

# The Even Start Family Literacy Program: The Rise and Fall of Family Literacy and the Need for its Return

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## I. INTRODUCTION

In 1988, the federal government launched the Even Start Program, later to be called the Even Start Family Literacy Program, to address the nation's growing illiteracy issues. Millions of adults in America were illiterate and their children often followed suit, making America's illiteracy an intergenerational issue. The program was built on the belief that children's early learning is greatly influenced by their parents, and so a child's educational success was tied to parents' ability to be their child's "first teacher." It aimed to attack illiteracy through the family unit by simultaneously providing adult and child education and enhancing parenting skills. The program grew nationally, reaching its peak in 2002, but soon after met its demise because three national evaluations could not find support for its success.

However, America's illiteracy issue still exists and is still multigenerational. Today, approximately fourteen percent of adults cannot read.<sup>1</sup> An additional twenty-one percent of adults can only read at a fifth-grade level.<sup>2</sup> The population of Americans unable to read at a basic level continues to grow as more families immigrate to the U.S. and children continue to struggle to read until they become adults. Thus, there is a need for a program that moves with the family and within the home. Nonetheless, Even Start should not be revived as it once was but should be revised so as to allow projects funded under the program to better focus on the needs of the local communities being served.

Part I of this Note will analyze the purpose of the family focused illiteracy solution and the evolution of one such example, Even Start. It will first examine the rise of family literacy programs. It will then describe the design of Even Start, its subsequent expansion through federal legislation to better utilize the family unit to alleviate illiteracy, and finally its demise. Part II will analyze the evaluations of the program noting the positive gains of participants. It will examine the inconsistent national evaluations that both did and did not support Even Start's success by first explaining how the target population was served, and then demonstrating the positive, but statistically insignificant, gains of the program's core focus areas: Child education outcomes, parent education outcomes, and the parent-child relationship. Part II will then analyze the flaws in the design of the national evaluations arguing they should not have been the basis for the program's elimination. Part III will analyze the insufficiency of current literacy approaches and need for a program similar to Even Start to address the illiteracy issue. It will examine how current federal programs do not address the intergenerational illiteracy issue because of their one-dimensional focus. It will conclude with possible revisions to the Even Start program if it were to be reinvigorated.

There is a cycle of illiteracy in the U.S in which impoverished and illiterate parents foster illiteracy in their children. This cycle has not been broken by current adult or early childhood education programs because such programs only attack one facet of illiteracy at a time, parent or child illiteracy. As the education

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1. *The U.S Illiteracy Rate Has Not Changed in 10 Years*, HUFFINGTON POST (Updated No. 27, 2017), [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/illiteracy-rate\\_n\\_3880355.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/2013/09/06/illiteracy-rate_n_3880355.html).

2. *Id.*

achievement gap widens in the U.S., people are failing to reach their full potential, causing the U.S. to fall behind other nations. Therefore, by enhancing the family unit, the U.S. will enhance itself as a nation.

## II. EVEN START PURPOSE AND EVOLUTION

As illiteracy became a prominent issue in the United States during the 1980s, legislators turned to family literacy programs to alleviate it. The most important of these programs was Even Start. It received great support early on but was eventually defunded and eliminated due to national evaluations that did not conclusively find Even Start to be effective.

### *A. The Rise of Family Literacy*

During the 1980s, literacy became a prominent issue in the United States.<sup>3</sup> A study conducted by the Census Bureau conservatively estimated that thirteen percent of adults living in the United States were illiterate.<sup>4</sup> Legislators became increasingly concerned as the number of illiterate adults increased by nearly a million Americans each year.<sup>5</sup> In a series of House and Senate hearings, legislators heard from experts about economic, military, social and personal impacts that arise from a vast number of illiterate Americans.<sup>6</sup> Legislators resolved that any successful solution must be both preventative and reactive,<sup>7</sup> giving rise to adult and child literacy programming.

Before the rise of family literacy programs, the literacy issue was addressed via separate adult and child programming. Adult programming assisted adults in developing basic literacy skills and increasing economic independence.<sup>8</sup> Separate child programming, such as Head Start, centered on early childhood education and the importance of school readiness.<sup>9</sup>

In the mid-1980s, the illiteracy solution shifted to a family literacy focus.<sup>10</sup> Publications from the Department of Education<sup>11</sup> noted the importance of early learning in the home for later development of literacy skills.<sup>12</sup> Research on the influence of family literacy on emergent child literacy showed that skills and behaviors, such as understanding concepts of print and letters, transferred from a

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3. CAROL CLYMER ET AL., CHANGING THE COURSE OF FAMILY LITERACY 2 (2017).

4. *The Effective Schools and Even Start Act: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Elementary, Secondary, and Vocational Educ. of the Committee on Educ. and Labor, 99th Cong. 7* (1986) [hereinafter *Effective Schools Hearing*] (statement of Rep. William Goodling).

5. *Id.*

6. *Id.*

7. *Id.*

8. CLYMER, *supra* note 3, at 2.

9. *Id.*

10. *Id.*

11. *See, e.g.*, ANDERSON ET AL., BECOMING A NATION OF READERS: THE REPORT OF THE COMMISSION ON READING (1985), <https://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED253865.pdf>.

12. *Effective Schools Hearing, supra* note 4, at 7.

parent to child during activities like book reading.<sup>13</sup> Studies also showed the best predictor of a child's school achievement was the mother's education level.<sup>14</sup> The combination of this research led to a shift in the responsibility for children's early literacy learning from schools to parents.<sup>15</sup>

Policy makers pushed for family literacy programs that supported child development and literacy and that simultaneously enhanced parent literacy and parenting skills.<sup>16</sup> They recognized that illiteracy is an intergenerational issue that creates a cycle of illiterate parents producing illiterate children who then become illiterate parents that perpetuate the cycle. Illiterate parents unconsciously create a home environment that hinders reading and writing development.<sup>17</sup> Parents may have a negative or apathetic attitude towards education or do not engage in parent-child reading tasks hindering literacy growth.<sup>18</sup> Therefore, the cycle of illiteracy could not be broken through addressing just an individual's illiteracy but rather through promoting the family's literacy. Family literacy programs empower parents, allowing them to promote literacy of the whole family, shifting the focus away from illiteracy as an individual's issue.<sup>19</sup> These programs highlighted the role of the parent as the child's first teacher.<sup>20</sup> Their goal was to connect the home and the school and "to mediate the incongruence between what is learned about literacy at home and what is expected at school."<sup>21</sup> Accordingly, family literacy worked to attack intergenerational illiteracy.

Family literacy programs developed across the nation and were sponsored by a range of organizations such as state governments, school districts, private foundations, and universities.<sup>22</sup> In 1988 the federal government instituted its own family literacy program, the Even Start Program, later to be renamed the Even Start Family Literacy Program. The program was heralded by then-Representative William Goodling, who was known as the "Father of Even Start."<sup>23</sup> Before his time in Congress, he worked as a teacher, school principal, and superintendent of schools and was known for his commitment to education.<sup>24</sup> He drew on his experiences as an educator to create a program that would link adult literacy and

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13. FLORA V. RODRIGUEZ-BROWN, *THE HOME-SCHOOL CONNECTION: LESSONS LEARNED IN A CULTURALLY AND LINGUISTICALLY DIVERSE COMMUNITY* 33 (2009).

14. CLYMER, *supra* note 3, at 2 (referencing THOMAS G. STICHT & BARBARA A. McDONALD, *TEACH THE MOTHER AND REACH THE CHILD: LITERACY ACROSS GENERATIONS* (1990); Thomas G. Sticht, *Adult Literacy Education*, 15 REV. RES. ED. 59 (1988)).

15. *Id.* at 2–3 (referencing Vivian Gadsen, *Family Literacy*, in 2 *ENCYCLOPEDIA OF LANGUAGE AND EDUCATION* 163 (Nancy H. Hornberger, ed. 2008)).

16. *Id.* at 8.

17. Kathleen S. Cooter, *When Mama Can't Read: Counteracting Intergenerational Illiteracy*, 59 *ISSUES URB. LITERACY* 698, 698 (2006); Peggy Daisey, *Intergenerational Literacy Programs: Rationale, Description, and Effectiveness* 20 *J. CLINICAL CHILD PSYCHOL.* 11, 11 (1991).

18. Cooter, *supra* note 17, at 1.

19. Daisey, *supra* note 17, at 2.

20. RODRIGUEZ-BROWN, *supra* note 13, at 37.

21. *Id.*

22. ROBERT G. ST. PIERRE & JANET P. SWARTZ, *THE EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM: EARLY IMPLEMENTATION* 2 (1996).

23. *Goodling Institute for Research in Family Literacy*, PENN STATE COLL. OF EDUC., <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/about-us> (last visited Apr. 15, 2018).

24. *Id.*

early childhood education programs to break the intergenerational cycle of illiteracy.<sup>25</sup> He helped create, promote, and defend the program as it evolved.

### *B. Legislative History and Program Design*

This section details the rise and fall of Even Start, from the pilot program in 1988 to its transfer from federal to state control and subsequent amendments to its demise in 2012.

#### 1. Creation of the Demonstration Program: Hawkins-Stafford Amendment

Even Start began as a small endeavor under the Hawkins-Stafford Amendment as a demonstration program, in which the federal government awarded grants to local education agencies (LEAs).<sup>26</sup> The program began with 76 demonstration projects in 1989 requiring \$14.5 million in federal funds, and grew to 123 projects in 1990 totaling \$24 million in federal funds.<sup>27</sup> Under the pilot program, LEAs could apply to the Department of Education (ED) for a federal four-year discretionary grant.<sup>28</sup> Federal funding started at ninety percent of the total cost of a project and diminished by ten percent each year upon renewal.<sup>29</sup> Grants were awarded to family literacy projects that would reach the greatest percentage of eligible children<sup>30</sup> and would fulfill the three overarching goals of the Even Start Program: (1) to help parents become full partners in the education of their children; (2) to assist children in reaching their full potential as learners; and (3) to provide literacy training for their parents.<sup>31</sup> The statute mandated annual evaluations by independent evaluators who would assess achievement of the program's goals<sup>32</sup> and measure the program's effectiveness.

25. MARIS A. VINOVSIS, *HISTORY AND EDUCATIONAL POLICYMAKING* 119 (1999).

26. Even Start's proponents strategically included the program in the reauthorization of Elementary and Secondary Education Act (ESEA) rather than attempt to create a stand-alone piece of legislation. The ESEA reauthorization expanded Chapter 1 funds to be used to link preschool and adult education to finance early childhood and secondary education. Including Even Start as a separate initiative under Chapter 1 reinforced the idea of using those funds to finance early childhood education. However, the Bush administration did not believe Even Start should be a distinct program, because existing Chapter 1 legislation covered the program's objectives. Despite this objection, Even Start was included in ESEA. *Id.*

27. ST. PIERRE & SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 22, at 3.

28. *Id.* While the appropriations amount remained below \$50 million, ED directly made the grants to grantees. Once federal appropriations reached \$50 million, control would be transferred from ED to the state agencies. FUMIYO TAO ET AL., U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., STATE ADMINISTRATION OF THE EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM: STRUCTURE, PROCESS AND PRACTICES 1 (2003).

29. 20 U.S.C. § 2744(c) (2012). This meant that by the fourth year sixty percent of the total program was federally funded.

30. *Id.*

31. ST. PIERRE & SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 22, at 3.

32. 20 U.S.C. § 2748 (1988) (repealed 1994). Programs were evaluated in their effectiveness in providing adult education, parent training, services to special populations like those with disabilities, home-based programs involving parents and children, coordination with related programs like Head Start, and training of personnel. *Id.*

The program strategically targeted low-income families with parents eligible for adult education,<sup>33</sup> so the population served included both adults with literacy issues and at-risk children. An Even Start eligible family had at least one parent that qualified for adult basic education programs, at least one child between one and seven years of age,<sup>34</sup> and lived in an elementary school area with a high concentration of low-income families.<sup>35</sup>

The program concentrated on breaking the generational cycle of illiteracy, so it took on a “family-focus” design, rather than a parent- or child-focus, to address illiteracy of adults and children simultaneously.<sup>36</sup> The purpose of the program was to unify adult and early childhood education into one program that cooperated with and built on existing community resources but provided new services to eligible families.<sup>37</sup> It worked to enhance child and parent literacy and education, but it also equipped parents with the tools necessary to help their children grow and develop more generally. It did so through three main components: An integrated program of early childhood education, adult literacy training, and parenting education.<sup>38</sup>

The program was premised on the idea that these components are interrelated and build upon each other, so all three were necessary to make lasting change in a child’s education.<sup>39</sup> Adult literacy focused on improving a parent’s literacy and educational skills<sup>40</sup> in order to combat adult illiteracy and produce parents that could meaningfully support their children’s literacy. Child education centered on preparing a child for success in school and promoting development<sup>41</sup> to prevent illiteracy in the emerging generation. Parenting education enhanced the parent-child relationship so that parents could understand and support their child’s growth and development.<sup>42</sup> Through parenting education, parents could become partners in their child’s education, enhancing the emerging generation’s literacy.

Even Start also fostered and encouraged participation in the program by providing support services to parents. In addition to the three core services, projects needed to provide support services designed to remove barriers that would restrict a family’s participation in Even Start’s core educational services.<sup>43</sup> Required support services included child care and transportation that catered to participants’ employment and various responsibilities.<sup>44</sup>

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33. 20 U.S.C. § 2745 (1988) (repealed 1994).

34. *Id.*

35. *Id.*; 20 U.S.C. § 2723 (1988) (repealed 1994).

36. ST. PIERRE & SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 22, at 3.

37. Augustus F. Hawkins-Robert T. Stafford Elementary and Secondary School Improvement Amendments of 1988, Pub. L. 100-297, § 1051, 102 St. 130 (1988) (amended 1991, repealed in part 1994) [hereinafter Hawkins-Stafford Amendment].

38. ST. PIERRE & SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 22, at 2.

39. *Id.* at 2–3.

40. *Id.* Parent education took the form of either adult basic or secondary education, English as a second language (ESL), or preparation for a General Education Degree (GED) certificate. *Id.*

41. *Id.*

42. *Id.* at 4.

43. ABT ASSOCS., NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM 233 (1995) [hereinafter FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION].

44. Hawkins-Stafford Amendment, *supra* note 37, § 1054.

While the statute set forth the major elements of an Even Start local project, it afforded flexibility to LEAs to devise projects that met local needs.<sup>45</sup> Project designers were encouraged to work with similar programs already serving the community such as Head Start to adapt their Even Start projects to the locality's needs.<sup>46</sup> Even Start projects were not to duplicate existing programs but were to build upon them.<sup>47</sup> Additionally, grantees could choose the instructional approaches to be applied and the frequency and duration of the program.<sup>48</sup> Programs did not need to service the entire target age range of children but could narrow it to focus on a community's most needy.<sup>49</sup> Furthermore, programs offered additional support services aside from the required transportation and child care, such as food, counseling, and health care to participants.<sup>50</sup>

## 2. Amending Even Start: National Literacy Act of 1991

Under the National Literacy Act of 1991, the program was expanded to allow for more projects nationwide and renamed "Even Start Family Literacy Programs."<sup>51</sup> Originally, the pilot projects were to be evaluated nationally before a decision would be made to expand the program.<sup>52</sup> However, the program received so much support from both Congress and the president that they expanded it before the results from the national evaluation were released.<sup>53</sup> The program received \$48 million in appropriations, nearly double its previous amount.<sup>54</sup> In 1992, the program was transferred to state control.<sup>55</sup> Previously, ED distributed grants directly to eligible programs. Now, ED distributed grants to states who would distribute sub-grants to eligible entities.<sup>56</sup>

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45. ST. PIERRE & SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 22, at 3.

46. *Id.*

47. *Oversight Hearing on the Even Start Program: Hearing Before the Subcomm. on Elementary and Secondary, and Vocational Educ. of the Comm. on Educ. and Labor*, 102nd Cong. 7 (1992) (statement of John T. MacDonald, Assistant Secretary for Elementary and Secondary Education, United States Department of Education).

48. *Id.*

49. About twenty percent of Even Start projects funded in the first year of the program restricted core educational services to children who are three years of age. Another twenty percent did not provide direct services to children who are older than five years of age. However, in both of these types of projects, parenting information and special family activities included all of the children in the family up to age eight. *Id.* at 3.

50. *Id.* at 6.

51. *See generally* National Literacy Act of 1991 § 303(b), Pub L. 102-73, 105 Stat. 350 (1991) (repealed 1994) (amending 20 U.S.C. § 2742 (1988)).

52. VINOVSIS, *supra* note 25, at 127.

53. *Id.* The premature expansion was defended on the grounds that it supported the National Education Goals of school readiness and adult literacy. It was also popular at the state and local levels as a way to bring together local agencies that catered to at-risk children and families. *Id.*

54. *Id.*

55. *Even Start and Family Literacy Programs Under the Elementary and Secondary Education Act: Hearing Before the Committee on Educ. and the Workforce*, 106th Cong. 11 (1999) (statement of Cheryl Keenan, Director, Bureau of Adult Education and Literacy Education, Pennsylvania Department of Education).

56. Letter from Marnie Shaul, Assoc. Dir., Educ. Workforce, and Income Security Issues, to Hob. George Voinovich, Chairman, Subcomm. on Oversight of Gov't Mgmt., Restructuring, and the D.C.,

The National Literacy Act also amended Even Start to better reach the most in need and placed greater emphasis on working through the family unit. Community-based organizations could now apply to implement a project, in addition to LEAs.<sup>57</sup> This allowed the program to reach more underserved populations across the country. Participant eligibility was also expanded. The target range of children now started at birth rather than one year of age;<sup>58</sup> thus, at-risk children could receive support from the very beginning. Families were also permitted to continue participation in activities despite the new ineligibility of a member.<sup>59</sup> Previously, if one family member became ineligible,<sup>60</sup> the whole family was precluded from continuing to participate despite other eligible family members. Families could now continue to participate in activities until all family members became ineligible.<sup>61</sup> This placed greater emphasis on working through the family as an instrument to support each family member's literacy gains.

### 3. Even Start's First Reauthorization: Improving America's Schools Act of 1994

The Even Start Program continued to grow and focus on enhancing literacy through the family for those "most in need."<sup>62</sup> Funding for the program nearly doubled once again in 1995 to total \$118 million.<sup>63</sup> The Improving America's Schools Act (IASA) placed greater focus on attacking illiteracy through the family unit by allowing family members such as older siblings or grandparents to participate in activities when appropriate in order to support eligible participants.<sup>64</sup> Eligibility was also expanded to include teenage parents,<sup>65</sup> a group of parents that itself is still maturing and in need of significant support in order to positively affect their children's literacy.<sup>66</sup>

## 4. Amendments Between Reauthorizations

Congress still sought to grow and strengthen the Even Start Program despite a disheartening evaluation of the program's success. After Even Start's

Comm. on Governmental Affairs (Mar. 8, 2000) (on file with the Government Accountability Office) [hereinafter GAO Letter].

57. Community-based organizations still needed to apply in collaboration with an LEA but could now take the initiative to apply. *See* National Literacy Act of 1991 § 303(b), Pub L. 102-73, 105 Stat. 350 (1991) (repealed 1994) (amending 20 U.S.C. § 2742 (1988)). One such organization was the Street Law Clinic at the Georgetown University Law Center, which implemented an Even Start program in Washington, D.C. Interview with Richard Roe, Director, D.C. Street Law Program, in Washington, D.C. (Feb. 3, 2017).

58. National Literacy Act § 303(e), Pub L. 102-73, 105 Stat. 352 (1991) (repealed 1994)

59. *Id.*

60. A member became ineligible when a child reached age eight or a parent completed his or her educational requirements. *See id.* (stating that eligible participants "shall be" a parent eligible for completing educational requirements "and" a child of such parent under the age of 8).

61. *Id.*

62. Improving America's Schools Act of 1994, Pub. L. 103-382, 108 Stat. 3521, § 1001(c)(11) (1994) (repealed 2015).

63. *Id.* at § 1002(b), 108 Stat. 3522 (repealed 2015).

64. *Id.* at §1206(b), 108 Stat. 3582 (repealed 2015).

65. VINOVSIS, *supra* note 25, at 122; Improving America's Schools Act, *supra* note 62, at §1206(a)

66. Cooter, *supra* note 17, at 1.



reauthorization, the first national evaluation of the program was released. As explained more in Part II Section B below,<sup>67</sup> it noted that participating children did not make significantly greater educational gains than non-participating children.<sup>68</sup> This meant the evaluation did not support the program's effectiveness. Initially, these results went either unnoticed or ignored by Congress.<sup>69</sup> Goodling appeared before the House Subcommittee on Appropriations and assured his colleagues of Even Start's effectiveness.<sup>70</sup> Subsequently, Congress sought to further strengthen Even Start, and in 1996, it amended the program to require instructional services to be "intensive."<sup>71</sup> Eventually, the evaluation's results made their way to Congress, and some questioned the funding of what seemed to be an ineffective program.<sup>72</sup> Goodling defended the program on the grounds that it was still in its nascent stages and that they were still determining what would produce the desired positive results.<sup>73</sup> Both the administration and Congress agreed that the program needed further adjustment and evaluation.<sup>74</sup> Under the Reading Excellence Act (REA) of 1998, Congress began focusing Even Start on educational outcomes of participants rather than on programmatic design. States were now required to develop results-based indicators of program quality<sup>75</sup> and to use these indicators to monitor, evaluate, and improve Even Start programs.<sup>76</sup> Goodling attempted to amend the program once more through the Literacy Involves Family Together Act (LIFT Act), but it did not pass the Senate despite its success in the House.<sup>77</sup>

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67. *See infra* Part II, Section B.

68. FUMIYO TAO ET AL., NATIONAL EVALUATION OF THE EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM xxii (1998), <http://files.eric.ed.gov/fulltext/ED427889.pdf> [hereinafter SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION].

69. VINOVSIS, *supra* note 25, at 136.

70. *Id.* at 137.

71. TAO ET AL., *supra* note 28, at 2.

72. VINOVSIS, *supra* note 25, at 138–39.

73. *Id.* at 139.

74. *Id.*

75. Reading Excellence Act of 1998, Pub. L. 105-277, 115 Stat. 2681 § 1210 (1998) (repealed 2002) provides that "[s]uch indicators shall include the following:

- (1) With respect to eligible participants in a program who are adults—
  - (A) achievement in the areas of reading, writing, English language acquisition, problem solving, and numeracy;
  - (B) receipt of a high school diploma or a general equivalency diploma;
  - (C) entry into a postsecondary school, job retraining program, or employment or career advancement, including the military; and
  - (D) such other indicators as the State may develop.
- (2) With respect to eligible participants in a program who are children—
  - (A) improvement in ability to read on grade level or reading readiness;
  - (B) school attendance;
  - (C) grade retention and promotion; and
  - (D) such other indicators as the State may develop."

76. TAO ET AL., *supra* note 28, at 2. REA also amended Even Start by providing a definition of the term "family literacy services" to match the definition in other legislation with family literacy components, including Head Start, the Adult Education and Family Literacy Act, and the Reading Excellence Act program. *Id.*

<sup>77</sup> *See generally* H.R. 3222, 106th Cong. (2000) (as passed by House Sept. 12, 2000), <https://www.congress.gov/bill/106th-congress/house-bill/3222>. Under this amendment, projects would have had to set aside funds for research focusing on improving literacy in adults with reading difficulties.

### 5. Even Start Reauthorized Under the No Child Left Behind Act

Congress further amended and expanded Even Start to work through families to improve the nation's literacy. A second national evaluation once again failed to attribute any positive gains made by Even Start participants to the program.<sup>78</sup> Nonetheless, Even Start was reauthorized by the No Child Left Behind Act (NCLB).<sup>79</sup> At \$260 million, Even Start funding reached its peak in 2002.<sup>80</sup>

#### *C. Even Start's Demise*

Even Start's demise began under the Bush Administration when ED started requesting fewer appropriations for the program. In 2002, ED requested a \$50 million reduction for Even Start for the following school year, the first ever requested reduction.<sup>81</sup> ED cited "mixed evaluation" results from the national evaluations in support.<sup>82</sup> ED requested \$25 million fewer dollars the subsequent year.<sup>83</sup> ED claimed the money would be better used elsewhere, since two national evaluations<sup>84</sup> did not show participants to make "significantly greater" gains than non-participants.<sup>85</sup> By then, Representative Goodling had retired from public office and without the program's biggest advocate defending it,<sup>86</sup> the program could no longer withstand the negative results of the evaluations. Nonetheless, Congress allotted approximately \$250 million for both the 2003 and 2004 fiscal years.<sup>87</sup>

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*Id.* at 3. It also would have further promoted working through the family unit by allowing children ages eight and over to participate in Even Start services, if a collaborating organization carried the cost for those children. *Id.* at 33.

78. See GAO Letter, *supra* note 56, at 4.

79. See No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1425, § 1231 (1992) (repealed 2015).

80. See No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, Pub. L. 107-110, 115 Stat. 1440-42, § 1002 (1992) (repealed 2015).

81. *A. Elementary and Secondary Education, FY 2003 Budget Summary*, U.S. DEP'T. OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget03/summary/section-ii/edlite-A.html#4> (last updated Mar. 11, 2005) (delineating the funds that were requested for the 2003 fiscal year).

82. *Id.*

83. *Section II. A. Elementary and Secondary Education, FISCAL Year 2004 Education Budget Summary and Background Information*, U.S. DEP'T. OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget04/summary/edlite-section2a.html#even> (last updated Sept. 15, 2006).

84. Eventually three national evaluations were completed.

85. *Id.*

86. Goodling retired in 2001. *GOODLING, William Franklin*, HIST., ART & ARCHIVES U.S. HOUSE OF REPRESENTATIVES, <http://history.house.gov/People/Detail/13932>.

87. Congress allotted \$248.38 million for the 2003 fiscal year and \$246.91 million for the 2004 fiscal year. *Funding Status, Even Start*, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/evenstartformula/funding.html> (last updated Jan. 20, 2010). Although ED had requested funding reductions, it continued to release guidance documents for the program in 2003. See U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., *GUIDANCE FOR THE WILLIAM F. GOODLING EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAMS (2003)*, <https://www2.ed.gov/policy/elsec/leg/esea02/pg6.html>.

In 2004, ED proposed to eliminate Even Start as a federally funded program, citing the evaluations and a PART rating in support.<sup>88</sup> Again, ED cited the lack of “significantly greater” gains found in the national evaluations.<sup>89</sup> By now, however, ED had accrued further support to eliminate the program, a rating of “ineffective” on the Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) process.<sup>90</sup> The PART rating assessed the program to be duplicative of other programs serving similar ends, such as Head Start, Adult Education, Early Reading First, and Reading First.<sup>91</sup> ED still wanted to use the funds for literacy programs but believed that other programs would be “better suited to address the President’s literacy goals.”<sup>92</sup> Congress finally adhered to ED’s request and slashed the Even Start budget by more than half for 2006, dropping it from \$225 million to \$99 million.<sup>93</sup>

Even under the Obama Administration, ED continued to push for the program’s elimination. ED stated that the program’s main premise—that the integration of its core components (adult education, parenting education, parent-child activities, and early childhood education) adds value to the individual components—was unproven.<sup>94</sup> Furthermore, the extent to which family literacy programs can enhance parent literacy and parenting skills was unknown.<sup>95</sup> Despite the negative assessments, Congress continued funding Even Start at a fraction of what it previously did but eventually eliminated it in 2012.<sup>96</sup> Even Start no longer exists in ESEA’s most current reauthorization, the Every Student Succeeds Act, and is no longer a federally funded program.

### III. EVALUATING EVEN START

The national evaluations showed that participants in the Even Start Program did make positive gains but failed to show that they made significantly greater

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88. *Section III. Programs Proposed for Elimination, FY 2005 Budget Summary*, U.S. DEP’T OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget05/summary/edlite-section3.html> (last updated Feb. 2, 2004).

89. *Id.*

90. *Section III. Programs Proposed for Elimination, Fiscal Year 2006 Budget Summary*, U.S. DEP’T. OF EDUC. <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget06/summary/edlite-section3.html#even> (last updated Feb 7, 2005) [hereinafter *Fiscal Year 2006*]. “The Program Assessment Rating Tool (PART) was developed to assess and improve program performance so that the Federal government can achieve better results. A PART review [is run by the Office of Management and Budget] and helps identify a program’s strengths and weaknesses to inform funding and management decisions aimed at making the program more effective. The PART therefore looks at all factors that affect and reflect program performance including program purpose and design; performance measurement, evaluations, and strategic planning; program management; and program results.” *Assessing Program Performance*, OFF. OF MGMT. AND BUDGET, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/omb/performance> (last visited Apr. 15, 2018).

91. GOODLING INST. FOR RES. IN FAM. LITERACY, RESPONSE TO OMB’S “PART” REPORT ON FEDERAL ADMINISTRATION OF THE WILLIAM F. GOODLING EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM I (2006).

92. *Id.*

93. *Fiscal Year 2006*, *supra* note 90.

94. U.S. DEP’T. OF EDUC., EDUCATION FOR THE DISADVANTAGED: FISCAL YEAR 2008 BUDGET REQUEST A14–15 (2007), <https://www2.ed.gov/about/overview/budget/budget08/justifications/a-edfordis.pdf>

95. *Id.*

96. *See* CLYMER ET AL., *supra* note 3, at 1.

gains than non-participants. In other words, the evaluations could not show that participation in the program is what led to these gains. As a result, Congress defunded and eliminated the program. However, the evaluations suffered from methodological and design flaws and should not have been the basis to dismantle the program. Studies administered at the local and state levels showed participants did make significantly positive results due to participation in the program. Thus, Congress should not have weighed the evaluations so heavily and should have considered other evaluative measures before cutting the program.

### A. *The National Evaluations*

As statutorily required, the Department of Education (ED) evaluated the Even Start Program through independent evaluators and produced three national evaluations.<sup>97</sup> These evaluations measured the program's effectiveness focusing on achievement of its three goals.<sup>98</sup> Based on the three national evaluations, the next section will discuss (i) whether Even Start served its target population and achievement of the programs goals through (ii) child education outcomes, (iii) parent education outcomes, and (iv) changes in the parent-child relationship.

#### 1. Population Served

The Even Start Program was successful in serving its target population of economically and educationally disadvantaged families. The program was designed to serve low-income families with parents who have limited educational opportunities or literacy skills.<sup>99</sup> By 2003, the program serviced nearly 50,000 families,<sup>100</sup> eighty percent of whom reported household incomes at or below the federal poverty level.<sup>101</sup> While educational background varied among parents, the

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97. The first National Evaluation documented the program's development from 1989–90 to 1992–93 and the second from 1993–94 to 1996–97. See FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 5; SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 1. The third documented the program's development from 1997–98 to 2000–01. ROBERT ST. PIERRE, THIRD NATIONAL EVEN START EVALUATION: DESCRIPTION OF PROJECTS AND PARTICIPANTS 2 (2001) [hereinafter THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION].

98. TAO ET AL., *supra* note 28, at 3.

99. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at x.

100. *Even Start Facts & Figures*, U.S. DEP'T. OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oss/esfacts.html> (last updated Oct. 24, 2014). While the number of families served fluctuated at times, it generally was on a positive trajectory. The third national evaluation documented a gradual reduction in participating families over the course of study. The long-term reduction in the number of families per project and the shorter-term drop in the total number of families served by Even Start may result from a conscious technical assistance strategy by Congress and the Department of Education to focus resources intensively on the most needy families in order to achieve the best outcomes. This strategy was formed, in part, on the basis of findings from the first national Even Start evaluation which showed that (1) families in projects that offered more hours of core instructional services participated more than families in projects that offered fewer service hours, and (2) families that participated more intensively in core instructional services had better learning gains than families that participated less intensively. THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 123.

101. THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 125. The third evaluation reported a reduction in this number, however, this was attributed to the more precise questioning regarding income on surveys. *Id.*

majority of participants lacked an education above a high school degree, even those falling about the poverty level.<sup>102</sup> Approximately eighty percent of participants did not have either a high school diploma or GED upon entering the program.<sup>103</sup> Additionally, English proficiency varied amongst participants; over seventy percent of participants could not read, write, or understand English well.<sup>104</sup> Many participants, especially Hispanic and Asian families, did not speak English as their first language and spoke another language in the home,<sup>105</sup> thus English proficiency was a serious concern. Even Start reached a population that had literacy issues and was most in need of educational supplementation, but least able to receive it without assistance.

## 2. Child-Education Outcomes

The three evaluations proved that Even Start children improved educationally,<sup>106</sup> but could not conclusively determine whether these gains were due to program participation.<sup>107</sup> Participating children made positive gains in both school readiness<sup>108</sup> and literacy.<sup>109</sup> Evidence in the first evaluation suggested these gains could not be attributed to Even Start participation, because participating children did not make statistically significant larger gains than non-participating children.<sup>110</sup> The third evaluation corroborated this claim, finding that comparable or greater gains were reported from children enrolled in Head Start, a similar early childhood education program.<sup>111</sup> This indicated that Even Start was not the cause of its participants' gains.

Conversely, other evidence suggested that Even Start participation could have been the cause of children's educational improvement. Evidence in the first evaluation also suggested that some child gains were greater than what would have occurred if the Even Start Program did not exist.<sup>112</sup> In other words, some children

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102. *Id.*

103. *Id.* at 130. Nearly forty percent of entering Even Start parents had completed some high school and forty-five percent had attended school for nine years or less. *Id.* at 129. A minority of parents had a high school degree or above, with about ten percent of parents holding a high school diploma or GED and five percent with some college. *Id.* at 131.

104. *Id.* at 142.

105. *See id.* at 139 (finding that a majority of participants were recent immigrants who spoke their native tongue).

106. The First and Second National Evaluation found positive gains in school readiness. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 176; SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 166. All three evaluations found positive gains in literacy. *See* FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 176 (1995); SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 166; THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 166.

107. *See* FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 238; THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 166.

108. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 237.

109. *Id.* at 238; SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 167.

110. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 238; THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 166.

111. THIRD EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 166. Head Start is an early childhood education program that will be more thoroughly discussed in Part III, *infra*.

112. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 177 (citing gains in school readiness and vocabulary, for example).

made gains because they were in the program, seeming to suggest the program had an impact. The second evaluation noted children did grow in Even Start and that growth was not due to a child's natural development.<sup>113</sup> Additionally, the longer a child stayed in the program the greater the gains she made, showing that participation in Even Start had a positive and demonstrable effect on children.<sup>114</sup> Thus, the evaluations were inconsistent in determining the programmatic effect on child education outcomes.

### 3. Parent Education Outcomes

Like child outcomes, the three evaluations showed improvement in parent education and literacy,<sup>115</sup> but were split on whether these gains were due to Even Start participation. The first national evaluation showed that significantly more parents participating in Even Start completed their GED than those not in the program.<sup>116</sup> The study concluded that without Even Start few of these parents would have found the assistance needed to complete their certificates,<sup>117</sup> which supports the claim that the program impacted its participants. It also found gains in parental literacy but had conflicting results concerning whether they were caused by the program's impact.<sup>118</sup> Some evidence revealed that the program contributed to parents' literacy improvement,<sup>119</sup> thereby supporting the program's success. Other evidence showed that gains were not significantly different from those of non-participants,<sup>120</sup> which does not support the program's success. The second and third evaluation also could not conclusively attribute the parent literacy gains to Even Start.<sup>121</sup>

### 4. Changes in the Parent-Child Relationship

The third of Even Start's primary goals was to help parents foster child growth and development, which was advanced through parenting courses. While participating in Even Start, parents made positive gains in their personal skills, in improving the home learning environment, increasing parent-child reading, and in increasing their expectations for their children.<sup>122</sup> Most of these gains were not statistically significant from non-participants and could not be attributed to the program.<sup>123</sup> However, the third evaluation concluded that when parents spent more

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113. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 145, 166.

114. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 145.

115. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 196; SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 169; THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 165.

116. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 196.

117. *Id.*

118. *Id.*

119. *See id.* Even Start parents made gains similar to or greater than those of non-Even Start parents and gains were directly related to the amount of instruction received through Even Start. *Id.*

120. *Id.*

121. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 165, 169; THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 165.

122. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 209.

123. *Id.*

time in parenting education, their children made more significant educational gains.<sup>124</sup> This suggests that the skills learned did positively affect their children's educational growth, although parenting skills may not have statistically significantly improved. In other words, there was some support that Even Start's model succeeded.

*B. National Evaluations' Unreliable Results Should Not Have Been Basis for Program's Elimination*

The three national evaluations demonstrated that Even Start participants did make positive gains in the program's three core areas, child education, parent education, and parenting skills, but could not conclusively attribute these gains to participation in Even Start. However, these studies were critically flawed and minimized Even Start's effectiveness. Other studies have suggested that Even Start was the cause of gains made by participants.

1. Evaluation Designs Were Critically Flawed

The first national evaluation was flawed in its design and use of data, making it unreliable. The designers of the second evaluation criticized the first study's design for employing mechanisms that did not measure the impact of participation in Even Start on a child's progress.<sup>125</sup> Thus, the evaluation was limited in its ability to measure programmatic effectiveness and is not completely reliable. Additionally, the first evaluation used improper data, which may have skewed its results to make it appear as if Even Start was not effective. The first evaluation did not exclude data from children who were not actively participating in the program.<sup>126</sup> These children could not have made gains because of the program, because they did not actively participate in it. Nonetheless, they were counted as Even Start participants in the comparison employed to measure program impact.<sup>127</sup> Including such children would have skewed the data to make it appear as if Even Start did not work.

The second evaluation was also ineffective in measuring Even Start's impact on participants. Unlike the first and third evaluations, which compared participating students to a control group, the second compared the student with him or herself using pre- and post-tests.<sup>128</sup> Comparing students to themselves without a control group makes measuring programmatic effects difficult, because the measured effects could have been caused by a child's natural development rather than participation in the program.<sup>129</sup> In other words, students make gains on their

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124. THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 168.

125. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 131 n.94.

126. FIRST NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 43, at 156.

127. *Id.* ("Children in the Even Start group were tested whether or not they were still actively participating in the program.")

128. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 131 n.93.

129. See Robert S. Michael, *Threats to Internal Validity & External Validity* 5, [http://www.indiana.edu/~educy520/sec5982/week\\_9/520in\\_ex\\_validity.pdf](http://www.indiana.edu/~educy520/sec5982/week_9/520in_ex_validity.pdf). Pre- and post-test designs have internal validity

own as they develop, so lack of a comparison group makes it difficult to determine whether gains were due to a child's maturation or to participation in the program.<sup>130</sup> Consequently, both the first and second evaluations were limited in their ability to measure whether Even Start produced changes in participants, making them an inadequate basis for defunding the program.

The second evaluation also utilized incomplete or inconsistent data, making its results unreliable. Most of the analysis in the second evaluation was based on data from only two program years during which multiple data points for the same participants were unavailable.<sup>131</sup> Without multiple data points, researchers were unable to make longitudinal determinations for many of those participating in Even Start.<sup>132</sup> Thus, long-term effectiveness of the program could not be adequately measured. Additionally, data collection in the second evaluation was inconsistent. Staff assisting with the study were associated with the local projects and were only trained once.<sup>133</sup> As local personnel kept changing, staff members received variable instructions on test administration and data entry, thereby producing inconsistent data quality.<sup>134</sup> This inconsistent and incomplete data could have skewed the results, making it appear as if Even Start was unsuccessful, even if it was successful.

Although the third evaluation focused on measuring program effectiveness,<sup>135</sup> its ability to do so was diminished because of poor data quality. Data used in the third evaluation was unreliable. Methods for data entry were changed during the study, causing loss of data due to technical difficulties.<sup>136</sup> Additionally, data was reported directly to the federal government, preventing those closer to the implementation of the programs such as state and local agencies from reviewing them for accuracy.<sup>137</sup> Thus, results could have been skewed, because the study was based on unreliable data.

Furthermore, results from the third evaluation may not have been representative of the Even Start Program as a whole, because it employed a small sample size. The third evaluation's results were based on only eighteen Even Start projects, a small sample size.<sup>138</sup> It would have been more difficult to detect whether Even Start had a significant impact, because significant relationships for a

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issues, which "compromise our confidence in saying that a relationship exists between the independent and dependent variables." *Id.* at 4.

130. The authors of the second evaluation admitted that the study design "would have been much stronger had there been a comparison group against which to assess progress of Even Start participants." SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 181.

131. SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 131.

132. Given the study was comparing pre- and post-tests, the utility of its results depended on measuring the program's long-term effectiveness. *Id.*

133. *Id.* at 180.

134. *Id.*

135. THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 21.

136. GOODLING INST. FOR RES. IN FAM. LITERACY, COUNTER TO THE *THIRD NATIONAL EVEN START EVALUATION: PROGRAM IMPACTS AND IMPLICATIONS FOR IMPROVEMENT* (2003) 2 (2004), <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/policy/es-part-analysis-2page>.

137. *See id.*

138. NAT'L COUNCIL OF LA RAZA, WILLIAM F. GOODLING EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM: EFFECTIVE, YET MISUNDERSTOOD 2 (2007).



population are more difficult to detect with a small sample size.<sup>139</sup> Thus, the study would not have effectively measured statistically significant gains achieved by program participants.

Additionally, the sample population used was not representative of the whole population, so inferences drawn based on the sample do not apply to the Even Start population as a whole. The individual projects used for the sample population in the third evaluation were selected on a voluntary basis,<sup>140</sup> which may have produced results making Even Start appear ineffective. It is not feasible to directly study a population as large as Even Start's, so a smaller, sample of the population is studied instead.<sup>141</sup> Generally, when using a population sample, it is randomly chosen to prevent over- or under-representation of certain factors that may skew results.<sup>142</sup> Allowing projects to volunteer runs the risk of producing results that do not reflect Even Start's effect on participants, but rather the effects of other factors.<sup>143</sup> Here, the studied projects over-represented Hispanic and urban populations.<sup>144</sup> These communities may have had certain characteristics that are not generalizable to the entire Even Start population, which included rural populations and non-Hispanic communities.<sup>145</sup> Because of the high incidence of these characteristics, they could have become prominent influences in the study, confounding Even Start's effect. One such characteristic is fluency in another language. Language acquisition has been shown to affect the ability to learn and improve one's English literacy and could have been at play in the evaluation.<sup>146</sup> Thus, literacy gains - or lack thereof - made while in the program, could have been a product of something other than the program. Without taking these factors into consideration, the third evaluation's results should not have been attributed solely to Even Start's effect.

Because of design flaws and unreliable data, the three national evaluations were critically flawed and, therefore, should not have been a basis for defunding or eliminating Even Start.

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139. *Organizing Your Social Sciences Research Paper: Limitations of the Study*, USC LIBRARIES, <http://libguides.usc.edu/writingguide/limitations> (last visited Apr. 15, 2018).

140. THIRD NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 97, at 2.

141. See generally *QMSS e-Lessons: Why Sample*, COLUMBIA CNMTL, [http://cenmtl.columbia.edu/projects/qmss/samples\\_and\\_sampling/why\\_sample.html](http://cenmtl.columbia.edu/projects/qmss/samples_and_sampling/why_sample.html) (last visited Apr. 20, 2018).

142. *Why Randomize?*, YALE INST. FOR SOC. & POL. STUD., <http://isps.yale.edu/node/16697> (last visited Apr. 20, 2018).

143. See *id.*

144. GOODLING INST., *supra* note 136, at 2 (“Selected programs over-represented Hispanic (75%) and urban (83%) populations in contrast to Even Start’s national demographics of 46% and 55%, respectively.”).

145. *Id.*

146. The authors of the second evaluation noted that “there is growing consensus in the field of second language acquisition that facility in a second language requires some minimal proficiency in a first language.” SECOND NATIONAL EVALUATION, *supra* note 68, at 179. Thus, if parents were not proficient in their first language, it could have affected English language acquisition. Whether parents were tested on literacy in their first language before being subjected to the study is unclear. *Id.*

## 2. Other Evaluations Demonstrated Significant Gains

Furthermore, several contemporaneous state and local evaluations reached very different conclusions regarding the success of the Even Start programs than the national evaluations, suggesting Even Start might have had stronger footing than the national evaluations indicate.<sup>147</sup> Unlike the national evaluations, these studies found statistically significant gains for Even Start participants, suggesting gains were due to program participation. Rather than relying almost exclusively on the national evaluations, Congress should have also looked to local and state data to determine whether the program was successful.

Several state studies demonstrated that children made educational gains because of participation in Even Start. A Nebraska state study found that Even Start pre-school children made statistically significant gains in language and literacy for oral and reading skills<sup>148</sup> reducing the credibility of the national evaluations which found no significant gains in literacy skills. A Colorado study attempted to determine the program's long-term effects by studying families with an average of 138 hours of participation and had been out of the program for an average of 3.5 years.<sup>149</sup> This study reported that Even Start students were reading at higher levels than the comparison group.<sup>150</sup> No Even Start children read below grade level, while twenty-eight percent of the control group did.<sup>151</sup>

Studies also showed that Even Start parents made statistically significant gains. Whereas the national evaluations found no significant gains in parent literacy and parenting skills, a Massachusetts study found significant gains in both: "Over 80% of Massachusetts's Even Start parents made significant academic gains in communication, reading, and understanding children's learning and writing."<sup>152</sup> About two-thirds of the parents made strong gains in English language acquisition.<sup>153</sup> A Monongalia County West Virginia study found that its Even Start program had a large impact on parent reading literacy and parenting skills over a two-year period.<sup>154</sup>

While these studies are limited, they do suggest there was a positive programmatic effect at levels other than the national level. They are not conclusive of the Even Start program, as a whole, but they do offer results that cast doubt on the national evaluations. Numerous state studies—a non-exhaustive list was discussed here—indicated significant results. Further, these studies were

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147. These studies may also have had design flaws, but because they produce different results than the national evaluations, at the very least, the conflicting evidence suggests more research was needed before the decision to cut the program.

148. GOODLING INST., *supra* note 136, at 3.

149. BECKY ANDERSON, COLORADO EVEN START FOLLOW UP STUDY: TRINIDAD STATE JUNIOR COLLEGE 4 (2003).

150. *Id.* at 5.

151. Fifty-three percent of program participants were reading above grade level and forty-seven percent were at grade level, while only twenty-eight percent of the non-Even Start students were reading above grade level and forty-four percent at grade level. *Id.*

152. GOODLING INSTITUTE, *supra* note 136, at 4.

153. *Id.*

154. MERRILL L. MEEHAN ET AL., PROCESS AND OUTCOME EVALUATION OF AN EVEN START PROGRAM 6 (1999).

implemented on a more focused level, the state rather than national, making them better able to measure their localities' needs. Positive results at the state level suggest the national evaluations were not an accurate representation of all project results.

#### IV. THE NEED FOR A REVISED AND RESTRUCTURED FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM

After Even Start was defunded, a similar federal program was not put in its place. However, intergenerational illiteracy is still a prevalent issue within the United States.<sup>155</sup> Without a family literacy program taking the place of Even Start, intergenerational illiteracy will continue. Even Start was once criticized as duplicative of other federal program agencies serving similar ends, namely Head Start, Early Reading First, Reading First, and Adult Education.<sup>156</sup> Since then, Early Reading First<sup>157</sup> and Reading First programs,<sup>158</sup> programs that only provided childhood education, are no longer federally funded, and resources for adult basic education have been decreasing.<sup>159</sup> While Head Start still exists and thrives, it targets early childhood education and does not satiate the need for adult education. Thus, there is currently a need for a program that intertwines adult and early childhood education.

##### *A. Illiteracy in America Today*

Despite the United States' status as a post-industrial nation and a first-world country, illiteracy is still a major issue in the United States.<sup>160</sup> According to a study conduct by ED and the National Institute of Literacy, approximately fourteen percent of adults in America cannot read, a total of thirty-two million Americans, including high school graduates.<sup>161</sup> Nineteen percent of high school graduates cannot read,<sup>162</sup> and an additional twenty-one percent of adults can only read at a fifth grade level.<sup>163</sup> Compared with other developed countries, the United States has one of "the most entrenched multigenerational literacy problem[s]."<sup>164</sup> In the

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155. See *The U.S Illiteracy Rate Has Not Changed in 10 Years*, *supra* note 1.

156. GOODLING INST. FOR RES. IN FAM. LITERACY, RESPONSE TO OMB'S "PART" REPORT ON FEDERAL ADMINISTRATION OF THE WILLIAM F. GOODLING EVEN START FAMILY LITERACY PROGRAM 1 (2006), <https://ed.psu.edu/goodling-institute/policy/even-start-part-analysis>.

157. *Early Reading First*, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/earlyreading/index.html> (last updated June 12, 2014).

158. *Reading First*, U.S. DEP'T OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/programs/readingfirst/funding.html> (last updated Dec. 4, 2015).

159. CTR. FOR POSTSECONDARY AND ECON. SUCCESS, ADULT EDUCATION FUNDING LEVELS AND ENROLLMENT 2 (2012).

160. See *The U.S Illiteracy Rate Has Not Changed in 10 Years*, *supra* note 1.

161. *Id.*

162. *Illiteracy Statistics*, STAT. BRAIN, <https://www.statisticbrain.com/number-of-american-adults-who-cant-read/> (last visited Apr. 15, 2018).

163. *Id.*

164. Karsten Lunze & Michael Passche-Orlow, *Limited Literacy and Poor Health: Role of Social Mobility in Germany and the United States*, 19 J. HEALTH COMM. 15, 17 (2014); *Program for the Inter-*

U.S., a parent's education level strongly affects the subsequent generation's literacy levels, making it even more difficult for a low-income child to overcome educational inequality.<sup>165</sup>

*B. Other Programs Do Not Address the Multigenerational Illiteracy Need*

Current adult education programs do not address the multigenerational aspect of illiteracy in America. A solution must address both child and adult illiteracy and the interplay between the two. Existing adult education programs have limited success because adults with literacy issues may not view illiteracy as their "number-one problem" or identify illiteracy as a cause of other issues in their lives.<sup>166</sup> Thus, they are unlikely to participate in adult education programs.<sup>167</sup> Adults who do participate often have other responsibilities like child care that make attending class difficult, leading to high absenteeism and dropout rates within the programs.<sup>168</sup>

Even Head Start, a thriving early childhood education program, does not meet multigenerational illiteracy needs because it does not emphasize adult literacy. Both Even Start and Head Start programs address the education and literacy needs of low-income families with young children,<sup>169</sup> but Head Start does not address adult illiteracy to the same degree as Even Start. Head Start's main purpose is to ensure school readiness for young children by enhancing the social and cognitive development of children.<sup>170</sup> On the other hand, Even Start's purpose is to improve literacy *for the whole family* and to increase educational opportunities for parents and children.<sup>171</sup> Head Start's objectives for adult literacy are minimal; they extend to technical assistance and staff training for activities that would improve adult literacy.<sup>172</sup> The program does not statutorily require tracking or measurement of adult literacy nor does it place great emphasis on promoting parental literacy. On the other hand, one of Even Start's main objectives is to improve adult literacy and education. It makes a point to implement measures to track parental education and literacy. Head Start's lesser concern for parental literacy improvement and sole focus on child literacy indicate it is not as viable an instrument to attack the multigenerational literacy issue.

Head Start and Even Start cater to a similar population, but Even Start families were more likely to be economically and educationally disadvantaged.<sup>173</sup> Even

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*national Assessment of Adult Competencies*, NAT'L CNTR. FOR ED. STATS, <https://nces.ed.gov/surveys/piaac/countries.asp> (last visited Apr. 15, 2018).

165. CLYMER ET AL., *supra* note 3, at 2.

166. Daisey, *supra* note 17, at 13.

167. *Id.*

168. *Id.*

169. U.S. GEN. ACCT. OFFICE, GAO-02-348, HEAD START AND EVEN START: GREATER COLLABORATION NEEDED ON MEASURES OF ADULT EDUCATION AND LITERACY 2 (2002) [hereinafter GAO-02-348].

170. *Id.* at 2, 8; 42 U.S.C. § 9831 (2012).

171. GAO-02-348, *supra* note 169, at 2-3.

172. *Id.* at 8, 12; 42 U.S.C. § 9843(d)(3) (2012).

173. See *Even Start Facts & Figures*, U.S. DEP'T. OF EDUC., <https://www2.ed.gov/about/offices/list/oese/oss/esfacts.html> (last updated Oct. 24, 2014).

Start families were demographically different because its eligibility was tied to parents' educational attainment,<sup>174</sup> rather than Head Start's income eligibility.<sup>175</sup> Even Start families tended to be significantly poorer; forty-one percent of Even Start families had an annual household income under \$6,000 compared with thirteen percent of Head Start families.<sup>176</sup> Although Even Start families were and Head Start families are low-income, Even Start parents were even more educationally disadvantaged. About three-quarters of the parents in Head Start had high school diplomas or GEDs;<sup>177</sup> consequently, the program generally focused on early childhood education.<sup>178</sup> While adult education for parents was available, parents participated in the program primarily to obtain education for their children.<sup>179</sup> Conversely, Even Start parents were less likely to have high school diplomas and more likely to speak a language other than English.<sup>180</sup> Even Start specifically targeted this population<sup>181</sup> in order to provide support to *families* most in need, not just children. Unlike Head Start parents, Even Start parents primarily participated to obtain education and literacy services for themselves. Despite underlying similarities in the populations, Even Start served a different population of families, addressing both parent and child illiteracy concerns. Without the program, this population is left underserved by Head Start because Head Start focuses more on child education.

### C. Reimagining Even Start

There is currently a need for a program that addresses illiteracy by simultaneously focusing on adult and child literacy. States are already implementing adult education and early childhood education programs separately. If they were to marry these objectives, they would attack illiteracy from a multigenerational perspective. If Even Start or something like it were to return, it should continue to be authorized by a federal statute and be administered by the states. The federal government should take on a regulatory role and allow states to oversee the administration of the program and monitor performance. LEAs should have freedom to administer the program to adapt to the needs of the local community.

#### 1. The Federal Role

The federal government should continue to have a role in creating the program. A federal goal of family literacy is imperative, because it keeps the states accountable. States have various priorities and responsibilities and may push aside family literacy. Without a federal goal, states will not be incentivized to change

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174. GAO-02-348, *supra* note 169, at 3. To be Even Start eligible, at least one parent must not be enrolled in school and must lack a high school diploma or its equivalent or lack the basic skills necessary to function in society. *Id.*

175. *Id.*

176. See *Even Start Facts & Figures*, *supra* note 173.

177. *Id.*

178. See GAO-02-348, *supra* note 169, at 3.

179. *Id.*

180. *Id.*

181. *Id.* at 9.

the status quo and continue to alleviate illiteracy through separate adult and child education programs. They will continue to downplay the interaction between parent and child literacy. Therefore, federal oversight is needed to incentivize states to address illiteracy through an intergenerational approach.

In creating a similar program, Congress should be tasked with designing the program. Congress should allot funds through block grants to states and allow states to disperse them to projects as they see fit based on a locality's needs, because states can better ascertain local needs. Congress should continue to have a family focus. The new program should seek to target the same population, low-income families with literacy and education issues, since this is the population with a need and with fewer resources to serve the need. Rather than just targeting impoverished families and risk conflating illiteracy with poverty, eligibility should continue to be tied to adult education to ensure that families with educational issues are reached. The new program should also continue the tripartite structure of child education, parent education, and parenting skills. This structure gives parents the means and the knowledge to work with their children to improve literacy of the family while child education provides support in strengthening child literacy, thereby stopping a cycle of illiteracy. Furthermore, Congress should continue to require independent evaluation of the program focusing on growth of participants rather than proficiency in order to take into account the different literacy needs of families. Evaluations provide evidence that can be used to improve and adapt programs. Additionally, focusing on proficiency may make it appear as if the program has no impact. Evaluations should also focus on the program's long-term effects so as to assess growth that has been shown to occur with longer participation in the program.

Additionally, the new program should learn from Even Start's problems with retention and consistency of participation. Two of the largest issues reported by Even Start projects were retaining families through the program's end and variable participation among those who remained.<sup>182</sup> Retention and participation are essential for the program to have long-term effects on families. Congress should embed mechanisms designed to address participation and retention of participants in addition to the required support services of transportation and child care.

Congress should create a benchmark for project comparison but ought to be wary of attaching punitive measures to negative comparisons. A national benchmark could be used by states to assess their own progress, which could prove useful for state project improvement. However, it should be used with caution by the federal government to avoid inferring inadequacy of programs that are serving different population needs. Participants have different literacy needs, so progress varies depending on a local project and the serviced population. If a benchmark were to be created, it should be used for comparison. However, divergence from the benchmark should not be reason to implement punitive measures.

Moreover, the Department of Education (ED) should also play a role in implementing the new program. States heavily relied on the federal Even Start office to learn about legislative changes and the effect these changes would have

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182. ST. PIERRE & SCHWARTZ, *supra* note 22, at 17–19.

on state and local responsibilities.<sup>183</sup> ED was instrumental in producing guidance that addressed issues such as statutory requirements and should continue to do so in a future iteration of the program.<sup>184</sup> ED should also provide state and local staff with more opportunities to attend technical assistance workshops to best assist them in their own implementation endeavors. Furthermore, ED is in a unique position to unite state coordinators together. It could provide forums for state coordinators that face similar issues or cater to similar populations to collaborate.

## 2. State and LEA Roles

Administration and implementation of the program should be split between the states and the LEAs. Previously, Even Start staffing at the state level was thin, leaving state coordinators to balance Even Start administration with other responsibilities.<sup>185</sup> As projects changed and expanded over time, state coordinators took on larger roles within Even Start.<sup>186</sup> Thus, coordinators could not and did not expend all their energy on every aspect of the program. To more effectively address family illiteracy, a revised Even Start program should remove some of the administrative and implementation pressure from states and disperse it to LEAs. Functions such as providing local projects with programmatic guidance and technical assistance such as grant application workshops or general program administrative support should remain with the states.<sup>187</sup>

However, performance monitoring of local project operations could be split amongst the state and the LEA. States should set guidelines for state responsibilities and LEA responsibilities to avoid a clash between the two roles. States should focus on macro-level performance by setting state objectives and monitoring to ensure compliance with the federal statute with some deference to LEAs.<sup>188</sup> LEAs should monitor performance on a more micro-level, for example by collecting and analyzing data on academic achievement and levels of participation to ensure the specific literacy needs of a community are met.

Project improvement should also be split between LEAs and states. States also facilitated project improvement, but “improvement” is community specific and may be better facilitated by LEAs. A key aspect that should be emphasized in a new program is use of local project peer review teams. Those facing similar concerns and hurdles would best be able to assist a project in its specific dilemmas. While states can ensure that peer review teams are utilized, LEAs would best be able to pair up local projects to both critique and support each other.

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183. TAO ET AL., *supra* note 28, at xvii.

184. *Id.*

185. *Id.* at vii (“[M]ost state coordinators have multiple responsibilities other than administering Even Start; they spend, on average, 49 percent of their time on Even Start duties, and the remaining time on other responsibilities.”).

186. *Id.* at xviii.

187. *See id.* at xi.

188. *See id.* at xii.

## V. CONCLUSION

Illiteracy is a persistent issue in the United States that crosses generational bounds. Because parent illiteracy can perpetuate a cycle of illiteracy, there is a need to address literacy among parents and children in the same arena. Current programs address adult illiteracy separately from child illiteracy and do not counteract the negative effect an illiterate parent can have on a child's educational outcomes and development. To advance as a nation, the United States needs a family literacy program like Even Start in which there is a federal goal, funding, and regulatory guidance, as well as state oversight and local administration.