

POLICY AND PROGRAM STUDIES SERVICE REPORT HIGHLIGHTS

State Administration of the Even Start Family Literacy Program

The Even Start program is intended to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy through a unified family literacy program that integrates early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education, parenting education, and parent-child interactive literacy activities. Even Start, which began as a federally administered program in 1989-90, became a state-administered program in 1992 when the national funding exceeded \$50 million. Since that time, the responsibilities of state Even Start offices have evolved substantially. Initially, each state had relatively few local projects to administer, the state grants were much smaller, and the statutory requirements were fewer and less rigorously defined. However, as the number of local projects grew steadily, the programmatic guidance and leadership provided by Even Start state coordinators to local projects have become increasingly critical in promoting effective programs at the local level.

This study describes Even Start administration at the state level and factors that facilitate or impede program improvement activities conducted by state coordinators. The report is intended to: 1) help federal staff better target their guidance and technical assistance to states; and 2) provide state coordinators with descriptions of program administration practices in other states as a self-assessment guide.

Study Design

The study involved two components:

- State Survey. A mail survey sent to Even Start state coordinators in all 50 states, the District of Columbia, and Puerto Rico. Completed survey forms were received from 51 state coordinators between November 2001 and February 2002.
- Case Studies. Interviews were conducted with state coordinators in 12 states between March and May of 2002, through telephone interviews with six states and site visits to another six states.

When the state survey and the case study interviews were conducted, states were in the process of adjusting to two major changes: 1) the implementation of states' performance indicator systems, and 2) a substantial increase in the Even Start budget (from \$150 million in 2000-01 to \$250 million in 2001-02). Information presented in this report describes state Even Start operation in the early stages of adjustment to these changes, and may not reflect the current status of related operations.

Key Study Findings

State Even Start Administrative Infrastructure

Even Start is located under early childhood education or K-12 programs in 24 states and under adult education (or programs related to education of adults such as vocational education and community colleges) in 13 states; 14 states operate Even Start under other programs.

Even Start staffing in some states has been very stable, while some states have experienced frequent changes in state coordinators. Over half of the states have had only one or two state coordinators since 1992, and a quarter of the current coordinators are very experienced with nine or more years of experience. However, 17 states have had three or four state coordinators since 1992, and about a quarter of the current state coordinators have had one year experience or less in this position.

Staff resources for Even Start at the state level are limited. In 19 states, Even Start is administered with 0.5 professional full-time-equivalent (FTE) staff and no more than 1.5 clerical FTEs. Most state coordinators have multiple responsibilities other than Even Start; they spend, on average, 49 percent of their time on Even Start duties, and the remaining time on other responsibilities.

Interagency Coordination and Collaboration at the State Level

Nearly three out of four states cited adult education as a major collaborator (37 states). Other common collaborators are Head Start (32 states) and Title I (30 states). Collaborators make multiple types of contributions to Even Start, such as sharing resources, conducting joint staff development activities, holding joint workshops or conferences, and sharing program administrative functions.

Subgrantee Recruitment and Selection

The Even Start statute directs states to give priority to applications that target the areas of the state with high numbers of most-in-need families or that will be located in empowerment zones or enterprise communities. **Three-fourths of the states (38 states) described factors that receive priority points including:** indicators of high need for a family literacy program (19 states), high poverty rates or similar economic indicators (11 states), and location in an empowerment zone or enterprise community (11 states). States were less likely to assign priority points for high rates of illiteracy and low English proficiency (4 states) or the unavailability of other family literacy services in the area (3 states).

States rarely deny continuation funds to local Even Start projects. In the two years from 2000 to 2002, most continuation applications were funded. Only 20 states reported that they had ever denied continuation funding to at least one project since the beginning of Even Start in 1989. The primary reasons for denying funding were insufficient program management and implementation progress (17 states), low recruitment and enrollment rates (14 states), and low quality and intensity of educational services (11 states).

Only a few states had ever denied continuation funding on the basis of participant outcome data. As part of the performance indicator requirement, all states must now use outcome data as the basis of continuation funding decisions, which will be a new challenge for many states and projects.

When the federal Even Start budget increased by \$100 million (67 percent) in 2001-02, the number of new applications more than doubled (a 120 percent increase). States awarded subgrants to about half (49 percent) of the new applicants. In contrast, nearly all of the continuation projects and re-competition applications were funded in both 2000-01 and 2001-02.

Subgrantee Performance Monitoring

On-site visits are the most commonly used method of monitoring local projects' program operations (46 states) and are generally conducted by the state coordinator or other state Even Start staff. Most of the states conduct on-site visits to each project once a year or less often, while 10 states schedule several visits per year to each project.

During on-site visits, a majority of the states focus on compliance and a project's progress in implementing family literacy services. Thirty states indicated that they monitor the quality and intensity of instructional services during site visits. The next most common issues addressed during site visits are the adequacy of the program facilities, staff morale, and staff qualifications. Only eight state coordinators indicated that they examine anything concerning participants (e.g., eligibility, retention rates, academic achievement, and participation records) during the monitoring site visits, and a few states

reported that they monitor how well the local projects deal with data collection, reporting, evaluation activities, and fiscal management.

Most states (43) indicated that they have a data collection system in operation for local projects to report program data. Among these states, most indicated that they regularly collected data from local projects on: recruitment and enrollment rates (100 percent of states), hours of service offered (95 percent), participant demographics (88 percent), hours of participation for adults and children (86 percent), retention rates (79 percent), and indicators of developmental progress and goal achievement for adults and children (79 percent).

Development and Implementation of Performance Indicators

States differed greatly in every aspect of Even Start performance indicators that were submitted in June 2001, including the measures used, performance standards set, and subgroups to which the measurements and standards are to be applied. Four areas where further development is needed to enable successful implementation of the system are:

- Further development and clarification of the content/specification of performance indicators;
- Specific guidance for the implementation process such as: how and where to obtain data collection instruments; data collection, data entry/storage, data reporting processes; and data collection and reporting schedules;
- Strategies for staff training to ensure that staff are properly trained to conduct (1) the data collection, especially the administration of standardized assessment instruments; (2) computation of outcome measures; and (3) reporting of each indicator correctly; and
- Careful plans and guidelines for the use of indicator data to avoid gaps in data collection and unnecessary demands on local and state staff time, and to coordinate the use of indicator data with local evaluation data.

Most states planned to collect the first round of performance indicator data in 2002. Fourteen states had already begun to collect data in 2001 or earlier. About half of the states plan to collect performance indicator data annually; 15 states, twice a year.

Program Evaluation and Improvement

Half of the states reported that they conduct a state-level Even Start evaluation, although the definition of “state evaluation” may vary among states. Over half of the 24 states that conduct a state evaluation indicated that they used data collected by local projects for the national evaluation as part of the state evaluation.

States also assist local projects with their evaluations by providing technical guidance and training. Over half (28 states) require local projects to collect specific types of data in their local evaluation; most of these states require projects to collect data on families’ progress towards educational and economic goals, family demographic data, and hours of participation by enrolled adults and children. About one-third of the states provide training for local Even Start evaluators; 15 states directly coordinate the local evaluation activities for all subgrantees.

Although 42 states said that they collect and review local evaluation reports, only 31 indicated that they use local evaluation data or reports for continuous program improvement (other states may collect the reports

mainly as a way of ensuring that local projects are complying with their evaluation requirement). For the 31 states that use the local evaluations, the results are used for purposes such as:

- Develop guidelines for the following year's program improvement efforts and determine topics for further technical assistance to local projects (16 states);
- Provide project-specific feedback to local projects and to examine program outcomes among all projects in a state (12 states);
- Needs assessment for statewide professional development activities (6 states);
- Prepare state-required reports (4 states);
- Input in making continuation funding decisions (3 states); and
- Tool to train local projects on data-based decision-making (2 states).

Need for Continued Federal Input and Assistance

Most state coordinators interviewed who had received the SFLI grant felt that the effective period of the SFLI grant was too short to allow strong partnerships to develop. They also reported that interagency collaboration played a critical role in their ability to administer Even Start and, without continued support similar to the SFLI grant, the role played by interagency collaboration might be weakened.

Based on statements made by state coordinators and the areas of administrative challenges identified in this study, the following types of federal support for the states, in addition to assistance already being provided, would strengthen the leadership roles played by the federal and state Even Start programs:

- **Comprehensive clearinghouse of information and materials** related to topics such as: Even Start legislative and program guidance; family literacy curricula; research-based instructional approaches for early childhood education, adult education, and parenting education; child and adult assessments; family literacy staff development; and local evaluation approaches.
- **More opportunities for state and local Even Start staff, including their evaluators and technical consultants, to attend high-quality, educational and technical assistance workshops led by national experts.**
- **More opportunities for state coordinators to work together in which state coordinators would take the lead in setting the agenda, presenting effective practices or lessons learned, and conducting collaborative problem solving sessions.**
- **Federal leadership to promote collection of core program and participant data that are comparable across states.** Such data would not only serve the federal need for national Even Start data, but also provide the states with a national benchmark to assess their progress.