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Changes in Family Literacy Funding and Welfare Policy: Consequences for Pennsylvania Family Literacy Programs

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Key Findings

Due to federal budget cuts in 2005-06, 11 family literacy programs in Pennsylvania switched from federal Even Start to state (Act 143) funding. Simultaneously, state welfare requirements stipulated that in most circumstances adult education is not an allowable work activity for welfare recipients over age 20. This study examined how these policy changes affected 10 Pennsylvania family literacy programs. The study reveals that the combination of these policy changes, coupled with the need to meet state standards, created distinctive challenges for programs, especially in student recruitment. Secondly, the effects of the policies were mediated by factors such as program size, structure, and geographic location, local infrastructure (e.g., transportation), and program participants' characteristics. Thirdly, the Act 143 and welfare policies had numerous, unintended ripple effects, affecting multiple programmatic areas and transcending the boundaries of government agencies. Fourthly, the findings show that the effects of policy changes are diverse and contradictory, simultaneously opening some opportunities while foreclosing others. Finally, the study illustrates the creative, resourceful ways that family literacy professionals respond to shifting policies.

Key Implications

The awareness that changes in funding and other government policies are routine, coupled with the adoption of innovative strategies, can enable family literacy and adult education programs to adapt to unanticipated changes in state and federal policies. Program directors advocated increasing alignment between state and federal family literacy guidelines and reporting systems and allowing state-funded family literacy programs to serve dual-enrolled students and teen parents in school and to apply for state funds for which they are currently ineligible. Directors underscored the importance of education in enabling welfare recipients to acquire and retain higher-wage employment. Policy recommendations included counting adult education as a core activity; setting realistic expectations for the time required to obtain a GED; providing financial support to pursue education after finding work; increasing coordination between state welfare and education agencies; and ensuring that education and welfare regulations do not penalize families for being poor.

Introduction

From 2005 to 2006 federal funding for Even Start family literacy decreased from \$225 to \$99 million. Consequently, as of summer 2008, 11 Even Start programs in Pennsylvania had shifted from federal to state (Act 143) funding. Due to differences in federal and state guidelines, the transition prompted many programmatic changes in areas such as recruitment, retention, professional roles and development, program identity, collaboration with partner agencies, and more. In October 2006, the Pennsylvania Department of Public Welfare (DPW) changed the state's definition of core activities for welfare recipients in order to meet the revised federal work participation rate of 50%. Consequently, for clients over age 20, family literacy, GED, ESL, or ABE attendance is no longer a core activity, except "when combined with a career-specific curriculum and embedded within a program that prepares the individual for employment" (DPW, 2006, p. 41). In both cases, state agencies played an important role in implementing federal policies (Belzer, 2007). Together, these policy changes have profoundly affected family literacy programs serving families in poverty.

The purpose of this study was to learn how these two changes in federal and state policies have influenced 10 family literacy programs in Pennsylvania and how program personnel have responded to these policy shifts. The findings provide a deeper understanding of how federal and state policy decisions shape everyday operations "on the ground." Further, the study highlights the unforeseen, often contradictory consequences of such policies, including the benefits and challenges they pose for family literacy programs.

Methods

We conducted three focus groups with ten program directors and other staff members from nine family literacy programs and interviewed the director of an additional program. The interview and focus groups were conducted by phone via conference call. All but one program that switched

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from Even Start to Act 143 funding since 2006 agreed to participate in the study. The family literacy programs were located in urban, rural, and suburban regions across Pennsylvania. Six programs were contracted to serve 20 to 45 families, two programs served 50 to 70, and two programs served 110 to 130, for an average of 55 families per program.

Focus group and interview questions explored the consequences of (a) the transition from Even Start to Act 143 family literacy funding and (b) recent changes in welfare policies regarding educational activities. We added the latter topic after hearing from several family literacy professionals (prior to the study) that their programs were losing participants and having difficulty meeting enrollment standards due to the new welfare requirements. Directors were asked to discuss their greatest successes and challenges in making the transition to Act 143, the effects of the funding change and new welfare requirements on their programs, the ways staff responded to the new policies, their opinions of these policy changes, and, in the case of welfare, their recommendations (if any) for changing requirements for core activities. Focus group and interview transcripts were coded and analyzed to identify central topics.

The Transition from Even Start to Act 143 Funding

Successes and Benefits

Directors identified their program's greatest successes in switching from Even Start to Act 143, as well as benefits of Act 143 guidelines compared to Even Start. Although the transition was more difficult for some programs than for others, all programs were still serving families, something they considered a success. For several programs, success entailed making a "smooth," "seamless" transition for students by keeping the same staff and program services. Thus, students "were not even aware that there had been a change of services." One program was able to increase its adult education hours by offering more classes through coordination with the local Intermediate Unit. The transition prompted another program to use more distance education, which provided students with new opportunities.

Three programs considered it a success that their program still existed, survived the first year under Act 143, or continued to work with families and referral agencies. For programs that made significant changes, making the transition was itself a success, for it required the creation of new programmatic structures, recruitment strategies, and other changes described in this brief.

The most frequently cited benefit of Act 143 guidelines compared to Even Start was not having to do regular home visitation. Most programs either stopped doing regular home visits or reduced the number of visits. Overall, directors appreciated relief from the "pressure" of this requirement, believing this freed up staff members' time for other responsibilities.

For programs that formerly had both Even Start and Act 143 contracts, another benefit was the ease of following one set of requirements and managing one contract instead of two. Other benefits included not having to secure local matching funds, as required by Even Start, and extending the program's use of distance education.

Challenges and Disadvantages

The most frequently mentioned challenges were, by far, the inability to dual-enroll students and to serve teen parents who are still in school. These differences between Even Start and Act 143 requirements had numerous ripple effects.

Dual Enrollment. Under Act 143, programs cannot count toward enrollment students who are enrolled in family literacy services and who also receive adult education services from a state- or federally-funded agency. After losing dual-enrolled students, some programs had more difficulty enrolling their contracted number of families and therefore spent more time and resources on recruitment. The inability to dual-enroll put staff members in a tenuous position of trying to meet students' educational needs and enrollment performance standards, which in turn shaped program placement decisions in unintended ways (see Box 1).

Box 1: What it really boiled down to most of the time, unfortunately, is not what program provides the best service, but do they have kids. You know, it's just that cut and dried: Do you have children, and if you do have children, [family literacy] is where you are going. That is not a good way to run the program and provide services, but because we can't dual-enroll, we are always thinking of, 'Well, we need the numbers. We need the numbers. We need the numbers.' That was something that we didn't think about before [under Even Start]. We thought about services first and then numbers later.

Act 143 funds "must primarily be used to provide the adult education component of the program" (PDE, 2008, p. 38). This provision required a shift in skills, mindset, and use of staff time. Programs adjusted their budgets to provide adult education instruction and train staff to adopt new roles. For instance, the "hardest transition" for one program was shifting from Even Start's collaboration model to providing its own adult education services—a "huge cultural change" for staff who were accustomed to supervising field staff, not teaching. Programs also had to cross-train staff because they had to provide all four program components, could not afford to hire more instructors, and (in some cases) provided services at several sites. Since programs could not dual-enroll students, teachers had to be trained as "experts in ESL and adult ed and GED and distance learning and pretty much everything." Although directors considered cross-training a "good thing," they worried that doing a lot of it "took away from direct services."

Teen Parents in School. Unlike Even Start programs, Act 143 programs cannot serve teen parents who are enrolled in high school. Four of the ten programs cited this change as a significant challenge. These programs lost 60% or more of their participants and subsequently had to alter recruitment strategies to meet enrollment targets. One program's small size and rural location magnified the consequences of this policy change because the program had a limited population from which to recruit new students. Conversely, large programs and those serving few teen parents in school were not adversely affected by this change.

A few programs used other funding sources to continue providing some services for teen parents, but they could no longer participants toward enrollment or other standards. Moreover, directors related that teen parents no longer benefitted from intensive family literacy services to help them stay in school, and that the program's relationship with high school partners had changed, since schools no longer saw the program as a resource for students.

Shift from Center-Based to Site-Based Program. To compensate for the loss of dual-enrolled students and teen parents (as well as many welfare recipients), three programs (two urban and one rural) shifted from a center-based to a site-based or satellite model where teachers "go to different sites and provide the services in the community." Teachers either carried supplies with them or bought materials for multiple sites, which directors considered an inefficient use of resources. In two programs, the shift to a model where "everybody is on the move" altered staff members' daily routines and morale because they spent more time driving to distant sites and did not know how many people would come on a given day (see Box 2).

Box 2: I think it affects them because they get to a place and then you never know what you are going to get. You don't know if the students are going to come that day and so you get there and... they don't show up and then you've got to drive back to the center and then wait to go to the next site. That is bothersome for them.

Several directors believed the site-based model diminished students' "sense of belonging." Providing services at a center evoked more of a "community feeling" because it brought together families from different neighborhoods and because learners felt like they were "going to school."

Home Visitation Requirement. Directors mentioned two disadvantages of not having to do home visits. The reduction in home visits affected teachers' relationships with families (see Box 3).

To "retain some of [the] intimacy" afforded by home visits, one program decided to incorporate a "home visit day," while another program began having students meet individually with teachers to review their goals. In another case, the decrease in home visits changed the program's relation-

Box 3: When we were required to do home visits I think we knew more about the families and we did more...The families form a better bond with the teachers when they have them come into their homes...You also see the weaknesses and the strengths the parents have when you go into their homes and they are there with their kids. So that really helps the teachers know what's helping in class and what they need to work on.

ship with the school districts and Children and Youth agencies that relied on them to do home visits, leading to a reduction in referrals.

Loss of Resources and Identity. For some programs, the shift to Act 143 meant losing resources. For instance, one program "went from a huge program with a lot of funding to this little program with hardly any funding" because it lost the sub-contractees who had provided adult education as well as the matching funds that were required by Even Start.

Four directors also noted the loss of Summer Reading Program (SRP) funds, which covered part of staff salaries and administrative time, among other expenses. (The state cut these funds to help support Act 143 family literacy program operating budgets.) Thus, programs provided fewer services to families during the summer and had to identify ways to absorb the costs. Due to different spending guidelines for Act 143 and Even Start, a director worried they would not be able to use state funds to replace the program's aging van.

Lastly, for some programs the shift to Act 143 entailed a "loss of identity" as Even Start; this prompted a "really big identity crisis" regarding their ways of working.

Programmatic Changes and Responses to the Transition

Some directors reported an "easy" transition with minor changes in the way their program operates, while others described a difficult transition with substantial adjustments. The nature of the transition depended partly on program size, structure, and partnerships, participant characteristics, and rural or urban location. Here, we identify the steps staff members took to prepare for and make the transition to Act 143.

Communication about the Transition. Talking to the state Family Literacy Coordinator beforehand helped directors and their staff know what programmatic changes to expect. Another director found it helpful to tell teachers what the transition would entail. However, staff members did not discuss the funding change with students because they wanted to make a "seamless" transition for them.

Staff Training and Consistency. Some programs began cross-training staff in order to provide multiple types of instruction. Staff members also assumed

distinct roles and responsibilities such as direct instruction instead of supervision. For several programs staff members' longevity in the program and professional knowledge were keys to the transition.

Program Structure and Services. Programs altered their structure to meet the Act 143 requirements by providing site-based services, changing class schedules, or expanding the use of distance education, mainly to increase the number of adult education hours. Distance education was especially important for a rural program in which families could attend classes at the site only "one or two days a week if that."

Recruitment, Outreach, and Partnerships. To compensate for the loss of teen parents and dual-enrolled students, some programs worked harder at recruitment, outreach, and developing new partnerships, for example, with Head Start and child care coordinating groups. One program sought to recruit families with children in school or Head Start so that the program could provide less child care. To meet enrollment standards, some programs placed students with children in family literacy instead of another program in the organization, while also striving to meet the students' needs through personalized service (e.g., emphasizing workplace skills).

Getting Appropriate Credit for Services. Due to decreased enrollment and instructional hours, some programs re-examined how they calculated specific services—for example, what counts as "parenting" and "parent and child time"—to ensure they received appropriate credit in state evaluations. However, a director worried that spending "a lot of time trying to figure out how to count [and] get credit" for services could inadvertently "take away" from a program's quality.

Advice for Other Programs

Directors offered the following advice for programs changing from Even Start to Act 143.

- "Be glad you are still funded."
- "Be open to the change. Just because you are changing your funding sources doesn't mean the whole program is changing."
- Be aware of the differences between Even Start and Act 143 (e.g., how adult education hours are counted) and clearly communicate these changes to instructors.
- Inform program partners of program changes and guidelines.
- Consider how to continue collaborative relationships under the Act 143 guidelines, particularly for Even Start programs that relied on partners to provide adult education.
- "Be seamless at the sites where the classes are happening so that the students do not feel [the program] is different."
- "You've got to build on your strength[s] and whatever changes that you need to make, you can't think twice about them. You just have to make them."

- Focus first on families rather than funding.

Comments and Suggestions for Policy Makers

Directors were grateful that the Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education (ABLE) continued funding family literacy after Even Start funding reductions and appreciated the very helpful support ABLE provided. A director noted that a more open-ended conversation about the change (instead of communicating a decision that was already a done deal) and a longer transition time would have been useful. Since programs are evaluated on a three-year basis, a two-year transition period would have helped programs that had a bad year during the first transition year.

Suggestions for changing Act 143 guidelines included allowing programs to serve dual-enrolled students and teen parents enrolled in school, and to use state Adult Education Impact funds to increase the effectiveness and intensity of instruction (currently Act 143 programs may not apply). Directors also advocated for greater alignment between state and federal family literacy guidelines, expectations, and data-reporting systems.

Changes in Welfare Policy

Effects on Programs

First, directors noted that the DPW policy left room for interpretation and that the guidelines were applied differently depending on the public assistance administrators and case workers (see Hayes, 1999; Mazzeo et al., 2003). Nevertheless, the change in allowable core activities for Pennsylvania welfare recipients had many consequences for family literacy programs. Programs experienced the greatest changes in enrollment, recruitment, retention, and instruction. In most (but not all) programs, enrollment declined due to the loss of welfare referrals and the increase in required core activity hours (see Box 4).

Box 4: We just do not have programming in the location that makes it feasible for someone who is depending on public transportation [and] who [has] other barriers to go from place to place, to pick up all of the hours that are needed. So [the new policy] has impacted the program because there have been fewer people who are on public assistance who have attended the program.

These programs had to allocate more staff time and money for recruitment, which in turn decreased the amount of time available for direct services. Some organizations with both Move Up and family literacy programs were challenged with uneven enrollment because many welfare clients were placed in Move Up classes designed for this population.

Although some welfare recipients still attended family literacy in addition to their core activities, directors found it more difficult to meet standards for retention and instructional hours. Finally, because they receive fewer

referrals, some programs had less interaction with the local public assistance office, particularly with case workers.

Effects on Program Participants

These policy changes also affected welfare recipients who wished to enroll in family literacy program, creating tension between pursuit of education and compliance with “work first” welfare regulations. For many, attending GED classes in addition to core activities (typically 20-30 hours) is logistically impossible. Several directors reported that some welfare clients continued attending family literacy classes because they knew they needed a GED to secure higher-wage jobs. However, they did not tell their case worker because they feared s/he would say, “You’ll have to stop going to class.” In short, welfare clients faced greater pressure to meet an expanding set of requirements and were caught between conflicting personal and institutional goals.

Programmatic Responses to Welfare Policy Changes

Programs responded to these changes in several ways. First, they worked harder at recruitment to compensate for the loss of public assistance referrals, for example, by developing relationships with new referral sources such as Head Start, school districts, and food pantries. The staff in some programs spent more time talking to welfare case workers and were more “aggressive” in telling them about family literacy programs and following up on any referrals.

An unintended consequence of the new welfare policy was that programs had to consider carefully which families they enrolled, as they must both meet enrollment targets *and* other standards such as parenting hours, pre/post-testing, and children’s assessments. With the loss of welfare referrals, the staff felt more pressure to enroll *all* families, yet in small programs enrolling even one family that does not meet the standards can “bring down your averages.”

Comments and Suggestions for Policy Makers

Directors strongly believed welfare policies should recognize the importance of education in enabling welfare recipients to obtain—and retain—higher-wage, “self-sustaining” employment. They viewed the emphasis on finding any kind of job as short-sighted, since living-wage jobs require at least a high school diploma or college degree.

Recommendations included counting adult education as a core activity (especially for people without a GED or high school diploma); setting realistic expectations for the time required to obtain a GED; and providing financial support for welfare recipients who pursue education after finding work. Directors advocated increasing coordination between state public welfare and education agencies to reduce competition among service providers, to anticipate how one agency’s policies affect other agencies’ programs, and to minimize isolation among state agencies. They also

recommended addressing the perceived duplication of Bureau of Adult Basic and Literacy Education services by Move Up (Public Welfare), and recognizing the vulnerable position of poor families who must abide by the multiple, demanding regulations of state and federal agencies.

Conclusion

This study reveals the complicated consequences of state and federal policy changes for family literacy programs and the multiple ways professionals respond to these changes. First, the *combination* of changes in family literacy funding and welfare requirements, coupled with the need to meet state program performance standards, created distinctive challenges for programs, especially in student recruitment. Secondly, the findings show that the effects of policies are mediated by program size, structure, and geographic location, local infrastructure (e.g., transportation system), characteristics of program participants, and other factors. Thirdly, the Act 143 and welfare policies had numerous, unintended ripple effects, simultaneously affecting multiple programmatic areas. These consequences transcend the boundaries of government agencies. Fourthly, the effects of policy changes are diverse and contradictory, simultaneously opening some opportunities while foreclosing others. Finally, the study illustrates the creative, resourceful ways that family literacy professionals respond to policy changes. The awareness that changes in funding and other government policies are routine frames how programs approach new requirements. This long-term view, coupled with the adoption of innovative strategies, can enable family literacy and adult education programs to weather and adapt to unanticipated changes in state and federal policies.

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