

Making Welfare Work for Families

Why a “Families Work” approach is better than a “Work First” Approach

Access to Adult Education

The Governor has proposed replacing the current Family Independence Program (FIP) with the “Work First” Program (H-7390, Article 16). The Poverty Institute and a number of community partners have proposed amendments to FIP contained in the “Families Work” bill (H-8113 Representative Dennigan and S- 3006 Senator Gibbs and Majority Leader Paiva-Weed). FIP provides cash assistance for children and their parents or caretaker relatives. Unless disabled or otherwise exempt, parents are required to participate in work readiness activities as a condition of receiving benefits. This is the first in a series of issue briefs comparing the Governor’s “Work First” program with the “Families Work” changes to FIP.

Participation in Adult education¹ promotes:

- **Family success:** Adults who earn a GED earn 50% more (\$28,000) than those without a diploma (\$17,847) and adults who have some college earn twice as much (\$34,500).
- **Business success:** Workers who have critical thinking, decision-making, communication and interpersonal skills are vital to the success of businesses in all sectors.
- **Children’s success:** Parents who are enrolled in adult basic education spend more time helping their children with homework, going to school activities and meeting with teachers, all of which are essential for a child’s success in school. Children’s literacy levels are strongly linked to the educational level of their parents.
- **Community success:** Families with higher earnings mean more tax revenue and reduced spending for subsidized health care and child care.

Many of the parents who currently receive FIP for their families have very low skills. As part of developing a “work plan,” parents are administered a Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). Forty percent of parents tested in English had a 6th grade or lower reading ability and another forty-six percent tested below 12th grade. For parents tested in Spanish, over sixty percent tested at 6th grade or lower and another eighteen percent tested below 12th grade.

Under the current FIP program, parents with limited literacy or English language skills can enroll in programs monitored by the Office of Adult Education that combine classroom and work experience or in GED classes or transition to college programs.

Under the “Families Work” proposal, FIP would be amended to require more parents to work, but retain options for parents to increase skills leading to stable employment.

- The current rule allowing a parent to participate in education or training during the first 24 months of receipt of assistance would be ended. Instead, from initial enrollment in FIP, parents would be required to go to work or to participate in activities appropriate to their educational and vocational experience.
- Parents lacking entry-level skill ability, (less than 6th grade), would be required to participate in “learn and work” programs, where classroom time is combined with work experience. Parents with higher level ability could participate in short-term training to gain skills for more stable employment or might be required to work at least 20 hours/week and participate in educational activities to achieve a GED, improve English language skills, or work toward a post-secondary degree.
- Parents with very limited skills (e.g. less than 3rd grade reading or no English) may need several years of intensive adult education classroom time and work experience to gain the skills they need to get a stable job. A 60 month time limit assures sufficient time for these very challenged parents.

¹ Adult education includes adult basic education, English for speakers of other languages, GED, and transition to college programs.

Under the Governor's proposed "Work First" program (H 7390, Article 16), parents' access to adult education services would be significantly curtailed.

- All parents would be required to look for a job for four weeks as their initial "work plan activity" even if they lack the literacy or English language skills to qualify for an entry level position.
- The proposed 24 month time limit on receipt of benefits (reduced from the current 60 months) would not allow sufficient time for these very low-skilled parents to achieve entry-level skills.
- Parents who are working at low-wage jobs would be denied opportunities for GED or post-secondary education to enhance their earning potential.