

Witness appearing before the House Subcommittee on
Labor-HHS-Education Appropriations

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Testimony regarding the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy Program
Efficacy and Appropriations

March 23, 2004

Mr. Chairman and Members of the Committee, thank you for giving me the opportunity to appear before you this morning. As Chairman of the National Even Start Association, I appreciate the support of this Committee; in particular, you Mr. Chairman, Mr. Cunningham and Mr. Kennedy. Your support of the nearly 1300 Even Start programs nationwide has allowed us to provide strong, effective literacy instruction and support services to over 50,000 families this year.

I very much appreciated Secretary Paige's offer during his testimony before this committee to review the evidence showing the effectiveness of Even Start. I might add that I, as well as a majority of the Even Start professionals in our Association, agree with the Administration and the Secretary's stand that all programs should be held accountable to provide all children an opportunity to be successful in education.

Toward that end, Mr. Chairman, I would like to share with you some evidence of success from Even Start projects across the nation. There are three main points that I would like to make. First, Even Start families are more disadvantaged than families served by other programs. Secondly, despite their backgrounds, children are making comparable gains to other children and are successful in school. And lastly, their parents are making progress in advancing their own educational backgrounds and in supporting their children in school.

According to the US Department of Education, Even Start families are significantly more disadvantaged than Head Start families. The average Even Start participant had an average income under \$15,000, and four times as many Even Start families as Head Start families had incomes below \$6000. Even Start parents are far more educationally disadvantaged than families served by other programs. Only 15 percent of Even Start parents had a high school diploma or GED compared with over 70 percent of Head Start parents. Even Start families are four times less likely to be employed than Head Start families when they join Even Start. And again, according to the Department of Education, no other federal education program serves as disadvantaged a population as Even Start.

There is good news about results for families. Although they score substantially lower at entry to the program, Even Start children make literacy gains that are comparable to other children. Here are some examples from states that collect statewide information about school readiness and primary school outcomes. In Florida, more than 80 percent of the children who had participated in Even Start were deemed "Ready for School" by the state's pre- Kindergarten screening compared to a statewide average of 75 percent. In New York State, 80 percent of preschool children enter Even Start with literacy scores below the 50th percentile on the Preschool Language Scale—a well-regarded and rigorous assessment. Yet, three quarters of those children grow more than one year in language development during a year of Even Start preschool—including the children whose native language is not English and children with learning disabilities. When they get to school, almost 80 percent of those children are reported by their teachers in grades one through three as reading at or above grade level. In Georgia, over three quarters of the Even Start children read on grade level by the end of the primary grades – nearly double the statewide average of 41 percent. Over 80 percent of the children participating in Pennsylvania Even Start programs displayed gains in reading, writing and mathematics. And in a study of 450 Even Start families in Pennsylvania, Kentucky and Texas, 69 percent of Even Start children exceeded expected levels in Academic Performance.

The parents of these children are also making gains. The average literacy level for adults entering a New York Even Start program is below 8th grade; yet 84 percent of the adults participating in Even Start increased their tested literacy levels last year. They were twice as likely as adults in other adult education programs to get their GEDs. Importantly, 84 percent of these New York parents showed documented gains in providing their children with educational support at home and in school. The Pennsylvania Department of Education reports that adults participating in Even Start demonstrated significant gains in reading, mathematics, and language usage as assessed with the TABE and CASAS.

Perhaps most important, the gains by Even Start participants are long lasting. A University of North Carolina longitudinal study, with a national sample of 30 sites receiving Even Start funds showed that 60 percent of the Even Start children continued to be at or above expected levels in reading, 80 percent were average or above in language and 73 percent were on level in math. In fact, Even Start students continued to have higher average test scores than other students randomly selected from the same classes. Two-thirds of their parents also continued their educations and attained GEDs or high school diploma.

Mr. Chairman, all Even Start programs are required to have an independent local evaluation each year. Our local project in San Diego is an example of the many success stories for Even Start. Over 70 percent of the children, aged three and four, demonstrated gains in reading readiness and 100 percent of the children in grades K-2 were promoted. Over a four year period, 50 percent of the adults attained a GED or high school diploma. 30 percent became economically self-sufficient.

We in Even Start understand and recognize the need for continuous improvement of our programs. Congress addressed improvements for Even Start in 2001 with the Literacy Involves Family Together Act. Since that time, there have been many improvements in Even Start, including the requirement to use scientifically based reading research and to improve the qualifications for Even Start instructional staff. By the end of this year, working with the U.S. Department of Education and the key architects of the President's No Child Left Behind Act, all Even Start programs will have participated in training to redesign and improve the quality of preschool education. Even Start, unlike Reading First and Early Reading First, is the only program targeted to assist parents in supporting their children's literacy. Even Start provides a critical link to support the most disadvantaged parents to exercise their roles as parents in seeking educational opportunities for their children—the type of informed parental choice that No Child Left Behind is all about, that is, helping parents exercise the option to move their children from low performing schools and take advantage of supplemental tutoring services and other supports to help their children in reading and mathematics.

Perhaps the greatest testimony of the effectiveness of Even Start at the community level is that local resources supply over 50 percent of the cost of Even Start programs. I know of no other federal education program that receives this kind of investment from the local community. If local people did not think this program was effective, they would not commit that level of support in fiscal times such as these. In light of all of the evidence I've provided, I therefore urge your continued support of the William F. Goodling Even Start Family Literacy program.

SCOTT B. HIMELSTEIN

Biographical Sketch

POSITION: Chairman, CEO of the National Even Start Association

BIRTHPLACE: Chicago, Illinois

EDUCATION: University of San Diego, B.A., 1980

EXPERIENCE:

1991 – Present: President, Lynch Foundation for Children, California

1997 – Present: Chairman, CEO, National Even Start Association, California

PROFESSIONAL

MEMBERSHIPS: Treasurer, Sweetwater Education Foundation

Board of Directors, Salvation Army

Board of Directors, San Diego Council on Literacy

HONORS AND

AWARDS: William F. Goodling Award for outstanding contributions in family literacy, 2002

Citizen of the Year for Phi Delta Kappa, 2001

Nominated Outstanding Young Citizen, San Diego Chamber of Commerce, 1990