

EVEN START BACKGROUND INFORMATION

THE PROGRAM

- Even Start is unique by offering a comprehensive one-stop family literacy intervention that includes adult literacy, adult basic education, GED preparation, and English-as-a-Second Language; early childhood education for the children; and training for parents in how to be the primary teachers for their children and full partners in their education.
- Teachers supervise and support parents as they work with their children in literacy activities so that parents will learn how to foster their children's literacy at home.
- Even Start is the only federal program that supports learning and reading skills for children from birth to age 8.

THE ISSUE

- Former President Bush proposed the elimination of Even Start in almost every federal budget he submitted to Congress. Although he was unsuccessful in completely eliminating the program, his position led to massive decreases in program funding that cut services to more than 20,000 families.
- **The current Administration also called for the elimination of Even Start as part of its Budget proposal for 2010.**
- Even Start is currently funded at \$66 Million. This amount is the result of six years of funding decreases totaling \$184 Million or almost a 75% across-the-board reduction in federal funds.
- As a result, of these ill-advised funding cuts, fewer and fewer at-risk families are receiving the services and support they need to be successful in school, in seeking employment, and in their communities.
- If our nation truly believes we should provide families with the high quality educational services necessary to produce positive results for our nation's poorest and most under-educated families, this is not the time to eliminate this valuable program.

THE EVIDENCE THE PROGRAM WORKS

We are dealing with the poorest of the poor who are much more illiterate than Head Start families; 85 percent live below poverty; 73 percent are unemployed. Forty-five percent of the parents did not go beyond ninth grade prior to enrollment in Even Start. From published results and outcomes that have been provided to the U.S. Department of Education; Pennsylvania, Illinois, Texas and New York are among the many outstanding studies that show 70 percent of the adults in Even Start have advanced their educational goals; 71 percent of the children exceeded oral language levels; in addition 70 percent of the parents got jobs.

Hispanic children represent the fastest-growing segment of the U.S. child population. The U.S. Census Bureau projects that by 2025 the Hispanic population will increase from its current level of 35 million to 61 million, at which point it will constitute 18 percent of the US population. Hispanic families, however, are plagued by low levels of meaningful reading instruction. Almost 40 percent of Hispanic children have mothers who do not have a high school diploma. As a consequence, many young Hispanic children enter school less ready to learn and succeed. More than half (53%) of the families served by Even Start are Hispanic. Families in the program are making tremendous progress. Teachers reported that 89% of Hispanic at-risk children were promoted to the next grade level.

WHAT IS THE IMPACT OF FUNDING CUTS ON EVEN START

Exactly how are these cuts affecting program participation and performance? Pennsylvania is indicative of the plight of literacy programs in this country. Funding decreases have caused the reduction in programs and by participants. In 2001-2002 Pennsylvania received over \$9 million in Even Start funding with 25 active programs. By 2008-2009 appropriation cutbacks resulted in only 9 programs serving less than 730 families. Without the needed funding boost, basic program operations will continue to be cut as will the support services for evaluation and program improvement, data management and reporting, professional development, and technical assistance.

Eliminating or even reducing funding for Even Start will leave over 40,000 family participants without vital literacy or parenting services. **Minority populations make up 70% of Even Start participants.** In Texas the percentage of Hispanic participants grows to over 90%. Many of those will be our newest citizens, in search of the English language skills they need to obtain a job and support their children's education. Research shows this population is gaining the most from Even Start programs. With each dollar decrease in funding, those most in need of a family-oriented literacy program will find less support.

WHY SHOULD FUNDING BE CONTINUED?

The best way to sum up the strong case for continued funding for Even Start is to recite the Report language included in the U.S. House Appropriations Subcommittee on Labor, HHS and Education. The Committee provides insight as to why this program deserves to continue funding.

“The Committee strongly recommends \$66,454,000 for Even Start, which is the same amount as the fiscal year 2009 funding level. Even Start provides grants to States for family literacy programs, integrating early childhood education, adult education and parenting education, for low-income families and their children, from birth to 7 years old. Generally, these parents are not in school, are above the State's age of compulsory school attendance, and have not earned a high school diploma (or its equivalent). The Committee does not agree with the Administration's proposal to eliminate Even Start, which is based on the results of flawed evaluation studies. For

example, the *Third National Even Start Evaluation: Program Impacts and Implications for Improvement, 2003*, was based on a very small sample (1.5 percent) of Even Start projects, was not representative of Even Start participants and programs, and predated new accountability measures for the program. The Committee encourages the Department to continue to work with States to improve indicators of program quality, including assessments for dual language learners, and the effectiveness of Even Start instructional services.”

THE BOTTOM LINE

When President Obama unveiled his early childhood initiatives the Education Department stated:

“The years before a child reaches kindergarten are among the most critical in his or her life to influence learning. President Obama is committed to providing the support that our youngest children need to prepare to succeed later in school. The President supports a seamless and comprehensive set of services and support for children, from birth through age 5.”

We agree wholeheartedly and believe Even Start is one of the best approaches for addressing the educational needs of young children for children whose parents have low levels of literacy or limited English proficiency.