, 2005, p. 5.

According to the *Evaluation*, to be more successful, Even Start must make the quality of instruction provided by programs its primary focus. Because Even Start programs are legislatively mandated to build on existing resources, some Even Start programs may be negatively impacted by the quality of services provided by their collaborators. The legislation requires that programs must work to ensure that existing resources are used only if they are of *high quality*. And instructional quality may be enhanced by more targeting to families and children with similar needs. Because of the complicated array of services that must be coordinated and/or provided by Even Start programs, they may be spreading themselves too thin by providing such varied services to parents and children of such different ages and divergent needs. And finally, according to the *Evaluation*, Even Start projects would benefit from more research on effective family literacy practices and instructional services, and on how best to meet the needs of diverse participants, including the growing segment of Even Start participants with limited English skills.¹⁵

¹⁵ *Third National Even Start Evaluation*, p. 17.