

Roberta Lanterman, Family Literacy Testimony, May 5, 2009
Subcommittee on Higher Education, Lifelong Learning, and Competitiveness
New Innovations and Best Practices Under the Workforce Investment Act

Good morning. My name is Roberta Lanterman. It is a privilege to be with you this morning.

I have worked for the cause of literacy for more than 25 years. Currently, I am the director of the Long Beach Family Literacy Program in Long Beach, California and the training coordinator for the McDonald's Family Mealtime Literacy Nights. Previously a kindergarten and preschool teacher, I also have been a certified trainer for the National Center for Family Literacy for more than 10 years. That experience has allowed me to tap into national best practices and research for the benefit of the children and parents I serve.

I would like to talk to you today about education partnerships that work – between parents and their children, between the public sector and private businesses, and between programs serving generations of learners.

In my early days as an educator, we made incremental progress, but there were barriers we could not overcome because parents were not literate. They could not help even if they wanted to. It was then that I saw the light. The problem is systemic, and the solution was to reach both generations simultaneously – helping adults while helping our youngest learners side-by-side.

All too often, we compartmentalize education – early childhood education, adolescent education, adult education, workforce training. We take limited aim at our problems by running from issue to issue, program to program, without remaining focused on the systemic issues that are causing our education and workforce problems.

We must focus on the interconnectedness of the problem, which will lead us to a real, long-lasting solution – educating the entire family. Studies show there is a direct correlation between the education of the parent, the poverty status of the home and the likelihood of the child's success in school. RAND Corporation research, "Are L.A.'s Children Ready for School," conducted in 2004, is one such study.

Addressing the needs of the entire family is a powerful community strategy for raising educational levels, improving workforce skills and breaking the cycle of poverty.

Consider Margarita – one woman who made the decision to participate in our family literacy program, and not only changed her life, but also the lives of her three daughters.

Her dream was to become a teacher. But obstacles got in the way. She was orphaned. She became pregnant and moved to a country where she did not know the language and had to sleep in the water heater room instead of a bedroom. Her husband's drinking problem was endangering the children, and she worked two low-wage jobs.

Through family literacy, she learned English, became involved in her children's education and revived her dream of becoming a teacher. Margarita has become a U.S. citizen, will soon graduate from college at California State University and has become a certified preschool teacher. But the effects of family literacy reach beyond Margarita. One daughter graduated from college and has started her own business. Another is studying to become a paralegal, and a third is enrolled in a gifted program in high school with an emphasis on international business.

In 2007, *Education Week* issued a report that underscores family literacy's philosophy, "From Cradle to Career: Connecting American Education from Birth to Adulthood." Importantly, more than half of the 13 categories used to predict children's future success dealt with issues surrounding parents and other adults. Another category (preschool enrollment) is directly related to parents' actions and value of education. Family income, parental educational attainment and parental employment were the three leading categories. Successful states had strong results in those categories, which served as a springboard for success in the remaining measures related to children's education.

One of the reasons the home environment is so important is that students spend five times as much time in communities and with their families as they do at school, so educators cannot conquer this challenge alone. Parents must be educated.

Let me tell you a little bit about the Long Beach Family Literacy Program that has been in operation since 1992. It serves as a model for other literacy efforts and has been lauded as a national example by the Annie E. Casey Foundation.

My program includes four components: adult education, parent education, parent and child together time, and early childhood education.

We provide adults and their children with the skills and resources necessary to be successful in their education, financially secure and productive members of their communities. They become lifelong learners, which has never been more important in this global, high-tech economy.

Seventy-three percent of our participants are at or below the federal poverty level, and 61 percent have not gone beyond the ninth grade.

By addressing the needs of parents and children simultaneously, we are outperforming stand-alone programs. We exceed state benchmarks year after year in adult education proficiency, preschool vocabulary and preschool alphabet knowledge.

Our most recent adult outcomes show that parents made gains that were more than double the state reading proficiency benchmarks. Our children who entered kindergarten increased their English-language skills at rate of 2.5 times more than the federal benchmark. Children in our program leave preschool possessing the skills to succeed in kindergarten and beyond, and their parents simultaneously gain the language and literacy skills to support them.

Our program ranks in the 90th percentile for attendance and retention because we do not let families fall through the cracks. We know if they come to our program consistently, they will reach their goals. It is that simple, but at the same time, it is that complicated.

For example, Cecilia was coming to the Toyota Family Literacy Program with her young daughter. But, after leaving her abusive husband, she moved into a domestic violence shelter 30 miles away. The shelter staff wanted her to quit the family literacy program and find immediate employment, but Cecilia daughter persevered – knowing the commitment would lead to long-term stability. She and her daughter took a train 30 miles to the program. As a result, she received her high school diploma with honors and is attending Long Beach City College to become an art teacher instead of being stuck in a low-wage job. Cecilia still comes to our program – taking two buses just to get here. She turned a nightmare into a personal triumph.

Our efforts address the educational needs of children and their parents to create literate home environments and prepare adults to enter the workforce.

We continue to implement new measures that ensure innovation and success. In 1998, we joined forces with the Pacific Gateway Workforce Investment Network to integrate family literacy and welfare-to-work programming. The model is still in place. The partnership with our local Workforce Investment Act employment entity is invaluable in bridging the gaps between education and employment for families in need.

Last year, we were awarded a grant from Toyota to bring our program to Hispanic families and expand our program to three local elementary school campuses. Of nearly 200 national applicants, Long Beach was among the top five in nation. The Toyota program, created by the National Center for Family Literacy, brings parents and children together in classrooms and includes culturally relevant programming.

Core services are provided through funding from First 5 Los Angeles and Toyota. But part of the key to sustainability is that we don't rely on just one or two funding streams. We hold fund-raisers with vendors and apply for grants from community foundations. We also request in-kind services and resources from our award-winning school district and our Workforce Investment Act partner.

The need is great in Long Beach – 42 percent of the population is low-income, and the unemployment rate exceeds 10 percent.

The good news is the entire community is responding to the success they see. Small business owners realize that educated community members make better employees and consumers. Local McDonald's operators are opening their doors for Family Mealtime Literacy Nights to provide workshops and meals to help families improve their literacy skills together.

Family literacy is crucial to supplying a 21st century workforce. The Toyota/NCFL model has been successfully implemented in both urban and rural settings – from New York, Chicago and right here in D.C. to Shelby County, Alabama; Wichita, Kansas; and Springdale, Arkansas. The Springdale program was featured in a recent issue of *PARADE* Magazine.

Results from the Toyota programs already implemented include:

- Significant literacy gains by adults with 54 percent improving literacy scores by at least one level. This has contributed to an improved understanding of basic oral and written instructions in English, reading a note from a teacher, setting up a doctor's appointment, and displaying basic computer literacy skills (word processing and sending e-mail);
- Children in the program exceeded peers in such areas as academic performance (79 percent), motivation to learn (86 percent), attendance (96 percent), classroom behavior (91 percent), and involvement in classroom activities (88 percent);
- 92 percent of parents stating they are better able to help their child with homework; and
- 91 percent of parents stating their child's grades have improved.

The needs of New York City are obviously different from the needs in Springdale, Arkansas, but the flexibility of family literacy programming yields success for all communities.

That's why it is crucial for Workforce Investment Act initiatives to support family literacy efforts.

Parents pass along more than just eye color and other genetic traits to their children. They instill values and attitudes toward learning and education. Stronger literacy skills across multiple generations benefit families, communities, and the national economy. It's simply too urgent to address only one generation at a time, one programmatic element at a time.

I strongly encourage Congress to continue to support family literacy programs as an important delivery model in the provision of adult education services.