

Good afternoon, I am Elizabeth Fraser , Director of the Middletown Even Start program. On behalf of all of the Director's and our families, I would like to thank the Education Committee and the Appropriations Committee for including our unique program model in the biennial budget. We are heartened to see that we are also included in the Governor's budget.

I am here today to testify in support of the educational system that is carefully and thoughtfully being developed in Connecticut. As we work on the evolution of the Even Start model, we are cognizant that individual programs should not operate in a vacuum. Without a workable, comprehensive and accountable system , we are just a myriad of solo programs rather than an inspirational state with educational strategy and vision. In fact, the collaborative model of Even Start cannot be fully successful without this larger context of a system. We are looking forward to the time when this *system* of well thought out programs and services will benefit from common vision, common goals and common access to the quality enhancement resources needed to be exceptional.

As we work towards a more cohesive ,intentional educational system , we respectfully submit that the Even Start model has a specific and necessary role ; that of providing educational opportunity for undereducated families.

In a perfect world, the foundation upon which all children grow and develop would be secure, nurturing and filled with the rich experiences that contribute to solid developmental growth. However, social and economic challenges often provide barriers to a secure family footing. For many of the most- in- need parents, a lack of education and the problem of illiteracy obstruct their personal and economic success, limit the pre-literacy skills of their children and contribute to a cycle of poverty that repeats through future generations and is of community concern. Even Start educates parent, child and parent/ child together. By using this model approach we have had success in breaking the cycle of undereducated families, the cycle of poverty, the cycle of despair.

Even Start is the only program in the state that uses a comprehensive, multigenerational approach to educate families. Many Even Start parents have missed their original opportunity to finish high school and now find themselves with young children of their own. Immigrants arrive in our country with young children and need to learn English with enough proficiency to not only be employable, but to assist in their child's education in a system much different than from their home country.

In the Even Start model, as adults are being educated in adult education classes,(High school, English, basic skills, GEd) their infants/ toddlers are also being educated and monitored in NAEYC accredited programs, ensuring a strong start for a vulnerable population. However, the most unique part of Even Start is that parents learn to participate in their child's education. Parents are given the resources, support and knowledge to mentor their own children. Learning is extended into the home environment. Activities and books are brought into the home by a literacy home visitor.

Our strong Results Based Accountability Report Card and our yearly independent evaluations substantiate the success of the model. In fact, the RBA confirms that Even Start adults make greater progress in their adult education classes than the adult education population as a whole and that children are on track for school success.

It is the belief of the Even Start Directors and our communities that a new Connecticut educational system holds much promise for the future of our children and families. We asked that the Even Start model be considered as one part this important and necessary plan.

Connecticut Even Start Overview

Purpose: To provide intensive family literacy services that help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities of low income families through programs that integrate early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education and parenting education into a unified family literacy program.

PROGRAM OVERVIEW

Even Start is a unique family learning program that promotes the academic achievement of children and adults through a two-generation education model. The purpose of Even Start is to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities of families most in need. The program has three interrelated goals:

- ☐ to help parents improve their literacy or basic educational skills;
- ☐ to help parents become full partners in educating their children; and
- ☐ to assist children in reaching their full potential as learners.

Even Start accomplishes these goals by providing comprehensive family literacy services that involve parents and children, generally from birth through age seven, in a cooperative learning effort.

The term "family literacy services" is defined in federal legislation as services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, of sufficient duration to make sustainable changes in a family, and that integrate all of the following activities:

- ☐ Interactive literacy activities between parents and their children;
- ☐ Training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children (literacy-based parenting education);
- ☐ Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency (adult basic or secondary education, or English language training); and
- ☐ An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life experiences (early childhood education, including supplemental services for school-age children). (Section 9101(20), ESEA).

Local programs are implemented through cooperative projects that do not duplicate but build on high-quality existing community resources, creating a new range of services for low-income children and parents.

Comprehensive Family Literacy

Parents are the child's first teacher. It is widely recognized that, from birth, children are influenced by the actions, attitudes and sensibilities of the adults surrounding them. Parents, extended family and early caregivers provide a foundation on which the child will grow and develop. Whether this foundation is stable or insecure, all new experiences are built on this base. We know that early experiences and the environment in which infants and toddlers are immersed leave a lasting effect and are documented predictors of future success

In a perfect world, the foundation upon which all children grow and develop would be secure, nurturing and filled with the rich experiences that contribute to solid developmental growth. However, as stated, social and economic challenges often provide barriers to a secure family footing. For many of the *most- in- need parents, a lack of education and the problem of illiteracy obstruct their personal and economic success, limit the pre-literacy skills of their children and contribute to a cycle of poverty that repeats through future generations and is of community concern.*

It is documented that the educational level of the mother is a predictor of her economic success and the future academic success of her child. In order to support the developing brain and pre-literacy skills of low-income infants and toddlers, the educational level and supports in the life of the mother and father must be addressed. Comprehensive family literacy programs provide a vehicle for helping parents support the optimal growth and development of their children as they work towards self-sufficiency. Reaching families at the earliest point of intervention, when their children are infants and toddlers, allows for optimum learning opportunities for both parent and child.

A model program includes wrap- around components that immerse families in an environment of literacy, including:

- *High quality education, with measurable results, for both parent and child.* Educational opportunities for most- in- need parents, including, basic skills, GED, high school completion, vocational training, ESL instruction, and possibly, access to Connecticut's community colleges and universities. Adult education is co-located with high quality early education for their infants and toddlers, allowing parents to increase their educational level and workplace skills while their children are receiving a sound, language- rich foundation in pre- literacy skills. Needed early intervention for children is recognized and services received during this critical phase of brain development.
- *Parenting education.* Parents receive the knowledge and peer support necessary to promote the optimal growth and development of their child.
- *Mentored inter-generational literacy activities.* Concepts and activities discussed in parenting classes are applied in a safe, non-judgmental learning environment, the early childhood classroom.

- *Home visits that connect school to the home.* Families receive regular visits that bring books and literacy activities into the home, ensuring that parents have resources they need for success.
- *Community collaborations.* Connecting parents with community resources is essential in providing support to help families to overcome barriers to participation. Assistance, from state and local workforce development agencies and social service agencies, (both financial and informational), supports families as they are immersed in family education and provides needed links to successfully transition into the workforce, higher education and quality early childhood programs.

Comprehensive family learning programs work from both ends of the educational spectrum. They provide a “family learning bridge”, emphasizing the important connection between parent learning and early childhood growth and development .Only by providing this learning bridge can we hope to solve the problem of illiteracy and the cycle of poverty in our communities.

Strategy

**Including Even Start model in a comprehensive system of educational programming that would provide “most in need” families with adult education, high quality, early childhood education and parenting classes that help parents understand their importance as their children’s first teachers. Frequent mentored interactive literacy activities for parents and their infants and toddlers and home literacy visits to connect school activities to the home. As parents become aware of the importance of literacy in their own success and the future success of their children, they will be motivated to become full partners in the education of their children.