

## CHAPTER 1: THE EVEN START PROGRAM AND THE NATIONAL EVALUATION

This chapter describes the Even Start program and the associated national evaluation. Key findings from this chapter are:

- ❑ Even Start intends to address the basic educational needs of low-income parents and their children from birth through age seven by providing a unified program of (1) interactive literacy activities between parents and their children, (2) training for parents regarding how to be the primary teacher for their children and full partners in the education of their children, (3) parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency, and (4) an age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life.
- ❑ Even Start has grown steadily over the past decade, both in terms of total federal funding as well as the number of projects that are supported with those funds. From a small demonstration program in which \$14.8 million was used to fund 76 projects in the 1989-1990 program year, Even Start has grown ten-fold. In 2000-2001, \$150 million in funding was distributed to 855 projects serving almost 32,000 families in all 50 states.

The third national Even Start evaluation continued the U.S. Department of Education's decade-long series of studies of the Even Start program.<sup>10</sup> Two complementary sets of information were collected in the third national Even Start evaluation through (1) the Even Start Performance Information Reporting System (ESPIRS) and (2) the Experimental Design Study (EDS). These two sets of data were designed to assess the outcomes and effects of Even Start, as well as to augment the descriptive information about Even Start programs and families that is contained in various national evaluation reports prepared during the past ten years.

The ESPIRS was used to collect annual data from 1997-1998 through 2000-2001 on the universe of Even Start projects, the types of projects funded, the nature and amount of services they provide, the collaborative efforts they undertake, and the obstacles that exist to implementation. The ESPIRS also was used to collect data on Even Start children, parents, and families, including demographic information, education and income data, the amount of service they received, and the progress they made on indicators of parent, child, and family well-being, such as economic self-sufficiency, literacy skills, and parent-child relationships.

The EDS was an experimental study of Even Start's effectiveness in 18 projects. It used the same progress indicators as the ESPIRS, augmenting those measures with direct assessments of parent and child literacy skills, teacher and parent ratings of child competencies and behaviors, and school record abstractions. The EDS provided experimental vs. control group

---

<sup>10</sup> The first national evaluation spanned the years 1990-1993; the second national evaluation covered 1994-1997. The third evaluation provides information on Even Start during 1998-2001. A copy of the first interim report can be downloaded from [www.abtassoc.com/reports/education/3rd-EvenStartEvaluation.pdf](http://www.abtassoc.com/reports/education/3rd-EvenStartEvaluation.pdf).

comparisons on most of these measures at three points in time (pretest when the family enrolled in Even Start, posttest at the end of that program year, and follow-up a year later); it also included case studies of program operations and a study of program costs. Exhibit 1.1 summarizes the data collection activities undertaken in the third national Even Start evaluation.

The first interim report from the third national Even Start evaluation was delivered to Congress in January 2001. It presented descriptive information on all Even Start projects and participants, based on two years of ESPIRS data (1997-1998 and 1998-1999). The present document is the second interim report from the third national Even Start evaluation. It draws on data from all four years of ESPIRS data collection (1997-1998 through 2000-2001) as well as pretest and posttest data from the EDS. Follow-up data from the EDS were not available in time to be included in this report. Hence, this report presents nationally-representative descriptive information on Even Start programs and participants, and in addition discusses program impacts based on pretest and posttest data collected from 18 projects during the 1999-2000 and 2000-2001 program years.

The first chapter in this report describes Even Start and key findings from prior studies, the purpose of the national evaluation and the study design. Chapter 2 draws on ESPIRS data to describe the universe of Even Start projects and the services they offer. Chapter 3 relies on data collected during site visits and goes into depth about Even Start's implementation in the 18 EDS projects. Chapter 4 uses data from the ESPIRS to describe the background characteristics of Even Start children, parents and families. Chapter 5 uses data from the ESPIRS to report on participation in Even Start including the number of families served, length of time that they participated and intensity of their participation. Finally, Chapter 6 draws on data from the EDS and ESPIRS to report on the outcomes and effectiveness of Even Start projects.

## LEGISLATIVE AND PROGRAM BACKGROUND

Even Start addresses the basic educational needs of parents and children from birth through age seven from low-income families by providing a unified program of family literacy services, defined in the 2000 legislation as services provided to participants on a voluntary basis that are of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family, and that integrate all of the following:

- ❑ 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.
- ❑ Parent literacy training that leads to economic self-sufficiency.
- ❑ An age-appropriate education to prepare children for success in school and life.

Projects provide some services directly, but also are required to build on existing community resources by collaborating with other service providers such as local adult education programs or Head Start. The Even Start Family Literacy Program was first authorized in 1989 as Part B of Chapter 1 of Title I of the Elementary and Secondary Education Act of 1965 (ESEA).

Competitive subgrants were awarded to local educational agencies (LEAs) in collaboration, when appropriate, with other non-profit entities. Even Start has been reauthorized three times, once in 1994, in 2000 by the Literacy Involves Families Together (LIFT) Act, and in 2001 by the No Child Left Behind Act. The 2000 reauthorization made many important changes to the program. The current evaluation, covering the years 1997-1998 through 2000-2001, reflects the program as it existed prior to the 2000 reauthorization. According to the legislation in place during the time of the evaluation, the Even Start program was intended to:

...help break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by improving the educational opportunities of the nation's low-income families by integrating early childhood education, adult literacy or adult basic education, and parenting education into a unified family literacy program.... The program shall (1) be implemented through cooperative projects that build on existing community resources to create a new range of services; (2) promote achievement of the National Education Goals; and (3) assist children and adults from low-income families to achieve to challenging state content standards and challenging state student performance standards (P.L. 103-382, Sec. 1201).

The major pieces of legislation that amended Even Start include the following:

- ❑ The National Literacy Act of 1991 amended Even Start by (1) requiring grantees to be an LEA in collaboration with a community-based organization or vice versa, and adding set-asides for Indian tribes and tribal organizations and for outlying areas; (2) requiring instructional programs to be of high quality and setting a minimum subgrant size of \$75,000; (3) allowing families to participate until all family members become ineligible; (4) adding developmental and support services to the screening tools that projects can use to prepare parents for full participation; (5) allowing states to waive the match requirement in whole or part; (6) targeting services to high-need areas of each state, and (7) lowering the age of children served from age one to birth.
- ❑ In the 1994 reauthorization (1) services were targeted to families most in need and extended to teen parents, (2) projects were required to serve at least a three-year age range of children and provide enrichment or instructional services during the summer months; (3) projects were allowed to involve ineligible family members in family literacy activities; (4) stronger partnerships and collaboration were required in the application and implementation process; and (5) funding for local projects was limited to eight years.
- ❑ In 1996, Congress sought to strengthen Even Start further by passing an amendment requiring instructional services to be intensive.<sup>11</sup>
- ❑ In 1998, the Reading Excellence Act amended Even Start by (1) providing a definition for the term “family literacy services” to match other legislation with family literacy components including Head Start, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, and the Reading Excellence Act program, and (2) requiring states to develop results-based

---

<sup>11</sup> Omnibus Consolidated Rescissions and Appropriations Act, 1996, Section 2755, P.L. No. 104-134 (1996).

indicators of program quality and to use these indicators to monitor, evaluate, and improve Even Start programs.<sup>12</sup>

- In 1999, the Omnibus Appropriations Act for FY 2000 allowed local grantees to continue to participate in Even Start beyond eight years and reduced the federal share for the ninth and succeeding years to 35 percent.<sup>13</sup>

In 2000, the reauthorization (LIFT Act) almost doubled Even Start's authorization level to \$250 million. The purpose of the program was altered to require projects to build on existing services *of high quality*, to promote the academic achievement of children and parents, and to use instructional programs based on scientifically-based reading research and the prevention of reading difficulties. The law contained several new or amended program elements including strengthened staff qualifications, required instructional services during the summer months, instructional programs and reading readiness activities to be based on scientifically-based reading research, encouragement of regular attendance and continuity in the program, and local evaluations used for program improvement. These amendments were continued when the program was reauthorized again recently by the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001. The latest legislation requires projects to provide family literacy services as defined in the ESEA (and discussed earlier in this section).<sup>14</sup>

When Even Start began as a federally administered program in 1989-1990, grants totaling \$14.8 million were made to 76 projects. According to the Even Start statute, if funding reached \$50 million, the program was to be administered by state agencies. This level was exceeded in 1992. Most Even Start projects now are administered by states, and the 2000-2001 appropriation of \$150 million supported 855 Even Start projects in all states (Exhibits 1.2 and 1.3). In addition, family literacy programs specifically for migrant families, Indian tribes and tribal organizations, and outlying areas are supported through special set-aside funds (five percent of the total Even Start allocation; six percent when the appropriation exceeds \$200 million) and remain under federal administration. The statute also authorizes discretionary grants for statewide family literacy initiatives for which Congress separately appropriated \$10 million in Fiscal Years 1999 and 2000, and a family literacy project in a prison that houses women and their preschool-aged children that is administered by the Department of Education.

The number of families served by Even Start grew steadily from 1989-1990 when 2,460 families participated to 1996-1997 when the program served a high of 34,400 families. In recent years, enrollment in Even Start dropped—to between 30,000 and 32,000. This reflects a gradual reduction in the number of families served by the average project, from a high of 62 families per project in 1991-1992 to 37 families per project in 2000-2001 (Exhibit 1.2).

---

<sup>12</sup> Title VIII of the United States Department of Labor, Health and Human Services, and Education Appropriations Act, enacted by the Omnibus Consolidated and Emergency Supplemental Appropriations Act, 1999, Section 101(f), P.L. No. 105-277 (1998).

<sup>13</sup> Section 306(a) and (b)(2) of H.R. 3424, as incorporated by the Omnibus Consolidated Appropriations Act, 2000, Section 1000(a)(4), P.L. No. 106-113 (1999).

<sup>14</sup> Title I, Part B of the Consolidated Appropriations Act, P.L. 106-554 (2001).

The long-term reduction in the number of families per project and the shorter-term drop in the total number of families served likely results from a conscious technical assistance strategy by the Department of Education to focus resources intensively on the neediest families to achieve the best outcomes. This strategy was based, in part, on findings from the first national Even Start evaluation showing that (1) families in projects that offered more hours of instructional services participated more intensively than families in projects that offered fewer service hours, and (2) families who participated more intensively in instructional services had better learning gains than families that participated less intensively. Building on these findings, the Department has been consistent in its guidance to Even Start state coordinators and to local projects—the best way to help families achieve progress is to provide high levels of service to the most needy families, rather than spreading services more thinly over a larger number of families.

## **DESIGN OF EVEN START PROJECTS**

During the period covered by this study, the legislation placed many requirements on Even Start projects. Each project had to identify, recruit and serve families most in need of Even Start services;<sup>15</sup> screen and prepare families for full participation; accommodate participant’s work schedules and provide support services; provide high-quality, intensive instructional programs (adult education, parenting education, early childhood education and parent-child activities); ensure that instructional and administrative staff have appropriate qualifications; provide training for staff who work with parents and children; provide home-based instructional services; provide some instructional and enrichment services on a year-round basis; coordinate services with other local programs; conduct a local evaluation; and provide services to a three-year age range of children. Even Start families participate in the following instructional services:

- ❑ **Adult Education and Adult Literacy:** high-quality intensive instructional programs to promote adult literacy including adult basic education (ABE), adult secondary education (ASE), and English as a second language (ESL), and preparation for the General Education Development (GED) certificate.
- ❑ **Parenting Education:** high-quality intensive instructional programs to help parents to support the educational growth of their children.
- ❑ **Early Childhood Education:** developmentally appropriate, intensive educational services for children to prepare them for success in school.
- ❑ **Parent-Child Activities:** interactive literacy activities between parents and children.

Screening and referral may include referrals for mental health counseling, services to battered family members, employment, and screening or treatment for chemical dependency. Even Start projects also offer support services such as transportation, flexible scheduling, child care, nutrition assistance, health care and meals to help families participate in the program.

---

<sup>15</sup> To be eligible for Even Start a family needs (a) a parent who is eligible for adult education services under the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act or who is within the state’s compulsory school attendance age range or attending secondary school and (b) a child under 8 years of age. The definition of “most-in-need” is based on locally established criteria that must include, at least, family income and parent’s literacy level.

Even Start is intended to benefit families in several ways. Potential outcomes for parents are improved literacy behaviors (e.g., shared literacy events with children and increased reading and writing activities in the home), parenting behavior and skills (e.g., positive parent-child relationships), and educational and employment skills that lead to economic self-sufficiency (e.g., improved reading and English language ability and higher education attainment). Goals for parents also may include growth in personal skills and community involvement. The potential effects of Even Start on children include improved school readiness (e.g., language development and early literacy). Once in school, outcomes might include reading on grade level, satisfactory attendance, and a lower incidence of special education and retention in grade.

The Even Start legislation is more specific than that of many similar federal programs, though it does not define curricula.<sup>16</sup> Decisions on how to implement each program element are left to individual projects. For example, the legislation requires high-quality, intensive instructional programs; services for parents and children together; and instructional services in the home. But projects decide on the frequency and duration of program activities,<sup>17</sup> whether activities are primarily center-based or home-based, and whether to invent educational curricula from scratch or use a hybrid of existing approaches. Based on the availability of local services, projects decide which activities will be supported by Even Start funds and which will be provided by collaborating agencies.

## THE NATIONAL EVALUATION

Since 1989, the Even Start legislation has included evaluation requirements at both the local and national levels. Though the legislative mandate has changed slightly over the years, the national evaluation's basic purposes have remained the same—to describe Even Start projects and participants, examine the performance and effectiveness of Even Start, and identify effective Even Start projects for use in program improvement and technical assistance. Two cycles of four-year national studies have been completed and this report presents data from the third national evaluation. There is substantial continuity across the three national evaluations, but each had its own special focus and challenges.

**First National Evaluation.** The first national evaluation (St.Pierre, Swartz, Gamse, Murray, Deck & Nickel, 1995) was broad in scope, addressing questions such as: What are the characteristics of Even Start participants? How are Even Start projects implemented and what services do they provide? What Even Start services are received by participating families? and What are the effects of Even Start on participating families? One part of the evaluation was the National Evaluation Information System (NEIS) which was used to collect data on participant characteristics, project implementation, and participant outcomes from all projects using paper and pencil or optically scannable forms. Literacy assessments were administered at program entry and exit to one adult and one child in each Even Start family. The evaluation also included

---

<sup>16</sup> Congress prohibits the Department of Education from specifying curriculum (Section 438 of the General Education Provisions Act, 20 U.S.C. Section 1232a).

<sup>17</sup> The recently added definition of family literacy services (Section 1202(e)(3)) provides that services must be of sufficient intensity in terms of hours, and of sufficient duration, to make sustainable changes in a family.

an experiment (the In-Depth Study) in which families in five volunteer sites were randomly assigned to be in Even Start or a control group and were measured three times during an 18-month period.

**Second National Evaluation.** In the second national evaluation (Tao, Gamse & Tarr, 1998) the national survey was improved, converted to a computer-based system, and renamed the Even Start Information System (ESIS). While program and participation information continued to be collected from all Even Start projects, the administration of literacy assessments was restricted to children and adults from a 10 percent sample of projects (approximately 60 out of 600) called the Sample Study. No control or comparison group was included in the second evaluation.

**Third National Evaluation.** The Department of Education selected Abt Associates Inc. and Fu Associates, Ltd. to conduct the third national evaluation to measure the effectiveness of the program and provide information on program implementation. The evaluation includes two complementary substudies: (1) the Even Start Performance Information Reporting System (ESPIRS) and (2) the Experimental Design Study (EDS).

The ESPIRS continued the decade-long annual collection of a common set of data from all Even Start projects. At the start of the third national evaluation, several improvements were made to the reporting system including the addition of an entirely new section asking parents to report the types of literacy-related activities and behaviors in which they and their children engage as well as the kinds of literacy-related tasks that their children can perform, a more detailed set of forms for collecting data on the amount of time that families participate in Even Start, and an updating of the project profile system developed in the second national evaluation.

In 2000-2001, the Even Start universe consisted of 855 projects and 31,896 families. ESPIRS data on these projects and families allowed the Department to manage the program at the federal level, provide oversight to Even Start state coordinators, provide project-level data to individual Even Start grantees, track changes in the program over time, make policy decisions, suggest program improvements, and respond to Government Performance and Results Act (GPRA) requirements. ESPIRS data were also used to help select the sample of projects to participate in the EDS (see below), to check the generalizability of gains observed in the EDS, and to obtain information on the types and intensity of services received by families in the EDS (which can serve as predictors of gains).

The ESPIRS provided information on the types of projects funded, the nature and amount of services they provided, the collaborative efforts they undertook, and the obstacles that existed to program implementation. The system also provided annual child, parent, and family-level data, including demographic information, education and income data, the amount of service families received, and the progress they made on indicators of parent, child, and family well-being, such as economic self-sufficiency, literacy skills, and parent-child relationships. As has been the case since the inception of Even Start, ESPIRS data were collected by Even Start grantees with training supplied by the national evaluation contractor. Grantee staff conducted face-to-face interviews with program participants, maintained records on services received, and

completed program-level questionnaires. Grantee staff entered these data in a computerized database and transmitted them annually to the evaluation contractor.

A second component of the third national evaluation, the Experimental Design Study (EDS), was included to provide a strong assessment of program effects. The EDS used a research design in which eligible families that wanted to take part in Even Start were randomly assigned to begin the program right away (intervention group) or to wait for one year (delayed intervention or control group). The EDS used the same progress indicators as the ESPIRS, adding direct assessments of adult and child literacy skills, teacher and parent ratings of child competencies and behaviors, and school record abstractions. The EDS allowed experimental vs. control group comparisons on most of these measures; it also included case studies of program operations and a study of program costs. All data collection for the EDS was done by contractor staff, instead of by program staff as was the case for the ESPIRS.

An experimental study of 18 Even Start projects, the EDS was restricted to projects that met Even Start's legislative requirements, operated during the 1999-2000 or 2000-2001 program years, and served a sufficiently large number of families. However, no examination of the quality of instructional services was done as part of the selection process. From this pool, we selected ESL projects (provide ESL services to Hispanic families), and non-ESL projects (enroll few or no Hispanic families); projects that provide high-intensity and moderate-intensity service levels (relative to other Even Start projects); and urban and rural projects. In each of the EDS projects, we planned to randomly assign 30 new families—20 to Even Start and 10 to a control group. Eleven projects participated in the EDS during 1999-2000. Pretesting was done as families enrolled in Even Start, mostly in fall 1999, and posttesting was done in summer 2000. Seven additional projects participated during 2000-2001. Pretesting in these projects was done in fall 2000 and posttesting was done in summer 2001. Follow-up assessments were administered one year after posttesting, in spring 2001 for the first group of 11 EDS projects and in spring 2002 for the second group of seven EDS projects. The follow-up data will be included in the final report, planned for June 2003.



EXHIBIT 1.1 DATA COLLECTION SCHEDULE FOR THE THIRD NATIONAL EVEN START EVALUATION					
EVALUATION COMPONENT	YEAR OF DATA COLLECTION				
	1997-1998	1998-1999	1999-2000	2000-2001	2001-2002
ESPIRS (all projects)	✓	✓	✓	✓	
EDS Cohort 1 (11 projects)			✓Fall 99 pretest ✓Spring 00 posttest	✓Spring 01 follow up (not included in this report)	
EDS Cohort 2 (7 projects)				✓Fall 00 pretest ✓Spring 01 posttest	✓Spring 02 follow up (not included in this report)

EXHIBIT 1.2 NUMBER OF EVEN START PROJECTS, FAMILIES, PARENTS AND CHILDREN, BY PROGRAM YEAR					
PROGRAM YEAR	NUMBER OF PROJECTS	NUMBER OF FAMILIES	NUMBER OF PARENTS	NUMBER OF CHILDREN	NUMBER OF FAMILIES PER PROJECT
2001-2002	1,125	NA	NA	NA	NA
2000-2001	855	31,859	32,793	43,374	37.3
1999-2000	770	31,570	31,301	41,586	41.0
1998-1999	737	32,200	30,800	40,500	43.7
1997-1998	655	30,500	30,286	41,528	46.6
1996-1997	637	34,400	35,800	48,300	54.0
1995-1996	576	31,500	36,400	47,800	54.7
1994-1995	513	30,752	34,609	56,858	53.0
1993-1994	490	29,400	33,081	39,920	58.0
1992-1993	340	20,800	23,404	28,243	61.2
1991-1992	239	14,900	16,607	20,822	62.3
1990-1991	122	6,460	7,457	8,629	54.1
1989-1990	76	2,460	3,529	3,940	32.4

Notes: Sources for number of families, parents and children are as follows:  
 1997-1998, 1998-1999, 1999-2000, 2000-2001: calculated from ESPIRS data.  
 1996-1997: 2<sup>nd</sup> evaluation 1994-1997 Final Report, p.30. Used numbers as reported.  
 1995-1996: 2<sup>nd</sup> evaluation 1996 Interim Report, p.24. Used numbers as reported.  
 1994-1995: 2<sup>nd</sup> evaluation 1995 Interim Report, p.17. Projected number of reported families, parents and children based on 476 reporting projects vs. 513 total projects.  
 1993-1994: Estimated parents and children based on 1992-1993 ratio of families to parents and to children  
 1992-1993: 1<sup>st</sup> evaluation Final Report, Exhibit 4.1. Projected number of reported parents and children based on 16,518 reported families vs. 20,800 total families.  
 1991-1992: 1<sup>st</sup> evaluation Report on Effectiveness, p.4-1. Projected number of parents and children based on 9,690 reported families vs. 14,900 total families.  
 1990-1991: 1<sup>st</sup> evaluation 2<sup>nd</sup> Interim Report, p.54. Projected number of families, parents and children based on 114 reporting projects vs. 122 total projects.  
 1989-1990: 1<sup>st</sup> evaluation First Year Report, p.117. Projected number of parents and children based on 2,307 reported families vs. 2460 total families.

Exhibit reads: In 2000-2001, 855 projects were funded by Even Start.

<b>EXHIBIT 1.3</b>			
<b>EVEN START FEDERAL EXPENDITURES, BY PROGRAM YEAR</b>			
<b>PROGRAM YEAR</b>	<b>FEDERAL EVEN START EXPENDITURE</b>	<b>FEDERAL EVEN START EXPENDITURE PER PROJECT</b>	<b>FEDERAL EVEN START EXPENDITURE PER FAMILY</b>
2001-2002	\$250,000,000	NA	NA
2000-2001	\$150,000,000	\$175,439	\$4,708
1999-2000	\$135,000,000	\$175,325	\$4,276
1998-1999	\$124,000,000	\$168,250	\$3,851
1997-1998	\$101,997,000	\$155,721	\$3,344
1996-1997	\$101,997,000	\$160,121	\$2,965
1995-1996	\$102,024,000	\$177,125	\$3,239
1994-1995	\$91,373,000	\$178,115	\$3,359
1993-1994	\$89,123,000	\$181,884	\$3,031
1992-1993	\$70,000,000	\$205,882	\$3,365
1991-1992	\$49,770,000	\$208,243	\$3,340
1990-1991	\$24,201,000	\$198,369	\$3,667
1989-1990	\$14,820,000	\$195,000	\$6,024
Notes: Federal Even Start expenditures include funds for technical assistance and evaluation, and state administrative funds. Subtracting these relatively small amounts of funding would not change the conclusions drawn in this report. The federal Even Start cost per project and cost per family are calculated by using federal-level data on the total program expenditures and the total number of projects funded, combined with project-level data on the total number of families served. Program expenditures do not include matching funds.			
Exhibit reads: In 2000-2001, federal Even Start expenditures were \$150,000,000.			