

SB 483 Connecticut Even Start Family Literacy SB 483

My name is Elizabeth Fraser, I am the Early Childhood Coordinator for the Middletown Even Start Program. On Thursday Feb. 22, I testified, for the first time, before the Appropriations Committee on behalf of proposed **Senate Bill 483, requesting funding for the Connecticut Even Start Family Literacy Program**. As I sat and waited for our turn I was genuinely moved, and grateful for this process of speaking out. It was inspiring to hear the stories of various program successes, from parents and teenagers and administrators, and the depth of dedication these people demonstrated. Each program and family had a compelling story; each program seemed worthy of funding. So I asked myself, why should our program, the Connecticut Even Start Family Literacy Program be funded at the possible expense of another? **Why does it deserve to be included and funded as a Connecticut program?** The answer can be summed up in three points:

- **The population that we serve**
- **The comprehensive, unique nature of the program**
- **The results that we have been achieving**

The Even Start population is categorized as the “most in need and the hardest to serve.” It consists of those parents who need an education: adult high school, GED, ESL or basic skills. They have severe financial constraints, are undereducated for the Connecticut workforce and they have infants, toddlers and young children. They have been disenfranchised by society as they wait for their children to get old enough to qualify for other programs. Meanwhile valuable time is being wasted, in terms of their education and that of their children.

Even Start is comprehensive and unique. It is the only program requiring family participation in five interconnected components. Families make the commitment to attend their **adult education classes** while their children are placed in **high quality NAEYC accredited early childhood classrooms** that educate and assess their children from the very first moments possible. But the program does not stop there. Even Start bridges these two elements by providing **parenting classes** where parents are exposed to the theory and best practice of child rearing, and develop a supportive peer group, and the program does not stop there. The **interactive literacy** component helps parents decipher the concepts discussed in the parenting classes while engaging with their children in a mentored environment. And then, to bring the program home, so to speak, family **literacy home visits** round out the Even Start experience. Our home visitors bring literacy activities into the home and are available on a one- to- one basis for any assistance families might need. In order to help families become as successful as possible, staff members help families locate and connect with other local and state services, such as housing agencies, food pantries, and health care, and collaborates with many others such as: school readiness, head start and family resource centers. Even Start strives to take care of the family. It is important to note that it is an Even Start mandate to collaborate with other programs, but not duplicate services.

This is a program that works. The Connecticut Even Start Family Literacy Program has demonstrated success through comprehensive independent analysis. **Statewide 86% of the required performance indicators were met in FY 06***. However just as compelling are the stories of our families, of their successes, of their children's successes and of their future dreams.

How would we make best use of appropriated funds?

- **Keep the program intact-** it is strong, well-managed and successful. The model is comprehensive serving the most in need and hardest to serve. It addresses the educational needs of parents and involves them in their child's education from the earliest age. The communities served have made substantial investments towards its success. If it were to be eliminated it would not only be far more expensive to reproduce in the future, but the cost to families would not be recoverable.
- **Reinstate those services lost** by previous cuts, enabling programs to operate at their full potential.
- **Expand the Even Start Family Literacy program** into the many communities that need it. Make it part of a connected Connecticut educational structure that recognizes and addresses the needs of all families.

*Data Source: Mica Research and Training, LLC (860-537-0884)

**February 22, 2007 Testimony to the Appropriations Committee in Support of
S. B. 483, AN ACT CONCERNING APPROPRIATIONS TO THE EVEN START PROGRAM**

The mission of the Even Start Family Literacy Program is to provide educational opportunities for the “most in need and hardest to serve” families in the community. To qualify, participants must be low-income, have a child that meets local program age guidelines, and be willing to commit to full participation in the following components:

- **Adult Education-** High School, GED, EDP, Basic Skills or ESL classes
- **Early Childhood Education-** High quality, NAEYC accredited classrooms
- **Parenting Education** – Classes that help parents build understanding of child development, literacy, and health, and gain skills that empower them to advocate for themselves and for their children
- **Parent and Child Interactive Literacy-** Activities that extend parenting classes by providing opportunities for parents to interact with their children, (while mentored by staff members), in a variety of settings, including early childhood classrooms, family events, and field trips
- **Home Literacy Visits-** Monthly visits that bring literature and activities into the home, helping parents to connect and extend what the child is learning at school to the home environment.

The Connecticut Even Start Family Literacy Programs form a family learning system that has operated in partnership with local adult education programs since 1992. Currently, Even Start Programs are located in six Connecticut communities: Stamford, the Naugatuck Valley, New London, Danbury, Windham, and Middletown. The State Department of Education oversees the distribution of federal funds, sets state standards, and monitors program quality. Funding to Even Start in Connecticut has dramatically decreased from a high of \$2.2 million in FY 03 to \$.66 million in FY 07. The decrease in funding has caused the elimination of Even Start programs in Bridgeport, Hartford, Norwich and a second program in Windham, and has severely impacted services offered in the remaining programs, especially for families of infants and toddlers. Federal funding for 2007-2008 is expected to be at the same level. The President has recommended zero funding for 2008-2009.

The components of Even Start complement the key elements of the state School Family Community Partnerships plan, including parenting education, learning at home, and collaboration with existing services. For the benefit of the families enrolled, each Even Start program collaborates with but not does duplicate community services such as Head Start, School Readiness, and Family Resource Centers. The Connecticut Even Start structure is flexible, allowing participating communities to meet their own needs while ensuring that each program is evaluated on the same criteria.

Children’s progress is monitored with standardized developmental assessments and the *Connecticut Pre-school Assessment*. Results are shared with parents and joint goals are set for each child. Children with special needs are identified and referred to *Birth to Three* for further assessment. Early detection and treatment are critical factors in dealing with developmental delays to help children be ready to learn when they enter Kindergarten.

Independent, yearly evaluations of the Connecticut Even Start Programs demonstrate the success of these programs. 60% of GED and High School Diploma adults attained diplomas in FY06. ABE and ESL students made statistically significant gains in reading, math and listening on standardized tests (CASAS) each semester. 93% of children enrolled in Even Start were attending preschool for the first time. 75% of preschool children (3-5 years) showed progress or mastery on cognition, language and writing skills. Statewide, 86% of the required performance indicators were met in FY 06*

We ask you to support S. B. 483 to provide funding that will allow the Even Start Program in Connecticut to continue, reinstate and expand as a model in family learning for the state and the country. Even Start is one of the few programs that provide parenting education and childcare for families with infants and toddlers. Both are key components of the Governor’s early childhood plan. Even Start enables parents to increase their own skills and employability and to learn how to become active participants in the education of their children.