

**Parents as Scholars: A Model Post-Secondary Education Program
for Low-Income Women in the New Welfare Landscape***

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Abstract

The Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act severely restricted access to post-secondary education for people receiving welfare. Through well-organized advocacy efforts, Maine was able to maintain access to higher education for families on welfare through the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program. Based on data from two surveys during the program’s five-year history, the authors document the experiences of PaS participants, and demonstrate the program’s tangible outcomes. They also reflect on its strengths and limitations, while considering its relevance to the broader debate over the availability of post-secondary education for low-income mothers and its likely future as reauthorization of TANF legislation occurs.

*Three longer versions of this paper are currently in press; full citations can be found in the reference list: Butler, Deprez & Smith (in press); Deprez, Butler & Smith (in press); and Smith, Deprez, & Butler (in press).

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Introduction

When Congress enacted the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—or “welfare reform” as it is more commonly called—in 1996, decades of progress that helped low-income mothers obtain college education in order to pull themselves and their children out of poverty was nearly eradicated. The federal law strongly discouraged states from incorporating post-secondary education into their state plans and focused instead on “work first” policies. As a result, hundreds of thousands of low-income mothers were forced to drop out of college and find jobs. The restrictions on post-secondary education for recipients of welfare is particularly disturbing given the clear evidence that higher education can increase a person’s earning capacity and is particularly helpful for women trying to escape poverty (Blau, 1998; Gittell, 1991a, b; Gittell & Moore, 1989; Kates, 1996; Nettles, 1991; Post-secondary education leads, 1998; Thompson, 1993).

Despite the pressure imposed by the federal law, the state of Maine persevered in its effort to make college a reality for low-income mothers. Advocates in Maine were adamant that welfare reform focus on raising families out of poverty and that policies work to change the position of women in the labor market in order to relieve poverty for low-income single mothers. Maine was one of only two states which maintained the post-secondary education option immediately after welfare reform in 1996. The Parents as Scholars Program (PaS) implemented in Maine has become a national model, most recently illustrated in the Pathways to Self-Sufficiency Act of 2002 (S.2552) introduced by Maine’s Senator Olympia Snowe. This paper reports on the Maine experience with the PaS program. The authors collected two consecutive waves of data from participants in the program, providing a preliminary view of the impact of post-secondary education in the lives of one group of women on welfare.

Maine’s Parents as Scholars Program

While PRWORA required states to continue spending state dollars on low-income families with children (the so-called “maintenance of effort” obligation), it could separate those dollars from TANF funded programs and continue to provide access to post-secondary education for low-income parents. The PaS program is funded with “maintenance of effort” funds and is a program separate from the TANF program. The PaS Program provides cash assistance (at the same level as the state’s TANF program) for parents who are otherwise eligible for TANF and who are enrolled in a two-year or four-year post-secondary educational institution; PaS does not pay tuition except in exceptional circumstances. The program is limited to 2000 participants, but has never been fully enrolled. (This represents approximately 10% of the total number of welfare recipients in Maine in 1996 and about 20% in 2003.) The PaS Program provides the same support services as are available through the state TANF program and there is a work participation requirement, which can be met primarily through class and course preparation time.

The 1999 Study

We began to collect data on the experiences and lives of PaS participants in the summer of 1999 when we sent a 19-page survey to each of the adults in the program at the time (n=848). The instrument was comprised of questions about the participants’ current and past educational experience; work and welfare receipt history; health and the health of their children; current

financial situation; children and child care circumstances; time use in their daily lives; experience in the PaS Program and with their post-secondary educational institution; and, beliefs about how PaS had impacted their lives. We received 222 completed surveys, giving us a response rate of 26.2%. The findings from this rich data set of both short answer and narrative responses, reported more fully elsewhere (Butler & Deprez, 2002; Deprez & Butler, 2001), reflected the positive impact of higher education in the lives of respondents. The participants wrote about improved self concepts, greater opportunities, and enriched family relationships.

The 2001 Survey

We invited the respondents of the first survey to participate in a longitudinal study: one hundred and ninety-two (86.5%) of the respondents said that we could contact them again in the future. Two years later, we queried this group of 192 about their continued participation: nearly two thirds of the original respondents (n=127, 66.1%) were located and replied affirmatively to our inquiry. A second survey was mailed to this subset of respondents in November 2001.

One of the primary purposes of the second survey was to see how participants who had graduated were faring in the labor market. We knew these data would be particularly important in the federal TANF reauthorization debates and in state legislative discussions about the future of the PaS program. While shorter than the first survey, it followed the same format of asking about employment, education, finances, child care and health, and again included open-ended questions about their overall experiences with the PaS program and attending college. We received 65 completed surveys in this second round, giving us a response rate of 51.2%. We attribute this relatively high response rate to participants' eagerness to report on their successes and their interest in participating in the state discussion on the future of the PaS program. The findings from this second survey are reported in greater depth elsewhere (Butler, Deprez, & Smith, in press; Deprez, Butler, & Smith, in press; Smith, Deprez & Butler, in press; Smith, Deprez & Butler, 2002).

Employment

The overwhelming majority of the 2001 sample (n=52; 80.0%) was employed at the time of the survey. Respondents worked anywhere from nine to 60 hours per week (median= 40 hrs/week) and earned wages ranging from \$5.70 per hour to \$25.48 per hour (median = \$9.93). Two-thirds of the employed respondents (n=35) had received their degrees—either from two-year or four-year institutions—at the time of the survey. There was a statistically significant difference ($p<.01$) between average hourly wages earned by graduates (\$11.75) and non-graduates (\$8.26). Moreover, graduates were significantly more likely ($p<.01$) to be in employment that provided benefits than were non-graduates (85.7% vs. 35.3% respectively). Additional evidence regarding the financial benefits of post-secondary education was documented by the 30 employed graduates who also reported the wages from their highest paying job prior to receiving their degrees. Before graduation, the average high wage of these respondents was \$8.63 per hour, while at the time of the survey, their average wage was \$12.13 ($p<.01$). This represents a 40.6% increase in wages for these women.

Overall Impact of Post-Secondary Education on Respondents' Lives

Returning to school was repeatedly reported to positively affect self-esteem, employment opportunities, and family relationships in the narratives of both surveys. For example, a 29-year-old graduate with an associate's degree in business writes in the 2001 survey about how her

whole life has turned around; she had accomplished things of which she had previously never thought she was capable. Her narrative exudes enthusiasm about her new life:

I never thought I was smart enough to go to college...what distorted thinking that was! I realized that I was actually quicker at getting things down than I thought...All I needed was one small success after another to realize my worth. I've become a better mother, a better partner, a better friend. I've gained a lot of confidence in that I can really make a difference in peoples lives because of the knowledge I've gained. I could fill pages upon pages with stories from the time I graduated from high school until now...Bad choices governed my life. Now, I am working for the Bureau of Health, working side by side with intelligent people working together to help make the people of Maine lead more healthy productive lives. I'm helping make that happen.

At the time of the survey, the respondent was a secretary earning less than nine dollars per hour. Her plans included returning to school to obtain her bachelor's degree, and eventually earning her master's degree in public health.

Giving back to the community was another theme evident in these narrative data, as illustrated by the quote below. She writes,

Completing my degree has had a tremendous impact on my self (image, self-esteem, etc.) and my future. When I received my degree this past spring I finally felt that I had achieved something worthwhile in life. That many more jobs would be available to me. At the same time I want to be able to give back to my community. I decided to go into teaching and am working on getting state certified...My family is proud and supportive and my child has a positive role model for the effort one must make when working toward a goal. I will always be grateful to have had the opportunity to complete my education. That is the one factor that can keep me from sliding into hopeless poverty. In completing my degree I knew that I can do whatever it takes to go after my dreams.

This respondent's statement captures the essence of the themes threaded through so many of the narratives: improved self-esteem, a sense of accomplishment, richer employment opportunities, role modeling for children, wanting to make a contribution to society, and a sense of security about the future.

Discussion and Implications for Policy

These data provide new evidence of the importance of education for greatly expanding the opportunities for and enriching the lives of recipients of welfare. The narrative data confirm past research that receiving a post-secondary degree can be life changing on many levels for low-income parents: they experience increased self-esteem, they become role models for their children; they gain skills that open up employment opportunities; and they are motivated to contribute to society. The quantitative data is in line with recently released statistics from the 2000 Census: post-secondary degrees lead to significantly higher wages. The Census data indicate that women with an associate degree earn more than twice as much as those without a high school diploma, and 38% more than those with only a high school diploma--\$25,000 compared to \$12,000 and \$18,000 respectively (Fremstad, Parrot, Greenberg, Savner, Turetsky, & Mezey, 2002; U.S. Census, 2000). Furthermore, respondents of our survey who had graduated were significantly more likely to have jobs that provided benefits than were non-graduates. For

parents raising children, access to health benefits and sick leave are of primary importance, although they are frequently not available to workers in low-wage employment.

When the reauthorization of PRWORA loomed on the horizon at the beginning of 2002, activists in Maine recognized that grassroots activism and coalition building were essential to ensure that the state's experience be heard in the national reauthorization debate. They invited together a host of groups from around the state—organizations representing women, children, low-income families, religious groups, labor interests, families with disabilities, domestic and sexual abuse victims, and social service agencies. The coalition, formed in January 2002, was named the Alliance for Family Success. The Alliance created an ambitious agenda for Maine to take its reauthorization message to the national arena. Maine had created some humane and successful approaches to welfare that needed to be championed at the national level. It had implemented several innovative and successful programs with some state funds. Central to this approach was the conviction that states be allowed to utilize federal funds to continue the programs, lest they be jeopardized by tight state budgets combined with difficult federal requirements. A critical component of the message was the success of the Parents as Scholars program and its potential to move low-income women not just off welfare but out of poverty.

A particularly important aspect of the Alliance's campaign was to ensure that Maine's Congressional Representatives and Senators knew of Maine's welfare reform successes and would help insure that they would not be jeopardized. To begin, the Alliance held a series of meetings with Maine's Department of Human Services (DHS) wherein together they created a "Common Ground" of principles, critical to Maine's continued success in TANF reauthorization. Among them were increased funding to support TANF programs, improved support for education, realistic participation rates, and reinstatement of federal funds to help legal immigrants. The Alliance and DHS together presented this "Common Ground" statement to Maine Congressional delegation staff in a day-long meeting.

The success of the Alliance's efforts is visible at both the state and federal levels. By joining together, DHS and the Alliance were able to complement one another's advocacy efforts and present a united front to the Congressional delegation. The State's two members of the House of Representatives—John Baldacci and Thomas Allen—both voted against the punitive H.R. 4737, the Personal Responsibility, Work, and Family Promotion Act. Maine's Senator Olympia Snowe introduced S. 2552, Pathways to Self-Sufficiency Act of 2002 on May 22, 2002—a bill, modeled on Maine's PaS Program, that would allow states to exercise an option to use federal funds for a PaS-like program. The State's other senator, Susan Collins, was a co-sponsor.

Unfortunately, the results of the 2002 mid-term elections do not bode well for progressive change in welfare reauthorization. The Administration's punitive proposals for welfare reform carry even more weight now that the President's party controls both chambers of Congress. For advocates of increased access to post-secondary education, this is a frightening prospect given that President Bush's views toward helping women on welfare are so clearly based on a work-first and marriage formation model. In this conservative climate, obtaining justice and equal opportunity for families on welfare will require increased strategic action from and collaboration between activist researchers and advocates for low-income families.

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