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Health, Education, and
Human Services Division

B-284443

March 8, 2000

The Honorable George V. Voinovich
Chairman, Subcommittee on Oversight of
Government Management, Restructuring,
and the District of Columbia
Committee on Governmental Affairs
United States Senate

Subject: Evaluations of Even Start Family Literacy Program Effectiveness

Dear Mr. Chairman:

The first national education goal, announced in 1990, was that all children in America will start school ready to learn. Over the past decade, increased emphasis has been placed on the importance of how children's preschool experiences prepare them for school. The Even Start Family Literacy Program, first authorized in 1988 by the Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA), attempts to improve the educational opportunities of disadvantaged families with young children (birth through age 7 years) by helping children reach their full potential as learners and their parents become full partners in their children's education. Even Start is funded at \$150 million for fiscal year 2000.

In anticipation of the reauthorization of ESEA, you asked us to assess how the Even Start program has performed in terms of preparing children for school. To respond to your request, we reviewed findings from evaluations of the Even Start program, other program documents, and the authorizing legislation. We conducted our work from December 1999 to February 2000 in accordance with generally accepted government auditing standards.

In summary, the results of the evaluations did not provide a definitive determination of Even Start's effect on children's school readiness. Although the results indicate that children's scores on school readiness tests increased during the time that they participated in Even Start, children not participating in Even Start achieved similar gains in test scores, at least in part because of their participation in other early childhood programs.

BACKGROUND

Research has shown that, among other factors, preschool experiences and parental involvement in learning can affect how well children perform in school. High-quality early education programs—those with low child-staff ratios, age-appropriate curricula, and a responsive caregiver, for example—are associated with positive outcomes for children. Outcomes related to quality child care include cooperative play, sociability, creativity, and language and cognitive development. Research has also found that when parents are positively involved in their children’s education (for example, by showing their children they value learning and setting high expectations for them), children achieve higher grades and test scores, have better attendance at school, and demonstrate more positive attitudes and behaviors.

The purpose of the Even Start Family Literacy Program is to help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving educational opportunities for families. To accomplish this, the program integrates early childhood education, adult literacy and adult basic education, and parenting education into a family literacy program. The rationale behind the program design is that children will benefit directly from their participation in early childhood education programs and indirectly from the effects of the program on their parents’ literacy and parenting skills. While some other federal education programs also provide services to both disadvantaged young children and their parents, Even Start is the only federal program specifically dedicated to this purpose. Even Start projects are required to coordinate with and integrate services provided by other agencies, such as Head Start and adult basic education programs offered by community colleges; however, Even Start projects can also provide services to families directly.

Since fiscal year 1992, Even Start has been primarily state-administered.¹ The Department of Education distributes grants to states, which then makesubgrants to partnerships consisting of at least one local educational agency and at least one community-based organization, higher education institution, or other public or private nonprofit agency. During the 1998-99 program year, 735 local Even Start projects served approximately 32,000 families.

RESULTS OF NATIONAL EVALUATIONS HAVE NOT CONCLUSIVELY SHOWN IMPACT

Even Start’s authorizing legislation requires the Department of Education to fund an independent evaluation of the program. At this time, two national evaluations of the Even Start program have been completed; a third is under way, but data are not yet available from this study. Both the first and second evaluations of Even Start provided outcome-related information on gains made by children in Even Start. However, only the first attempted to compare the performance of Even Start

¹The U.S. Department of Education administers a 5-percent set-aside of funds from the total Even Start appropriation that supports programs for children of migratory workers, Indian tribes and tribal organizations, and outlying areas.

participants with nonparticipants as a means of assessing the program's impact—that is, whether the gains children were making were due to their being in Even Start.

Data collected for the first national evaluation, which documented the program's early development from 1989-90 through 1992-93, showed that children participating in Even Start achieved positive outcomes for each of the assessment measures used, as displayed in table 1. The children's assessment scores increased significantly between a pretest, taken around the time they entered the program, and a posttest, taken after several months in the program.² For example, Even Start children's scores on the PreSchool Inventory increased by more than double the expected rate of learning, based on normal child development.³ The Preschool Inventory test measures school readiness skills, such as identifying shapes and colors and understanding numerical concepts.

Table 1: Results of First Even Start Evaluation Regarding School Readiness Outcomes Achieved

Assessment instrument	Outcome or skill measured	Positive outcomes achieved?
PreSchool Inventory	Range of school readiness skills, such as identifying shapes and colors and understanding numerical concepts	Yes
Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test	Listening comprehension for spoken words	Yes
Child's Emergent Literacy Test	Recognition of letters and punctuation and child's understanding of the orientation and directionality of text and purposes of reading	Yes

²In general, pretests were administered to children 3 years of age or older who were participating or expected to participate in early childhood education at the beginning of the school year (or when they entered the Even Start program). The same tests were administered as posttests toward the end of the school year. For children who left the program before the end of the school year, posttests were administered at the time they left, as long as a minimum amount of time had passed since they entered the program. Because some participants left the program early, complete data were not available for all children. For example, posttest data for one measure were available for only about half of the children who were pretested.

³Specifically, Even Start children gained at the rate of 0.91 test items per month, compared with the expected rate of 0.40 items per month. The study's researchers said that this could be considered a medium-sized effect by general standards of social science evaluations.

Although the first evaluation showed positive outcomes, it did not show conclusively that they were attributable to participation in the Even Start program. The researchers examined program impact by comparing the performance of Even Start participants to nonparticipants by randomly assigning families either to Even Start projects or to a control group.⁴ For this part of the evaluation, pretests were administered to children in the Even Start and control groups in the fall; posttests were conducted twice after that, at 9 months and 18 months after the pretest. Children in the Even Start group were tested regardless of whether they were still actively participating in the program.⁵ The data showed that Even Start children gained more than the control group children during their early participation in the program. However, after 18 months the differences between the outcomes of children participating in Even Start and the outcomes of children in the control group were not statistically significant. That is, the results did not provide definitive evidence that the program itself was responsible for the improvement in test scores. One explanation, according to the evaluation researchers, is that most of the children assigned to the control group participated in some other type of early childhood program by the time of the second posttest. In addition, the researchers noted that nearly half of the children who had been participating in Even Start at the time of the pretest had left the program by the time the second posttest was administered to them. This decreased time in the program may have limited its potential to affect their readiness for school.

The second national evaluation of Even Start covered program years 1993-94 to 1996-97. In this study, outcomes for children were measured using the PreSchool Inventory (also used in the first evaluation) and the Preschool Language Scale, which measures children's language development. Similar to the results of the first evaluation, data for the second evaluation showed that children who participated in Even Start achieved positive program outcomes for each of these assessment measures. However, whether the program was responsible for the improvement was not assessed in the second evaluation.

The Department is currently conducting a third national evaluation to try to answer the question of Even Start's effectiveness more definitively. This evaluation will cover program years 1997-98 to 2000-01. The researchers plan to continue to use a fairly broad battery of measurements to capture children's literacy skills and other indicators of school readiness, such as math and social skills. Like the first evaluation, the third evaluation is randomly assigning families to Even Start projects

⁴The random assignment of families was limited to five sites, with a total of 100 families in the Even Start program and 100 families in the control group. Families in the control group could not receive Even Start services but could receive other services available in the community.

⁵With this design, this part of the evaluation looked at children with varying levels of participation in the program versus just examining those families who remained in the program long enough to be posttested.

or control groups, allowing for an assessment of program impact.⁶ Results on the program's effect on children will be included in a final report due in June 2002.

AGENCY COMMENTS

We provided Education with a draft of this report for its review. The agency provided technical comments, which we incorporated as appropriate.

In addition to you and other appropriate congressional committees, we are sending copies of this report to the Honorable Richard W. Riley, Secretary of Education. We will also make copies available to others upon request.

Please contact me on (202) 512-7215 or Harriet Ganson, Assistant Director, on (202) 512-9045, if you or your staff have any questions about this report. Other major contributors were Susan A. Riedinger, Linda Y.A. McIver, and Pamela R. Vines.

Sincerely yours,



Marnie S. Shaul
Associate Director, Education, Workforce,
and Income Security Issues

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⁶As of fall 1999, the random assignment of families is being implemented in 11 sites. The Department of Education is considering the possibility of adding more sites to the study beginning in fall 2000.

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