



Opening the Doors to Higher Education for Low-Income Women: The Success of Maine's Parents as Scholars Program

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Education beyond high school is the door to the middle class in twenty-first century America. Studies have consistently found that educational success after high school leads to gains for individuals and the country as a whole. The economic benefits are clear and logical: increased access to jobs with good wages and health benefits; lower risks of unemployment; and better chances to hold onto jobs during economic downturns. In addition, people who have successfully continued their education beyond high school enjoy enriched personal lives, greater self-esteem and confidence, improved family relationships, and higher aspirations for their children.

With so many good things connected to continuing education, it makes little sense to prevent poor women on welfare from attending college. Yet that is exactly what happened when the U.S. federal government enacted sweeping "welfare reforms" in 1996. The new "Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act" discouraged the states from incorporating post-secondary education into their welfare efforts. Instead, the federal government told the states to push all women on welfare into any available jobs, even jobs with low wages and dead-end prospects. "Work first" was the slogan. In effect, the 1996 federal rules ignored – and threatened to discontinue – decades of earlier progress in helping low-income mothers obtain a college education so they could pull themselves and their children out of poverty. Among the most vulnerable in our country, poor families mostly headed by women were suddenly told to "end dependency" and "become self-sufficient" without any access to advanced education.

Despite the new hard-line, the state of Maine decided to persevere in longstanding efforts to make college attendance possible for low-income mothers on welfare. Advocates were adamant that reform focus on improving the position of poor women in the labor market. The Maine "Parents as Scholars" program was created to do just that – and it has paid off well for the state as well as people on public assistance.

"Parents as Scholars" in Maine's Welfare System

Maine's program is paid for by the state as an addition to the regular federal welfare program. Limited at any one time to 2,000 of those eligible for the federally subsidized temporary welfare assistance, Maine's "Parents as Scholars" program supports enrollment in both two- and four-year college programs. Participants receive the same cash benefits and support services that they would in regular welfare – including assistance with child care, transportation, car repairs, auto liability insurance, eye care, dental care, books and supplies, clothing and uniforms, occupational expenses, and other services as necessary. They also are eligible to receive the usual range of student services available from the institutions they attend: personal counseling, on-campus health care, job opportunities, job-search assistance, campus housing, child care, financial aid, and access to support groups, academic advising, and wellness programs. *The special feature of the Parents of Scholars program is simply that welfare parent-scholars are allowed to count study time and hours in college classes toward the overall weekly work requirement for all welfare recipients.* This is possible for Maine's parent-scholars on welfare as long as they finish their studies in a reasonable time and maintain at least a 2.0 grade average. If they stay in college beyond two years, they must increase hours of study for the final push toward the bachelor's degree.

The Evidence Shows Positive Gains

Good outcomes for Maine's college students on welfare are well-documented – and parallel what has been found in many studies showing that higher education is one of the most promising pathways out of poverty. Across the United States, only about six percent of welfare recipients are enrolled in some kind of educational program, but 90 percent of them find jobs paying two to three times more than the typical wages earned by people on welfare. Research on Maine's welfare-scholars shows similar results:

- Nine out of ten of the beneficiaries of Maine's program report positive changes in their lives – including improved family finances, promotions at work, home ownership, fewer family crises, and good outcomes at school for their children. Compared to other welfare recipients, parent-scholars require fewer publicly funded support services.
- Maine's employers have benefitted from access to a better-educated work force.
- In a 2006 survey, 44 percent of Maine welfare-students who had received a degree reported earning a bachelor's degree. This helps Maine's tax base, because U.S. Census data show that people who complete two years of college earn around 30 percent more than those with just high school diplomas, and those who earn four-year bachelor's degrees earn 32 percent more than the two-year graduates.

A Wise Approach Worthy of Wide Emulation

Maine's decision in 1996 to resist the force-welfare-recipients-into-any-job philosophy of national reform was visionary. Instead of cutting off possibilities for higher education for poor people temporarily in need of public assistance, Maine continued along the route it had embarked upon 15 years earlier. The state would continue to help low-income mothers improve their job prospects through higher education, so they could enjoy better workforce opportunities in the future. Taking such a thoughtful and humane approach to welfare reform was novel at the time, and still is. Yet Maine's approach has proved itself and should continue to spread to more states.

Back in 1996, only Maine and Wyoming opted out of restrictive federal rules that prevented welfare recipients from attending college. But by now, programs similar to Maine's Parents as Scholars effort are operating in Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Illinois, Nebraska, and California. As Maine has demonstrated, providing welfare recipients with access to postsecondary education can improve their prospects for a life without poverty. Everyone benefits when that happens.

Read more in Sandra S. Butler and Luisa S. Deprez, "The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine Success Story." *Maine Policy Review* 17, no. 1 (2008): 40-53.