

## Even Start Family Literacy

*Even Start is presently the major funding source for comprehensive family literacy services.*

### **History and Brief Description of the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program**

Even Start was originally authorized in 1988 as a small demonstration program under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA). It started with \$14.8 million allocated to 76 projects across the U.S., administered by the U.S. Department of Education. From the beginning, Even Start took on the nation's most vulnerable families, providing them with what the Department of Education calls the four core components of family literacy: early childhood education; adult literacy, parenting education; and interactive literacy activities between parents and children. When funding exceeded \$50 million in 1992, administration of Even Start was turned over to the states. Even Start reached a funding peak of \$250 million in 2001 and 2002. Funding has steadily decreased since, from \$248 million in 2003; \$246 million in 2004; \$225 million in 2005 and \$99 million in 2006. The 1,200 programs across the country had to make hard choices for survival with only 44 percent of funding for fiscal 2006. Many programs across the nation lost funding at this point, those that survived did so with decreased resources and the same if not stiffer regulations. Now for 2007 the program can expect another 17 percent cut in funds, reducing the amount to around \$82 million. Eliminating or further reducing funding will leave thousands of families in search of English Language skills; as they also look to obtain jobs and support their children's education. In Louisiana this has resulted in dozens of local programs being shuttered leaving hundreds of children and adults without the local support to become productive, literacy members of our communities.

The Department of Education cites compelling statistics that show Even Start families are the most in need.

- Eighty-four percent of Even Start's families are at or below Federal poverty levels.
- Even Start families are significantly poorer than Head Start families. Nearly half of Even Start families have an annual household income under \$6,000 contrasted with only 13% of Head Start families.
- Further, 84% of Even Start adults do not have a high school diploma or GED; 44% of the parents have not gone beyond the 9<sup>th</sup> grade.
- No other federal education program involves childhood learning during the formative years of birth to four.

Nonetheless, parents participating in Even Start acquire important skills to be their child's first and most important teacher. Nothing can make up for a lack of parental support. Even Start helps parents provide that support. The goals of No Child Left Behind can never be achieved if we leave the parents behind. Even Start provides a comprehensive family-parent involvement necessary for it to be successful.

## Family Literacy Fact Sheet

- Repeated studies have revealed that there is a direct correlation between the education of parents and the academic success of their children. Through family literacy programs, parents can break the cycle of low literacy and pass down a legacy of learning and academic achievement to their children.
- Family literacy is a new and powerful approach to education where parents and children come to the learning environment together. While children receive age appropriate education in nearby classrooms, parents pursue their own educational goals. This adult education may include adult basic education, GED preparation, English language instruction, or workplace skills. Parents also gain parenting skills during Parent Time where they can share their concerns with their peers and trained instructors. Another important component of family literacy programs is Parent and Children Together (PACT) Time. Here, parents and children learn and play together, giving parents the opportunity to increase their skills as their children's first and most important teachers.
- Family literacy has a significant impact on children. Research from the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State shows that preschool children who are enrolled in family literacy programs for at least three months scored significantly better on developmental tests than comparable children newly enrolled in family literacy programs. In addition, children whose parents participated more in adult education and parenting education scored significantly better on developmental tests than children whose parents did not participate as much. The impact on developmental test scores was greatest for children birth to three years old when the most rapid language learning is occurring. Parents are learning how to be their children's first teacher.
- Family literacy prepares children for success in school. Research including that of the National Center for Family Literacy shows that kindergarten teachers rate Even Start children as more prepared for school than comparable children. Children are also more successful in school. Even Start programs are mandated to provide services based on scientifically based reading research, thereby preparing at-risk children for success in school.
- Family literacy breaks the cycle of intergenerational low literacy. State and local evaluations reveal that Even Start is successful in increasing parents' and children's educational levels.
- Family literacy programs ensure that families receive the community social services they need. Families must first be able to meet their basic needs before they are ready to achieve educational goals which ultimately will be their only avenue to get out of poverty. Research has shown, as we know instinctively, that poor families have the least access to community social support services perhaps due to parental low literacy levels.

- Unlike other federal education programs, in order to receive Even Start funding, programs must demonstrate linkages between a local educational agency and community based organizations to ensure that the family literacy program is well grounded in the community.
- Even Start is the only program in the Department of Education that focuses on the birth to three age groups of children. Which we all know is the most crucial time for language development which determines the child's ability to be successful in school and life in general.
- Study after study has shown that families that participate in Family Literacy have:
  1. Parents that graduate from high school or receive GED's.
  2. Parents who go on to a higher education or job training program.
  3. Parents who leave the welfare rolls and join taxpaying workforce rolls.
  4. Parents who move from public housing.
  5. Parents who become full partners with the schools in the education of their children.
  6. Children who come to school with a much improved attitude about learning than their older brothers and sisters.
  7. Children who come to school ready to learn or actually reading.
- Family literacy is a holistic program that targets the family. The most vulnerable families in our society need the most intense intervention, in family literacy the adage is true that the 'sum is greater than the parts'. Family literacy programs offer access to a better future to low-literate families who live in poverty.
- Finally, Family Literacy is supporting the president's education goals. The guidelines provided in *Good Start, Grow Smart*, are similar to guidance provided in the Even Start Family Literacy Program. *No Child Left Behind*, furthermore, mandates that parents be involved in their children's education: services that have been developed and re developed through family literacy. The U.S. Department of Education's website states that "no other education program serves a comparable population".

Summaries of the research that support these facts can be found on the websites of the Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy at Penn State [www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute](http://www.ed.psu.edu/goodlinginstitute) and the National Center for Family Literacy [www.familit.org](http://www.familit.org).

## **State (Louisiana) Needs for Family Literacy Appropriations.**

With Louisiana being in the top of every statistical report concerning poverty, illiteracy, child abuse, teen pregnancy, single parents, school drop out rate etc., it is imperative we begin looking at ways to combat these negatives hindering the growth of our state.

Federal initiatives have been in place since 1988 for Family Literacy services. Several states have vested millions of dollars to help disadvantaged families become self sufficient. Louisiana's effort to pass family literacy legislation was successful; however, there has been no real funding commitment. The initial push for family literacy in Louisiana began in 1988 when Governor Buddy Roemer was elected, and First Lady Patty Roemer chose literacy as her priority issue. She created a six-month task force with the help of the newly-opened NCFL. This led to the creation of the Office of Literacy (now the Office of Lifelong Learning) in 1989. The Family Literacy Demonstration Program legislation was introduced by Representative Randy Roach and passed in 1991. Before the funds could be appropriated, however, Governor Roemer left office. The Family Literacy Demonstration Program legislation has not been funded by the succeeding administrations.

For programs to continue to the magnitude needed in Louisiana there MUST be state dollars backing up the feds. As programs are experiencing the dwindling and dwindling of federal dollars for Family Literacy state assistance is needed immediately. We need an initiative much like the LA 4 initiative implemented by Senator Jones several years ago that has practically assured preschool education for every four year old in the state. How much further Family Literacy would carry the message of the importance of education in our state. In the aftermath of Katrina what more evidence do we need to see how important education must become in our state? When this happens industry will come to our state and growth and prosperity will happen naturally.