

WELFARE REFORM CAUSES TROUBLING DECLINE IN SCHOOL ACHIEVEMENT AND INCREASE IN PROBLEM BEHAVIORS AMONG ADOLESCENTS

by Sarah E. Kurtz

With Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) up for reauthorization in 2002, this is a particularly appropriate time to review how the massive changes made by the 1996 legislation have affected children and youth in TANF families.¹ Since TANF is a program designed to assist children who have been deprived of one or both parents' care, its provisions should be evaluated with an eye toward how they affect the well being of these intended beneficiaries.

The primary thrust of the 1996 legislation was to shift responsibility for most program components to the states. When the legislation passed, no one could know how the states would respond, much less how their responses would affect the children the program was designed to support. And while the full effects of such a massive experiment may never be known, we do have some preliminary findings regarding adolescents that warrant close examination, and point us toward corresponding adjustments in the legislation, at least to address the identified risks to youth.

The 1996 legislation

The stated purpose of the 1996 legislation was to increase the flexibility of states in operating a program to "provide assistance to needy families so that children may be cared for in their own homes or in the homes of relatives."² Other program goals included ending dependence of needy parents on government benefits by promoting job preparation, work, and marriage;

reducing out-of-wedlock births; and encouraging two parent families.³ Within these goals, there is a "special emphasis" on reducing teen pregnancies.⁴ Current Administration proposals are fully consistent with this basic purpose of the program. The Administration proposes to amend the overall purpose of TANF to state: "The purpose of this part is to increase the flexibility of states in operating a program *designed to improve the well-being of children....*" (emphasis added).

While states were given flexibility to design program components themselves, certain mandates were retained or imposed. For example, states had to require 50 percent of all eligible families to participate by 2002,⁵ and 90 percent of two-parent families by 1999.⁶ Participation is defined as having at least one adult (or minor head of household) engaged in work for the month.⁷ Support services must be available.⁸ States may exempt single custodial parents of children under 12 months from the work requirement; if the state does exempt them, they may be disregarded in calculating the participation rate for 12 months.⁹

Work, in turn, is defined as participating in work activities¹⁰ for at least 30 hours per week for all families, 35 hours per week between both parents in the case of two-parent families, or 55 hours per week

¹ The legislation contains appropriations for grants to states through fiscal year 2002. 42 U.S.C. § 603(a)(1)(A) and (E).

² 42 U.S.C. § 601(a)(1). The family has to include a minor child, *Id.*, § 608(a)(1), and the state may not use its grant funds to provide medical services. *Id.*, § 608(a)(6).

³ *Id.*, § 602(a)(2)-(4).

⁴ *Id.*, § 602(a)(1)(A)(v).

⁵ *Id.*, § 607(a)(1).

⁶ *Id.*, § 607(a)(2). A family that includes a disabled parent is not considered a two-parent family for these calculations. *Id.*, § 607 (b)(2)(C). Also, these rates can be adjusted if other factors concerning caseload reduction are met. *Id.*, § 607(b)(3).

⁷ *Id.*, § 607(b).

⁸ *Id.*, § 602(a)(1)(A)(i).

⁹ *Id.*, § 607(b)(5).

¹⁰ Work activities are defined in section 607(d).

in two-parent families if federally funded child care is also being provided (unless one of the adults is disabled or caring for a disabled child).¹¹ However, in single-parent families where there is a child under six, only 20 hours per week are required.¹² Finally, participation requirements of recipients under 20 who are married or the head of household are satisfied by school attendance.¹³ Penalties in terms of reduced assistance must be assessed against individuals who refuse to participate, unless the state determines they have good cause.¹⁴ The state must excuse refusal to participate where the individual is a single custodial parent caring for a child under six, and has been unable to secure needed child care.¹⁵ There are other prohibitions and requirements pertaining to certain groups, such as the requirement that, with few exceptions, minor parents live in adult-supervised settings,¹⁶ and the requirement that they attend school.¹⁷

Effect of welfare-to-work programs on adolescent children in TANF families

In a research brief published by *Child Trends* last summer, researchers reviewed the first results assessing the impact of welfare-to-work programs on adolescent children of adult participants.¹⁸ The study examined data from three experimental evaluations of welfare-to-work programs conducted by the Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation. These three programs, in Canada, Minnesota, and Florida, were precursors of the 1996

legislation.¹⁹ The research compared the adolescent children of parents enrolled in each program with a control group of adolescents in welfare households in which parents were not enrolled.²⁰

The results from all three programs indicated negative effects on the adolescent children of adult participants. Across the board, findings showed decreases in school achievement and increases in risky behaviors. Specifically, compared with adolescents in each study's control group: (1) adolescents with parents enrolled in the Canadian program "showed increases in smoking, drinking, drug use, and delinquent activity; increases in the likelihood that teachers called home about their school behavior; and decreases in school achievement"; (2) adolescents with parents enrolled in the Minnesota program "likewise, showed a decline in school achievement. Their parents were also more likely to receive calls from teachers about their adolescent's school behavior"; and (3) adolescents with parents enrolled in the Florida program "not only showed a decline in school achievement but also were more likely to be suspended from school. Even more troubling, an increase in arrests, convictions, and involvement with police was

¹¹ *Id.*, § 607(c)(1).

¹² *Id.*, § 607(c)(2)(B).

¹³ *Id.*, § 607(c)(2)(C).

¹⁴ *Id.*, § 607(e)(1).

¹⁵ *Id.*, § 607(e)(2).

¹⁶ *Id.*, § 608(a)(5).

¹⁷ *Id.*, § 608(a)(4) (other provisions include child support cooperation requirements, penalties for fraud and felons, ineligibility of children out of the home for extended periods, etc., as well as a five year time limit on the use of federal funds).

¹⁸ J. Brooks, E. Hair, and M. Zaslow, "Welfare Reform's Impact on Adolescents: Early Warning Signs," *Child Trends*, July, 2001.

¹⁹ The Canadian Self-Sufficiency Project offered participants in the three-year, welfare-to-work program an increase in income to supplement their earnings if they worked at least 30 hours per week. The Minnesota Family Investment Program required randomly selected participants to engage in work activities for 30 hours per week after they had been on aid for 24 months, with sanctions for noncompliance, additional financial incentives for compliance, and support services. The Florida Family Transition Program likewise required randomly selected participants to participate at least 30 hours per week under threat of sanctions. It included modest financial incentives, case management services, and transitional childcare benefits, while placing a two- to three-year time limit on assistance. J. Brooks, E. Hair, and M. Zaslow, "Welfare Reform's Impact on Adolescents: Early Warning Signs," *Child Trends*, July 2001.

²⁰ Hence the research results may be particularly valuable now that the availability of control groups was eliminated by the mandates of the 1996 legislation.

found among adolescents in one particular group of families – those headed by mothers who had worked more and spent less time on welfare at the start of the program.”²¹

The researchers offered three possible explanations for these disturbing results. The first is an erosion in the quality of adolescent-parent relationships. “Parents assigned to these programs may be parenting their adolescents less effectively, either as a result of their employment per se or through such factors as increased stress and decreased energy.” Parents enrolled in the Canadian program, for example, did report an increase in the use of harsh parenting directed at older adolescents.

The second explanation suggested is a decline in parental monitoring. “These programs may leave parents with less time and energy to monitor their adolescents’ behavior.... Indeed, higher levels of parental monitoring are generally related to lower levels of delinquent or problem behaviors and higher levels of academic achievement in adolescents.”

The third explanation offered is that the adolescent’s role in the family shifts as they are needed to assume more adult roles, and given a corresponding increase in freedom from parental authority. “But while a certain degree of responsibility and autonomy is considered beneficial to adolescents, too much may jeopardize adolescent well-being.” The researchers point to research on adolescents that suggests that (1) “[e]xtraordinarily high levels of autonomy can be related to higher levels of delinquent behavior and lower levels of academic achievement”; (2) “[e]xtensive levels of responsibility for the family may lead to increased levels of stress and anxiety among some adolescents, who may feel overwhelmed by their responsibility”; (3) “[a]dolescents’ perception that they have adult levels of responsibility and are therefore ‘grown’ may cause problems with their teachers, who

treat them – and expect them to behave – like children”; and (4) “[t]eenagers who think of themselves as adults may feel that it is appropriate for them to experiment with behaviors that are more characteristic of adults but more problematic in adolescence, such as smoking, drinking, and having sex.”

The researchers further observed that “evidence exists that adolescents in ‘higher risk’ situations (such as poor, urban families) are even more sensitive to the consequences of high levels of responsibility and autonomy than their ‘lower risk’ peers. [footnote omitted] given the overrepresentation of these ‘higher risk’ groups among welfare recipients, even relatively modest increases in adolescents’ responsibility and autonomy may result in problems for some adolescents as their families move from welfare to work.” Indeed, examination of the data from the MDRC studies showed that adolescents were in fact performing household chores, including sibling care, more frequently than adolescents whose parents were not assigned to the program, and were more likely to be working 20 or more hours a week themselves.

These research findings are consistent with the most recent findings discussed in a March 2002 MDRC Policy Brief entitled *Welfare Policies Matter for Children and Youth -- Lessons for TANF Reauthorization*.²² This brief explores findings from syntheses of eight studies that evaluate the effects on adolescents of 16 programs designed to increase the self-sufficiency of low-income parents. The researchers discovered that across the board (in both mandatory and voluntary work programs, with and without earnings supplements, and with and without time limits), “adolescents’ school achievement and progress have been negatively affected by their parents’ participation in welfare and employment programs.” The researchers then noted that, “Increased employment

²¹ J. Brooks, E. Hair, and M. Zaslow, “Welfare Reform’s Impact on Adolescents: Early Warning Signs,” *Child Trends*, July 2001.

²² Morris, P., Knox, V., and Gennetian, L., *Welfare Policies Matter for Children and Youth-- Lessons for TANF Reauthorization*.

could remove mothers from their supervisory roles and place counterproductive demands on youth at a crucial point in their development. For low-income adolescents – a group already at risk of poor outcomes – the stakes are high.”

“Specifically, youth whose parents participated in these programs were less likely to be performing above average in school.... The proportion of these adolescents who repeated a grade or were enrolled in special educational services...was...10 percent greater...than that of adolescents whose families were in the control groups....” The researchers observed that there was evidence to suggest that adequate adolescent supervision may play a role: “In the five programs for which data on adolescents’ after-school activities were available, it was found that even though all boosted mothers’ employment, adolescents’ participation in structured activities outside school did not increase. *Previous research has shown that supervision and the structure of adolescent out-of-school time can positively affect schooling and social functioning. When parental supervision is reduced owing to employment, neglecting to replace it could lead to problems.*” (emphasis added).

The researchers concluded by confirming the earlier findings of the negative consequences to adolescents of taking on more responsibilities that could interfere with schoolwork. “Taking on adult roles can also erode adolescents’ willingness to continue accepting the authority of adults such as parents or teachers.” The report concluded that implications for the TANF agenda include new approaches to assure supervised settings after school for low-income youth.

Recommendations for reauthorization

As alarming as these findings are, there is, fortunately, much that can be done to address them by making three relatively minor adjustments to the TANF legislation that do not change the overall framework of the program.

Support services

– The TANF legislation already requires that state programs provide parents with support services.²³ However, there is no guidance beyond this general statement.

The legislation can make clear that support services should include the cost of after-school activities (such as sports, scouts, music, tutoring, counseling, etc.) for adolescents, as well as the cost of transportation to get to them. The state will not typically be paying child care costs for this population; the cost of extracurricular activities is a reasonable support service alternative to enable parents to work while their adolescents are in supervised settings.

Participation hours/good cause

– Current law contemplates that a single parent will be participating in work activities for 30 hours per week.²⁴ Moreover, while penalties are required for refusal to participate, this is not the case where the state determines there is good cause.²⁵ However, there is no guidance for states to follow on reasonableness of timing of the 30 hours, or on what would be good cause.

Reauthorization legislation could provide that participation hours, including commute time, shall be scheduled only during school hours for at least one parent of an adolescent when the adolescent is not otherwise participating in an extracurricular activity. For the most part, this could be accomplished within the existing 30-hour requirement, as participation could be scheduled from 8:45 a.m. to 2:45 p.m., accommodating most middle and high school schedules.²⁶ More flexibility in scheduling hours is possible to the extent the adolescent is participating in an extracurricular activity.

Where it is not possible to meet the hourly requirement without leaving an

²³ 42 U.S.C. § 602(a)(1)(A)(i).

²⁴ *Id.*, § 607(c)(1).

²⁵ *Id.*, § 607(e)(1).

²⁶ This would be made more difficult if the Administration’s proposal to increase the required hours to 40 per week were adopted.

adolescent unsupervised, reauthorization legislation could provide that good cause includes this situation just as it does the situation of lack of child care for a younger child.²⁷ Alternatively, a lower hourly participation requirement could be set for at least one parent of an adolescent, particularly if hourly participation requirements are increased generally, much as current legislation sets a lower hourly requirement for single custodial parents of children under six years of age.²⁸

Furthermore, this would be a good time to clarify that good cause also includes attending school appointments such as parent-teacher conferences; other opportunities for parent participation in the child's classroom or at the child's school; and attendance at school events such as class plays, PTA meetings, etc. Such provisions are entirely consistent with state labor laws, as evidenced by California Labor Code § 230.8 (employee may not be penalized for taking off up to 40 hours per year to "participate in activities of the school...of any of his or her children.") Research also supports the connection between academic performance and parent participation in the child's school.²⁹

The above recommendation is consistent with the Administration's proposal to allow states to count structured activities that further child well being, such as parental participation in a school field trip, toward meeting the last 16 hours of a 40-hour

²⁷ See 42 U.S.C. § 607(e)(2) (state must excuse absences due to lack of childcare).

²⁸ *Id.*, § 607(c)(2)(B) (20 hours per week).

²⁹ Indeed, the preamble to the California legislation states in part: "The Legislature finds and declares the following:

- (a) It is crucial for parents to be involved in their children's education, both in the school and in the home.
- (b) The evidence is beyond dispute that parent involvement improves pupil achievement.
- (c) Pupils whose parents are involved in their formal education have better grades, test scores, long-term academic achievement, attitudes, and behavior."

Sec. 2, Stats. 1994, c. 1290 (A.B. 2590).

obligation.³⁰ However, a good cause provision is still necessary for occasions when school appointments are scheduled at times that conflict with other participation requirements (e.g. the first 24 hours, or other required activities).

– Exemptions/deferrals

There is room in the TANF legislation to exempt some parents from program participation at least temporarily, since 100-percent participation is not required.³¹ There is no guidance, however, on whom it would be appropriate to exempt or defer from program participation, or for how long.

Reauthorization legislation could provide that it is appropriate to exempt or defer from program participation at least one parent of an adolescent in those rare cases where a parent is needed to monitor the adolescent during school hours due to a truancy problem. The deferral could last for as long as necessary to address the truancy problem. This is entirely consistent with the emphasis in the legislation on school attendance.³²

³⁰ The Administration proposes to allow states greater flexibility to define activities that are consistent with the purposes of TANF, and count them toward an hourly obligation. This conceivably could include participation in children's school activities. If so, it is an excellent idea that should be adopted; however, it should not be tied to an increased hourly obligation, for the reasons discussed above, nor should it be limited to hours after the first 24. See n. 9, *ante*, and accompanying text. Further, it should not be limited to time spent on school activities outside the home, but should include time spent in the home, e.g. monitoring homework assignments. See, e.g., Sec. 2, Cal. Stats. 1994, c. 1290 (A.B. 2590) ("The Legislature finds and declares the following: ¶ [] It is crucial for parents to be involved in their children's education, both in the school and in the home.").

³¹ 42 U.S.C. § 607(a). Administration proposals would give the states less flexibility in this area, however, were they to be adopted. In addition, states may extend time limits for up to 20 percent of families on the basis of hardship. 45 C.F.R. 264.1(c)(1).

³² E.g., 42 U.S.C. §§ 607(c)(2)(C), 608(a)(4).

Specific legislative language

There are a variety of ways the above concerns could be addressed in the legislation. Below are perhaps the three simplest, which together should cover most of the situations described above.

Support services

Add the following clause to 42 U.S.C. § 602(a)(1)(A)(i) (the requirement that states provide support services): “, which include services to adolescents in adult-supervised settings after school.”

Participation hours

Add the following provision to 42 U.S.C. § 607: “Participation hours, including commute time, shall not be required during hours when adolescents are not in adult-supervised settings.”

Good cause

Add the following clause to 42 U.S.C. § 607(e)(1) (good cause): “, which include attending school appointments, as covered by applicable state standards.”

Public policy implications

The above adjustments would solve the monitoring problem and the “overwhelming the teen” problem identified in the research, and would in turn likely go a long way towards reducing the stress/energy problem. Without these adjustments, however, the government will be *requiring* the parents of *all* poor adolescents to leave them unsupervised, despite the evidence that this harms them, because TANF funds are required to meet their children’s basic needs,³³ and consequently parents have no choice but to do what is required to receive them.

Even with the adjustments recommended above, many parents of adolescents will choose to work longer hours, if only because they need the additional income, and hope their adolescent needs less supervision than is typical; in that

case, government should not stand in the way of the parent’s decision that the family needs the money more than the adolescent needs the supervision, but should do everything it can to make that choice a success through the provision of support services in the broadest sense. However, where the parent determines that the monitoring of the adolescent is more important than the additional income, research findings support this determination, and government policies should not require a result that is at odds with it.

Research findings certainly suggest, at a minimum, that the government should not leave in place policies which permit states to require the parents of all poor adolescents to leave them unsupervised to engage in activities that may not even increase the family income (such as job search and community service), when there is sufficient time to engage in such activities during school hours. Because of the importance of arresting demonstrated adverse impacts of welfare reform on adolescents without delay (the effects can only worsen as more parents are required to participate), the recommendations should be adopted as mandatory provisions, just as the requirements that minor parents live in adult-supervised settings, that they attend school, and that participation may not be required of single parents of young children who lack child care are mandatory.

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³³ See 45 C.F.R. §§ 260.31(a)(1); 260.32(a)(2) (assistance to meet family’s basic needs).

