

William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program

Effective, Yet Misunderstood

Background:

The National Council of La Raza (NCLR) believes that Even Start can make a great impact on the school careers of Latino children. Latinos begin kindergarten significantly behind their White peers, and this gap persists well into elementary and secondary school. Much of this gap is attributed to the lack of language- and literacy-rich environments in the earliest years of life. For example, a recent national study found that Latino infants and toddlers had far fewer children's books in the home, and were less likely than their White counterparts to be read to by parents on a daily basis.

The Even Start program addresses these challenges with a two-pronged approach: (1) Even Start helps parents to act as full partners in their children's education by providing them with adult literacy and education services, including English as a

Second Language; and (2) Even Start works to ensure that children have access to critically important early childhood education (ECE) services. In fact, Even Start is the **only** Department of Education literacy program that serves children under the age of three – a time of rapid language learning that is critical for later reading proficiency.

In addition, Even Start has shown much success in reaching some of the most educationally disadvantaged families in the Hispanic community. Nearly half (46%) of all Even Start families are Hispanic, and the vast majority of these families are limited-English-proficient (LEP). Moreover, Even Start funding includes a set-aside for programs geared toward serving migrant families who often face challenges in accessing ECE services in states due to mobility issues.

Even Start Faces Elimination:

Funding for Even Start is in serious jeopardy. Currently, Even Start is funded at \$82 million. During the past three years, Congress has cut Even Start by 60% (\$151 million). In addition, the Department of Education recently took advantage of a procedural loophole and further cut Even Start by 17% from the original amount appropriated by Congress (\$99 million). Consistent with the previous three federal

budgets submitted by this Administration, the President has once again recommended the program be eliminated altogether. To date, the cuts sustained by Even Start have drastically reduced services to thousands of Hispanic children and their parents. In California, 85% of Even Start families are Latino. Unfortunately, in the last two years, 50 Even Start programs have closed due to a lack of funds.

Funding Cuts Are Based on Faulty Evaluation:

A study conducted by Abt Associates on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education showed no statistically significant difference on various measures of reading proficiency between Even Start families and a control group. These findings have contributed to a widely held misconception that Even Start is not effective. However, this study contains serious methodological flaws and understates Even Start's effectiveness, particularly with the Hispanic community. For example, the flaws in the study include, but are not limited to the following:

- ▶ Analyses are based **only** on children and parents who were assessed in English. Given that 75% of the study participants were English proficient, the failure to test participants in both English and Spanish misrepresents the overall reading and language gains for Hispanics.
- ▶ The literacy measures used in the study were not designed for bilingual children, and have strong potential to underestimate gains in English-language ability, particularly for preschool-aged English language learners (ELLs).
- ▶ The findings cannot be generalized to all of Even Start because the sample is not representative of the Even Start population. The sample overrepresented Hispanic ELLs participating in programs located in urban settings. Thus, the study does not enhance our knowledge of Even Start's impact with other populations, including non-Spanish-speaking ELLs, migrant and Native American populations, and families in rural communities.

Even Start Works:

In contrast to the flawed data from the national study on Even Start, efforts at the state level to measure outcomes and progress for Even Start participants demonstrate that the program is effective, particularly with ELL populations.

- ▶ In Texas, 54% of adult Even Start ELL students made significant educational gains, as measured by the adult education national reporting system.
- ▶ In California, Even Start third-grade students (the vast majority of whom are ELLs), outperformed all students and other ELL students on the California Achievement Test in reading. For example, 41% of third-grade Even Start students scored at or above the 50th percentile in reading compared to 36% of all students, and 15% of other ELL students.
- ▶ In New York, for three consecutive years (2002-2004), adult Even Start ELL students increased one level, as measured by the New York adult education assessment, 74.3%, 67.7%, and 73.3%, respectively.

Recommendations:

The fate of Even Start should not be based on a faulty evaluation. Rather, when setting budget priorities, Congress should look to mounting state data demonstrating the efficacy of Even Start, particularly for Hispanic and ELL families. In addition, Congress should ensure that reliable data is available for all children and families served by Even Start, including LEPs. To that end, NCLR strongly urges Congress to preserve and enhance the Even Start program by:

- ▶ Increasing Even Start funding to \$225 million for fiscal year (FY) 2008, and holding harmless the 6% set-aside for programs oriented toward serving migrant and Native American.
- ▶ Ensuring that the No Child Left Behind reauthorization requires a longitudinal evaluation of Even Start effectiveness, particularly for ELL populations.

For more information on Even Start funding contact:

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