STATE FAMILY SUPPORT
AND EDUCATION PROGRAMS:
Lessons from the Pioneers

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More state governments are developing publicly supported preventive programs
to strengthen families. This article describes the forces driving these initiatives,
which in turn are redefining ideas about when public involvement with families is
appropriate. It discusses four state programs and outlines the choices and issues
policy makers faced in formulating and implementing them.

Family support and education—or family resource—programs represent a new
way of working with families to empower and reinforce them in their development.
These family-oriented, as distinct from child-oriented, prevention programs are un-
dergirded by a set of operating principles described in an accompanying article (Weiss-
bourd & Kagan, 1989); the principles distinguish these programs from more tradi-
tional, child-centered social and educational services (Weiss & Halpern, 1988; Weiss,
Resnick, & Hausman, 1987). Based on the ecological premise that factors outside the
family affect the family’s capacity to nurture and rear its children (Bronfenbrenner,
1979), these programs frequently fill an empty niche in the continuum of commu-
nity services. They provide a variety of types of social support to achieve a set of inter-
related ends. These include the enhancement of child health and development;
prevention of various child and family dysfunctions, such as abuse and neglect; en-
hancement of parental knowledge, self-esteem, and problem solving; and promotion
of informal and formal community support for families.

Thousands of communities around the country have initiated such programs in the
past 20 years (Weiss & Hite, 1986; Weissbourd, 1987), often outside the human ser-
vice mainstream. These communities have thereby indicated their belief that they have
a stake in promoting the health and well-being of their young families. Now another
important transition is taking place: many state governments (including those of North
Dakota, California, Wisconsin, Kentucky, Vermont, Alaska, Massachusetts, New
Mexico, and Illinois) have begun to con-
sider their role in the creation and funding of preventive family support and education
programs.

RELATIONSHIP BETWEEN
FAMILIES AND THE STATE

This new and escalating interest in family-oriented prevention programs may mark the
beginning of a substantial change in the re-

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relationship between families and state-supported public institutions. In the past, major government provision of services for families has been largely limited to instances in which a family was judged to be in crisis and intervention was deemed necessary to protect the child. At its extreme, intervention dismantled the family by removing the child. In the last 25 years, publicly supported efforts to work with poor families whose children are perceived to be at risk of developmental delay have become more common, particularly within the context of early childhood education programs. Four states, whose programs will be described herein, have taken the next step: providing prevention services to enhance early parenting and strengthen families and communities as contexts for human development. Two (Maryland and Connecticut) have initiated pilot programs and two (Minnesota and Missouri) have enacted legislation establishing state-wide programs that are open on a universal and voluntary basis to all parents with young children. In instituting these programs, these four states have integrated two usually separate questions about government involvement with families—What should government do for families? and, What should families do for themselves?—into one: What should government—alone or with other public and private community institutions—do to enhance the family’s capacity to help itself and others? The integration of these questions has led to a particular type of programmatic answer: the provision of voluntary, community-based family support and education programs designed to strengthen and empower families.

This extension of public responsibility for families beyond past boundaries is possible, in part, because these states have created a set of programs whose guiding principles include respect for the family and its strengths; reinforcement of both the family’s and the community’s role in child development and socialization; and partnership relationships, both between parent and provider and between community providers and the state. The fact that these state-sponsored initiatives provide for considerable local discretion with respect to the shape of local programs has meant that they have been less prone to criticisms that the state is dictating how parents should raise their children. The appeal of these programs, both for families and for policy makers, may lie as much in how they structure and provide their services as in what new services they provide in local communities.

This paper will outline the four state-initiated family support and education programs, two originating in state departments of education and two in social service departments. It will discuss some of the reasons these initiatives were undertaken, address the choices policy makers faced in program formulation and development, and conclude with several questions pertinent to the future growth of state family support and education initiatives.

NEW INTEREST IN FAMILY PROGRAMS

Five factors have come together to heighten state policy makers’ interest in family support and education programs. Described in detail below, they include increased understanding of how contextual factors influence human development; encouraging evidence from evaluations of early intervention programs; concerns about changing family demographics and family fragility; the ways these programs reinforce the value Americans place on strong families; and a new pro-active role for state policy makers in education and the human services.

The first factor is a growing awareness, supported by research in child rearing and development (Bronfenbrenner, 1979; Hamburg, 1987; Osofsky, 1986; Zigler & Weiss, 1985), that those who care about the well-being of young children must, by necessity, also care about the well-being of their families. As Marion Wright Edelman, president of the Children’s Defense Fund, noted recently:
If you want to save the babies, make sure the mother has access to prenatal care, to immunizations, to knowledge of basic parenting skills, and to day care that will allow her to continue her education to get a job. Even if you really don’t like the parents, and you don’t want to help them, okay—think of it as investing in keeping the kids from becoming like them. (Lewin, 1988, p. 16)

In the past, it has been easier to argue for programs for children than for families, particularly in the case of poor children. This is partly because young children are indisputably in the category of the deserving poor, even if some question whether or not their parents are. Now the growing recognition of the importance of parental attitudes and behavior in child development and of the way contextual factors affect families’ child-rearing capacities has made it easier to argue for family programs. The result has been increased public interest in programs that provide family support and education in a community context.

Second, the results of a number of longitudinal evaluations of early childhood education programs, begun during the War on Poverty and continuing into the 1980s, are now available. These studies have proven the enduring benefits of early intervention programs, including those that work with parents to promote child development (Lazar, Darlington, Murray, Royce, & Shipper, 1982; Weiss, 1988; Zigler & Weiss, 1985). This evidence of program effectiveness, along with explicit efforts to package the information to attract the attention of the media and policy makers, has played a critical role in seeding broad new interest in early support and education. Furthermore, the accumulating and mutually reinforcing data from a number of these studies have been used by several private business organizations, including the influential Committee for Economic Development (1985, 1987), to argue for increased public and private investment in preventive programs for children and families. The involvement of business people arises from their concerns about the preparation of an adequate labor force for the twenty-first century. Their support has expanded the nucleus of those who have traditionally been interested in the well-being of children and young families. A few studies that suggest the cost-effectiveness of early intervention to promote child and family development also have spurred interest from both businessmen and policy makers motivated by possible future reductions in social welfare costs (Barnett & Escobar, 1987).

The broadening of interest and rationales for working with families to promote development and to ensure an adequate labor force is illustrated by the case of the Parent and Child Education (PACE) program, a two-generational family literacy program recently initiated by the Kentucky state department of education. That initiative received support from the legislature after Kentucky lost a bid for an automobile plant because it was felt that the state did not have an adequately trained labor force.

Third, dramatic shifts in the structure and composition of families, increased maternal labor force participation, increased isolation of young families, and the recognition of the feminization of poverty have contributed to an increasingly widespread sense that American families are in trouble (Bronfenbrenner & Weiss, 1983; Harris, 1987). One recent history of American family life suggests that, since the Puritans arrived, Americans have been

... decrying the increasing fragility of marriage, the growing selfishness and irresponsibility of parents, and the increasing rebelliousness of children. (Mintz & Kellogg, 1988, p. xx)

But these same historians also note that contemporary families are now more removed from the worlds of work, kinship, and community life and that, as a result

... there can be no doubt that the structural isolation of the contemporary family has made it in certain respects a more fragile institution. (p. xx).

So the three factors noted so far—the increased concern about the fragility of the contemporary family, the research-based recognition of the vital role family and community play in human development, and
data documenting the effectiveness of early, family-oriented programs—have conjoined to put consideration of programs designed to strengthen and support young families high on the current public policy agenda.

This heightened public concern about strengthening families is apparent in the prominence given the status of families in governors' state-of-the-state addresses; in the formation of legislative committees on the family; and in the attention devoted to family issues in numerous state economic development, early childhood, and social service reform reports. These reports typically present compilations of demographic data assessing the changing status of children and families, descriptions of mounting evidence of program effectiveness, and conclusions about the need for early intervention with families to prevent a variety of child, youth, and family problems.

A recent report from Alaska, prepared by the Governor's Interim Commission on Children and Youth (1988), is illustrative of these developments. This commission was charged with developing a plan for a quality, affordable child care system for working parents in the state, and with suggesting ways to prepare Alaska's children and youth to overcome barriers to their future economic self-sufficiency. Its primary recommendation argues for the importance of investing in parenting and family strengths, to wit:

The primacy of the family's role in child development is indisputably one of the most important American values. We in Alaska must support and nurture our families in order to nurture our children.

The Commission goes on to add that "support for parents to learn good parenting is the single greatest investment Alaska can make in strong families" (p. 15), and to suggest the need to develop parental support and education programs. Similar logic, including concern for national economic viability, underlies recent reports by the National Governors' Association (1987, 1988), which focus on the importance of early preventive interventions. In sum, these state and nationally oriented documents all connect the changing demographics of the family; the need to strengthen families through early preventive programs; and the future of the labor force, the state, and the nation. Together, these newly interconnected themes are motivating policy makers to explore and, in a number of cases, develop family support and education programs.

The fourth factor contributing to the appeal of these programs for policy makers, suggested in the above quotation from the Alaska Governor's Commission report, is the way in which they reinforce the primacy Americans place on the family and its child-rearing roles (Weiss, 1986). In their analyses of the ingredients shaping public policy, Weiss (1983) and Moynihan (1986) each noted the critical role of ideology and values as well as research information. That the goals and rhetoric of these programs reflect and reinforce powerful social values, and sometimes even help to reconcile contradictory ideological positions, has been important in their broader appeal for policy makers.

The importance of value issues is apparent in the case of Missouri, which recently passed legislation enacting the Parents As Teachers program, aimed at families with children up to three years old. In the words of one legislator who supported this provision of public funds to strengthen the capacity of parents to promote their children's development:

This program embodies everything essential for political appeal in Missouri. It is a state that doesn't want to take children away from the home. It is family-oriented. The purpose is to strengthen the family unit and to create bonding between the parent and the child in a positive way. (cited in Hausman & Weiss, 1988, p. 10)

Other states that have begun family support and education initiatives, including Minnesota and Maryland, have similarly reported that these programs need and get approval from both conservative and liberal legislators and policy makers who can come to-
gether around efforts to strengthen families. In addition, state programs receive broad support because they are based on a service ideology that emphasizes respect for family strengths; reinforces the family role in child development; and allows for substantial community input into program design and administration.

In the face of historic reluctance to interfere in family life, these programs have been able to earn strong political support for two other reasons, the first of which is suggested by the quotation from the Missouri legislator cited above. Insofar as these programs (for example in Missouri and Minnesota) reinforce familial responsibility and beg the question of working mothers by not providing day care themselves, they are legislatively neutral about the still ideologically charged issue of maternal employment. This allows legislators to support “the traditional family” even when these programs do in fact serve working parents and help them locate child care. Second, family support and education programs reflect the operational integration of conservative and liberal political perspectives about public involvement with families. The programs attempt to achieve the aims often expressed by conservatives: strengthening and promoting well-functioning, independent, self-supporting families, which in turn produce children who will be independent and self-supporting adults. They are also in accord with the more liberal perspective that extrafamilial and community support are critical for effective family functioning and that public efforts to provide this support are appropriate. As such, these programs create a middle ground where conservatives and liberals can join together to support programs designed to strengthen families and communities (Weiss, 1986).

Finally, increased state interest and involvement in family support and education programs are arguably the result of a fifth factor: the changing role of state government and the emergence of a group of state policy entrepreneurs in education and the human services. As one analyst of state government suggested, during the 1960s and 1970s the role of the state was defined almost exclusively as one of management of federally sponsored programs. But now the state role has broadened to include governance, that is, making as well as implementing policies, “not simply administering programs developed outside of their jurisdiction” (Elazar, 1981, p. 77). This decade’s emphasis on moving decision-making authority from the federal to the state level through block grants, coupled with a substantial decrease in federal funds for social programs, has heightened the influence of state government in many areas, particularly in education and social services. These recent events occurred after states had already begun a thrust toward modernization in the 1970s. During that period, state constitutions were revised, governors’ terms of office increased, legislative sessions lengthened, and legislators granted higher salaries (Elazar, 1984).

This modernization of state government, coupled with increasing state power and responsibility, has led to the emergence of public policy entrepreneurs: a diverse group of governors, legislators, and public administrators who conceive of their role and that of state government as entrepreneurial and active rather than strictly managerial and reactive. These entrepreneurs highlight problems, develop solutions, and build the political coalitions necessary to implement them (Hausman & Weiss, 1987). In education and human services, this new breed of public administrator exhibits a willingness to stay with an issue, even when initial financial and other supports are not immediately available, and to build and maintain the intra- and inter-agency coalitions necessary to mount new initiatives. One result of this resurgence of state government and of the new entrepreneurial mode is that, in a number of states, policy makers are taking a broader and more complex view of social problems, and they are assuming greater responsibility for preventing prob-
lems and promoting the well-being of children and families.

OVERVIEW OF STATE INITIATIVES

The formulation, implementation, and institutionalization of state-sponsored family support and education programs are currently being examined by the Harvard Family Research Project (Hausman & Weiss, 1987). These initiatives include two emerging from state departments of education, Minnesota’s Early Childhood Family Education (ECFE) and Missouri’s Parents As Teachers (PAT) programs, and two under the sponsorship of social service departments, Maryland’s Family Support Centers and Connecticut’s Parent Education and Support Centers. The basic characteristics of each state’s programs are described in Table 1. As noted below, the rationales and organization of the education and social services programs differ, but there are similarities as well.

The two programs under educational auspices stress the importance of strengthening the child’s early learning environment and reinforcing the parent as the child’s first teacher. Each is premised on the importance of strengthening the community as a context for child development through the provision of programmatic and peer support for parents. Both Minnesota and Missouri also highlight the benefits to both parties of strengthening the relationship between families and schools.

These two state initiatives originated with pilot programs, and both are now supported by legislation and appropriations that provide for state-wide enactment. This legislation is noteworthy because it extends the responsibility of the public school downward to children from birth, and outward to include support and education not only for children but for families. The programs transfer money from the state to the local education authority. The two programs originating in human resource or social service departments stress the importance of strengthening the family early as a way to prevent a variety of costly child and family dysfunctions later. The family support and education initiatives sponsored by state social service departments represent efforts to broaden the mandate and the continuum of their services to include family-oriented prevention programs. Both Maryland and Connecticut began their programs recently (in 1986 and 1987, respectively) and each has begun with a small set of pilot programs distributed across the state. Although the state social service departments initiated the programs, both states grant money to a diverse set of agencies at the local level. Perhaps the reasons for this include desire to reduce any stigma attached to social service programs and to signal that the state agency wants to do business with families differently than it has in the past.

In each of the four states, policy entrepreneurs have led the introduction of family support and education programs and concepts. They put together teams of advocates and attained the legislative support necessary to plan and carry out the initiatives. These teams frequently consisted of people from both within and outside of government. They were responsible for what Tableman (1986) has described as the development of the critically important “selling document, and a road map” (p. 338), which she found necessary to develop analogous prevention programming within state mental health departments.

Examination of how the programs were initially “sold” suggests that the entrepreneurs typically described them as programmatic responses to particular social problems of interest to their state at that time. So, for example, in the case of Minnesota and Missouri, the programs were proposed and are maintained, at least in part, as a way to strengthen early childhood development and prevent later school problems. In Maryland, where there are high numbers of adolescent parents, the program was sold partly in terms of reducing the negative consequences of early childbearing for teenagers and their families. In Connecticut, Par-
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<th>PROGRAM</th>
<th>SPONSORS</th>
<th>PARTICIPANTS</th>
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<td>Connecticut Parent Education and Support Centers</td>
<td>Dept. of Children and Youth Services. Through an RFP process, the State Dept. has funded ten state agencies ($30K each in 1986–87) to set up center programs in agencies around the state in a local-state partnership effort. Sponsors include local community service agencies, mental health services, Catholic charities, youth and family services, a town, and a YMCA.</td>
<td>Center must serve all parents of children 0–17 with priority to be given to underserved groups. Selection for programs is &quot;non-evaluative and not based on any negative criteria.&quot; The underserved include teen and single parents, low-income parents, two-worker families, parents with limited English proficiency, etc.</td>
<td>Those provided by sponsor with the skills to provide the required services.</td>
<td>Each center has to provide parent education and parent training services; parent support services (groups, drop-in programs, parent-child activities); information and coordination services and technical assistance, consultation and training services (for other community agencies).</td>
<td>To participate in the program and in its planning, governing, and operation.</td>
<td>To support families and strengthen the fundamental family processes that contribute to the healthy growth and development of children and youth. Designed to promote positive development; increase community-based prevention resources to assist parents; increase community linkages between parents and local resources; increase technical assistance and training to schools and other agencies working with parents.</td>
<td>Formative evaluation to monitor overall program implementation and outcome evaluation at selected sites is being conducted by an outside research organization.</td>
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<td>Maryland Family Support Centers</td>
<td>Partnership between the Dept. of Human Resources and two private foundations to form Friends of the Family. Eight centers currently funded. Through a proposal submission process four community agencies (a church, economic opportunity committee, local development corporation, Catholic charities) received funding for locally responsive programs.</td>
<td>Teen parents at sites funded around the state. Eventually there will be efforts to make opportunities available for centers for other parents.</td>
<td>Those necessary to provide core services; backgrounds of staff vary by local program.</td>
<td>A core set including: services to enhance parenting skills; health care and family planning; diagnostic and assessment services for parent and child; temporary child care; peer support activities; educational opportunities including GED; and job preparation and skill development to prepare for employment.</td>
<td>To participate in the program and strengthen parenting skills, their own development and that of their child. Intake interviews review family strengths and &quot;positive elements are examined and highlighted.&quot; Participants are used to seeking services in crisis and the program is locally-responsive, working on reorienting participants to their different services.</td>
<td>To develop community-based support services that (1) prevent unwanted pregnancies among adolescents, (2) assist adolescent parents to become better parents, (3) assure the healthy growth and development of children of adolescent parents, (4) help adolescent parents remain in the mainstream by completing school and preparing for employment.</td>
<td>Ongoing formative evaluation and client monitoring to include descriptive data on client status: program utilization: profiles of participants; intervention plans; and program participant, and community satisfaction ratings. An outcome evaluation is being planned.</td>
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<td>PROGRAM</td>
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<td>Minnesota</td>
<td>Initially an adjunct of the State Dept. of Education, the Council on Quality Education. In 1984, legislation setting up the program on a statewide basis through Community Education was passed. Budget comes from a combination of state money and local taxes collected for the program.</td>
<td>Anyone with children 0–6 within the local school district. Special efforts are made to recruit low-income and stressed families.</td>
<td>Staff varies by local program, but can include early childhood educators, child development and family life specialists, nurses, and consumer home economists. Certification for early childhood educator roles is being formalized; current licensing under the Div. of Vocational and Technical Education.</td>
<td>Local programs vary but in general offer parent education, group discussions, home visits for some, development activities for children, and access to toys and books, newsletters, and special services for particular populations (Southeast Asian immigrants, single parents, etc.).</td>
<td>They are the majority of members of a local advisory council; parents are also represented on state program’s advisory task force; parents are viewed as primary recipients of the program.</td>
<td>With the philosophy that the parent is the child’s major teacher, the program’s central goal is to enhance and support the competence of parents, to provide the best possible environment for healthy child development and a strong family.</td>
<td>The program has had several systematic formative evaluations and one summative one that assessed several local programs. The state is in the process of working out a state-wide client tracking form and more summative evaluations.</td>
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<td>Early Childhood Family Education</td>
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<td>Starting date: 1975</td>
<td>Funding: amount in 1987, $18.3 mil.</td>
<td>Missouri State Dept. of Elementary and Secondary Education, and local school districts. Initial four sites chosen by competitive grants process; initial funding through Chapter 2, ECIA, and technical assistance money from foundations. Legislation to set up the programs in districts throughout the state was passed in 1984. Funding comes from State Dept. of Education; local school district funds, and in-kind contributions at local discretion.</td>
<td>Anyone with children 0–3. Special efforts are made to enroll parents of newborns and at-risk families.</td>
<td>Each program in pilot phase had two full-time equivalent parent educators and a part-time secretary; staff are trained in early childhood education, child development, and parent education. Staff receive extensive training and in-service education. PAT has set up a national center to train parent educators.</td>
<td>In the pilot phase, there were monthly home visits and parent meetings beginning at age 3. The 1984 legislation provided for a reduced number of home visits. Children are periodically screened. Home visits are individualized to meet each family’s needs.</td>
<td>Parents are the primary recipients of services; some participate on local advisory boards. Others serve on their district’s parent council.</td>
<td>In line with the philosophy that parents are the child’s primary teacher, the program provides information and educational guidance to enhance the child’s physical, social and intellectual development and attempts to reduce stress and enhance the pleasures of parenting.</td>
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<td>Parenting as Teachers</td>
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<td>Starting date: 1981</td>
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Table 1
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ent Education and Support Centers were developed as part of a larger set of initiatives designed to prevent a variety of subsequent and costly problems for children and youth. General arguments about the cost-effectiveness of these programs were typically made; they were justified on the basis that the state can “pay now or pay later.”

The teams setting up each initiative had a fairly detailed strategic road map formulated at the outset; this plan specified the political, administrative, and programmatic steps necessary to develop the pilot programs and, ultimately, to ensure their growth and stability within the state department or agency. These entrepreneurial teams worked to build a constituency for the program within their own agencies and in the legislature, sometimes informally within other state agencies, and within the relevant advocacy organizations across the state. In several of the states, these efforts to involve a variety of constituencies early in the formulation of the initiative were made to create as much “ownership” and anticipate as many problems and obstacles as possible. Though the four initiatives described here have each been mounted by a single state agency, in several states it has been necessary to get informal clearance and support from other agencies in order to introduce the initiative.

All four states have also created state and local advisory boards. These boards have been helpful in providing visibility for the initiatives, in raising issues in program formulation and implementation, and in creating some of the informal interagency and interprofessional linkages necessary to nurture the new programs. Tableman (1986) has noted the importance of such advisory groups for introduction and maintenance of state preventive mental health initiatives. In sum, these policy entrepreneurs know how to wield the political hand necessary to create the constituencies and coalitions that can introduce their initiatives at both local and state levels (Hausman & Weiss, 1987).

In each of the four states studied, the family support and education programs began as a small set of pilot projects. No state has yet succeeded with a large-scale legislative mandate to institute such a program on a state-wide basis, although both Minnesota and Missouri abortively tried this route at the start. So the program formulators have begun with capacity building, amassing the necessary resources and expertise, as their initial policy instrument (McDonnell & Elmore, 1987). This may have been partly the result of the policy makers’ desire to avoid expensive measures that do not solve the problem, of tighter fiscal circumstances, and of the competition for scarce state dollars. However, because these states are building new program models and systems, introducing services with unprecedented state support, and developing programs that require considerable training and a new working relationship with local communities, it may have been particularly important and appropriate to start small.

The growth in the pilot phase has sometimes been experienced as frustratingly slow and halting by those involved, particularly in the older programs, those of Minnesota and Missouri. In Minnesota, the idea of the ECFE program first surfaced in the 1970s; in fact, legislation providing for sponsorship of such programs within the state department of education was first introduced and defeated in 1973. The program’s developers then set up a plan for a small set of pilot projects, beginning with six programs in 1975. Pilot program growth continued until legislation was finally passed in 1984 that funded program development in community education districts throughout the state. Similarly, in Missouri, interest in parent-oriented early childhood education began in the early 1970s. Four state-sponsored pilot programs were begun in the 1980s, and legislation authorizing state-wide provision of the program was finally passed in 1984.

Slow growth before, or conceivably after, the enactment of legislation enabling
state-wide programming nonetheless allows the creators to develop a small set of strong pilot programs and then to build on these gradually. It is also noteworthy that, in each of the four states examined here, state staff maintained relatively tight control of the pilot programs in order to insure program quality. This control was coupled with considerable technical assistance and other support. So, despite the frustrations of sluggish growth in the pilot stage, state program formulators report that, in retrospect, the benefits of starting with pilot programs have been considerable. This approach has allowed the development of sound program quality, the building of an infrastructure of state training and technical assistance for local programs, and the gradual growth of staff training mechanisms.

Finally, as Tableman (1986) has argued, prevention programming can sometimes be perceived as a threat by the home agency. Beginning with pilot demonstration programs is, therefore, "an extraordinarily effective way to feed innovation into a state system" (p. 339). Given the increased state interest in these programs, and the positive experiences of the pioneers, it is unclear whether other states will necessarily begin with full-blown state-wide programs. However, those considering such new initiatives would do well to weigh the benefits of pilot programs and phased growth.

PROGRAM FORMULATION AND IMPLEMENTATION

Following the decision to pursue a family support and education program, a series of critical choices must be made about how to structure and administer the program: where to locate it; whom to serve; and what kinds of services to provide. These issues and the various decisions states made will be described briefly below.

One of the hallmarks of family support and education programs has been their base in and responsiveness to local communities. Perhaps because of this, as well as the increased recognition of the importance of some local ownership for program effectiveness and maintenance (McLaughlin, 1987) and the tradition of local control of initiatives sponsored by education departments, the states have developed hybrid rather than hierarchical relationships with local communities. Program initiation and administration have been a joint activity. Specifically, the state agencies have allowed for considerable local choice with respect to who delivers this family programming, where it is delivered, and what is delivered. In all four states, the local agencies that administer the programs have found it advantageous to have this degree of flexibility.

The two states with education initiatives provide resources to local education agencies that deliver the service, but the school district has latitude with respect to where the service is delivered, and can contract out with other community agencies if it is appropriate to do so. For example, in Minnesota local programs are delivered not only at school sites but at child care centers, in housing projects and community centers, and even at parental workplaces. The Missouri legislation urges local education authorities to consider the PAT curriculum developed by the state, but it allows local schools to use other materials if they can be shown to have the same features. The Minnesota legislation specifies a set of general services for parents and children, but allows considerable local choice with respect to programming and materials. The ECFE state program staff have recently put together a guide to parenting and child development materials for the use of local program directors in order to facilitate the creation of varied and locally responsive programming.

In the two states with programs within social service departments, diverse community agencies can apply for state grants to set up the family support and education efforts. The result is considerable variability with respect to local homes for these programs. Connecticut has provided grants to
mental health services, religious organizations, and youth service centers, for example, while Maryland has set up Family Support Centers under the auspices of religious groups, public housing authorities, and other community agencies. As the services column of Table 1 shows, these two states delineate a general set of services that the programs must provide, but allow the local sponsors to make decisions about the particular program models and materials they will develop and employ.

Thus, one question program formulators have had to address is whether to implement one program model or curriculum on a state-wide basis, or allow for the proliferation of a variety of models developed by local communities as long as they contain some of the basic services outlined by the state (see Table 1 for the list of basic services). With the exception of Missouri, which does allow for some local modification of the PAT curriculum and service delivery model, the states have chosen to allow for relatively flexible programming. Observations and interviews with local program staff in each of the states suggest that their models are still evolving and sometimes becoming more differentiated as they attempt to reach new population groups and develop stronger programs.

The states also had to make an initial decision about whether to offer their programs on a universal basis to all parents with children in the relevant age group, or to target particular neighborhoods or population groups. In each case, this decision was influenced by a number of factors. The two education programs are provided on a universal basis; anyone with a child up to three years old in Missouri and up to six in Minnesota is eligible to participate. The rationale for this includes the view that these programs are a downward extension of public education within its tradition of providing universal services, a tradition rare in the provision of other human services. Making a program universal can also avoid any possible stigma that might be inherent in programs targeted to a limited population, particularly if it is labeled “at risk.” Finally, in both Minnesota and Missouri, the policy formulators had indications that it was politically wise to provide a universal service so that all young families would benefit. In these states, broad political support was necessary in order to pass the legislation for the programs, so the votes from rural, suburban, and urban legislators all had to be sought. Some informants in both states also report that political support from middle-class voters was deemed to be important for continued legislative support of the programs.

It is as yet unclear how effectively these universal programs reach and serve the high-risk children and families in their communities. In selling the state initiatives, their advocates suggested that the programs can benefit high-risk families. Once the programs have been established, one of the issues that frequently emerges is the need to vary their content and procedures in order to reach such families. In some instances this is difficult because the high demand for services from the middle class can limit the financial and other resources available for more intensive services for high-risk families. Specifically, in some Minnesota sites, these programs have large waiting lists of primarily middle-class families eager to get into the regular neighborhood program. It can be difficult for the school district to justify diverting resources from these programs to serve highly stressed families in need of more intensive and comprehensive services. Therefore, when the inevitable resource constraints arise, tension can occur between satisfying those who want the service and providing for those who need it most. This is a “second generation” problem that states with more mature universal programs are currently working to solve.

Connecticut’s program and new family support and education legislation recently passed in Oregon illustrate efforts to create universal programs that also make explicit attempts to serve particular groups. The
former offers, and the latter is developing, services on a universal basis; but each requires the recruitment of groups in the community that are considered to be underserved (e.g., teenage and single parents, low-income parents, two-worker families, and parents with limited English proficiency). Universal service provision in these cases, predicated on the view that all families need support and education, also aims to minimize any stigma that might be associated with a social service program. Maryland began its Family Support Centers for adolescent parents in order to capitalize on the state's urgent concern to mount new parenting and pregnancy prevention programs for that population. However, from the outset, it has been the intention of the formulators to make the program available to all families with young children in the neighborhoods where centers are located. Maryland has now funded one of its centers on that basis.

The states have also been faced with continuous decisions about how to use the scarce resources available to provide adequate training and technical assistance. State staff have taken on these responsibilities in their efforts to shape and strengthen the quality of local programs. This is perhaps the only available strategy in cases where there is no state mandate for local agencies to develop these programs. Even when such a mandate does exist, it is a useful strategy when introducing a new type of service that depends heavily on trained and sympathetic staff. However, because none of the states has a large staff connected with the initiative, they have developed creative ways to provide technical assistance through regional networks of programs, careful in-service training, provisions for older programs to help newer ones, and continuous efforts to keep in close touch with emerging field issues. In every state, the support and nurturing provided by state staff have been continuous and labor-intensive.

Decisions about the amount and sources of funding available for these initiatives are the result of a complex process influenced by each state's fiscal status, agency budget politics, and estimates of the amount necessary to provide the particular services. All of the states began their pilot programs with relatively small allocations of money from the sponsoring state agency. Initially this may have minimized any sense that the programs threatened the agency’s basic division of resources. Missouri's program is now being phased in on a state-wide basis, and the state education department reimburses local districts for the number of families they have served. This expansion has been accompanied by a reduction in the amount available per family; whether or not this has dulled the intervention will be tested by the state's planned evaluation of the expanded program. Minnesota funds the ECFE program through a combination of state education funds and a local levy. Funds are available on the basis of the number of families eligible rather than the number participating, and there is a minimum amount per district to accommodate rural areas with a small number of eligible families. Because, in many places, all who are eligible are not yet served, the allocation per family can be higher under this funding formula. Connecticut funds its small program through the agency budget. Maryland has put together a combination of state money allocated for social services, as well as grants from private foundations, and created a nonprofit organization called Friends of the Family. This effort highlights the philosophy that both the public and private sectors have a responsibility to families, and suggests to citizens and social service professionals that the new agency thus created will not do business as usual with families.

At present there is not a great deal of information available about the cost of quality services for different groups (Weiss & Halpern, 1988). Better budgetary data would be very useful to states currently considering the sponsorship of family support and education programs. Information about cost feasibility should contain a breakdown
of the costs of developing and of implementing different program alternatives because cost is necessarily a predominant consideration for policy makers. Ideally, future evaluators will design studies that address questions about which program components are necessary and sufficient to produce desired results. At present, state policy makers have little basis on which to make judgments about the potential effectiveness of such a program and about how to minimize costs without substantially risking program effectiveness.

GROWTH AND IMPLEMENTATION

While the four states began with a small number of pilot programs, two (Minnesota and Missouri) have moved fairly quickly from multiple pilots to full-scale, statewide implementation. In both cases, state staff were amazed at how quickly this expansion occurred after legislation passed. In Maryland, which is still in the pilot stage, substantial pressures are mounting for the program to be expanded to many more communities around the state. This stage of escalating interest and rapid expansion brings with it questions about how to manage program growth. Embedded in this larger question are a set of specific issues about how quickly a program can expand and still maintain quality; how to recruit and train staff in a new service genus; how to choose among competing agencies for appropriate homes for these programs; and how to build the necessary state infrastructure to monitor and support local programs.

The older programs have gone through a "famine to feast to famine" cycle of development. The Minnesota and Missouri initiatives began with few resources, then had to set up programs at many sites in a very short amount of time, and thus experienced some of the "famine to feast" problems associated with quick growth. The third stage of this cycle, the "feast to famine" part, occurs when the funding does not increase as additional responsibilities are added to the program; in Minnesota, for example, there is now some concern on this score with regard to the ECFE program.

As other states consider family support and education programming, it is important to keep these cycles in mind, and to raise two fundamental questions: What are the minimum kinds and amounts of services necessary for a program to have an impact within the community? And, ultimately, what is the minimum amount of funding necessary per program? Other, longer-term issues with financial implications include: the need to train a cadre of people able to serve both children and parents in an uncharted "discipline;" the need to offer competitive wages in order to attract and retain competent staff; and the need to determine the program resources that will effectively serve high-risk families with multiple stresses.

Now that these programs have developed a fragile toehold within their state agencies, they are beginning to confront some backlash. Family support programs, particularly the more mature efforts, have begun to compete for dollars that other agency staff would like to see allocated elsewhere. In the case of the education agencies, there are questions about whether to reallocate money, for example, to school-based programs for at-risk four- and five-year-old children. In the social service agencies, there is some tension about allocating money for prevention, when resources for crisis intervention and treatment are regarded as insufficient. Moreover, now that these programs have grown and acquired visibility at both the state and local levels, other parts of the sponsoring agency or, in some cases, outside agencies have begun to initiate struggles for control of the initiatives. If, as their planners hope, these programs eventually get more funding and begin to realign agency budgets so that more resources are available for preventive programs for young families, more opposition to their expansion is likely.

As noted previously, another critical issue that the states are facing, now that their
initiatives are operative, involves the capacity of these universal programs to reach and serve at-risk families within the community. Program providers are finding that it often requires substantial outreach to attract these families, and that the programs sometimes lack the financial and programmatic resources and specially trained staff necessary to serve and retain them. In Minnesota and Missouri, developers are realizing the need to adapt their programs to serve particular population groups, including, for example, illiterate parents, economically disadvantaged parents, and highly stressed and isolated families, who are sometimes reluctant to participate in such programs. These states are beginning to make provisions for special outreach and program services in addition to their regular programming. Both the Minneapolis and Duluth, Minnesota, ECFE programs, for example, offer a variety of services, including a hospital-based effort to reach new parents, and a particularly intensive program called Family School, to meet the needs of highly stressed families; Family School, in particular, requires substantially more resources per family than does the regular program. Overall, these state programs are based on the premise that all families can benefit from support. As the programs have matured, they have recognized that all families do not necessarily need and benefit from the same kind or intensity of support.

Finally, the states are now struggling with evaluation issues and decisions. All had an informal, and some a formal, process evaluation in place in their program formulation and early implementation stages. In several cases, particularly in Minnesota, the formative evaluations provided information that was helpful in strengthening the program and in indicating the types of families that the programs were able to reach. Each has also used data from the evaluation of other early childhood and family support programs to justify to legislative and agency staff the value of developing these new programs.

In these four states, there has been some concern about pressures to evaluate the initiative and demonstrate its effectiveness. These pressures, generally not strong ones, are felt in anticipation of legislators' demands for evidence that the program positively affects human development; however, in none of these states have legislators appropriated money for program evaluation. Nonetheless, there is a growing sense that lack of outcome evaluation may be the political equivalent of a Damocles' sword for these programs: Will legislators allocate the money elsewhere because the program cannot ultimately show policy-relevant outcomes (Weiss & Halpern, 1988)? Missouri is the only state that has conducted an evaluation to assess the short-term outcome of its pilot programs (Pfannenstiel & Seltzer, 1985); the other states are currently in the process of designing these evaluations. With a small state staff, it is very difficult to design an evaluation. At this juncture, these states could benefit from outside technical assistance to help them think through what is an appropriate, sensitive, and credible evaluation strategy for their particular initiatives.

THE FUTURE: TENSIONS IN CONTINUED GROWTH

The four states described here are pioneers, and we can learn much from their experiences. They are expanding state responsibility for families and crafting new relationships between family and government through the provision of a special type of family-oriented prevention program. As noted at the outset, many grass roots family resource programs have grown up outside of the mainstream of human services; these four state initiatives reflect the mainstreaming of family support and education programs through their incorporation into state education and the human service systems. In this mainstreaming process, the states have worked to avoid too much centralization, bureaucratization, and professionalization in the provision of programs; to
maintain community responsiveness and flexibility; and to emphasize participant empowerment and family strengths. As such, these state programs are informed by the principles outlined by Weissbourd and Kagan (1989) and others (Weiss & Halpern, 1988). They reflect a new way of doing business with families, particularly for publicly sponsored programs. These four state initiatives also suggest that there is a diversity of approaches states can take in their efforts to support families.

This paper has emphasized the growth of public interest in programs and policies to provide support and education to young families. Thus, it is plausible to assume that the four state initiatives outlined here will continue to grow and stabilize, and that more states will enter into this kind of programming. In concluding this paper, five areas will be identified in which challenges are inherent as family support and education programs proliferate and develop.

First, it is critical that support and education programs be understood and advocated within the context of an overall family policy that promotes the development of young children and families. If the United States does not have an explicit, well formulated, and coordinated family policy, it is all the more important for policy makers to recognize that support and education programs are not a substitute for other necessary family services, such as adequate health care, housing, food, child care, and income. In fact, the effectiveness of a family support program is at least partly dependent on the basic needs of participating families being met. At the community level, and perhaps at the state and federal levels, this means that analysts must examine where these programs fit within a broader continuum of preventive and rehabilitative services for children and families.

Second is the extremely complex and sensitive set of issues related to the conflict between family privacy on the one hand, and the provision of publicly supported family programs on the other. At this juncture, all of the state initiatives described here have voluntary participation; in the future, perhaps as part of welfare reform efforts, it is conceivable that such programs could be mandatory for particular population groups.

Third, as more states undertake these programs, it is likely that tensions will surface between state efforts to maintain quality control and local efforts to provide community-responsive and flexible programming to meet the needs of diverse families. Careful consideration should be given to how a state can monitor and maintain quality without overly homogenizing the programs. One of the principal strengths of the larger family support movement has been the recognition that, just as there is no one type of American family, there can be no one type of universally effective family program. Promoting quality while maintaining diversity, then, is one of the primary challenges inherent in new state initiatives.

A fourth set of issues for current and future generations of programs involves implementing a nondeficit service delivery ideology with different types of families. Specific challenges include: implementing nondeficit programs that emphasize family strengths with extremely high-risk families; balancing the sometimes competing needs of parents and children in high-risk families; determining the levels and types of resources necessary to serve different population groups effectively (Mustick & Halpern, in press; Weiss & Halpern, 1988); and ascertaining when the services of highly trained professionals are necessary. Careful examination of existing programs that are implementing nondeficit models and building this new ideology of service delivery is critical if a new generation of programs is to benefit from the hard lessons of earlier efforts.

A fifth set of issues, of particular importance if these programs are to attract greater public support, involves funding mechanisms. As noted previously, information about costs and budgetary feasibility is not available for family support and education
programs, a lack that has curtailed their consideration by some policy makers. Given current national and state climates in which efforts to limit costs are paramount, it is also important to explore creative financing strategies. These might include public-private partnerships and innovative packages similar to those being developed to finance low-income housing initiatives (Enterprise Foundation, 1988). Analysis of the current funding streams that might be used to underwrite family support and education programs would also be worthwhile. Exploration of cost and financing issues should also take into account the experience of the states described here and of many local programs. Specifically, it is important that programs have sufficient resources to serve diverse families, and to avoid a situation where "programs' operating conditions . . . mirror the resource scarcity and unpredictability of the lives of families served" (Musick & Halpern, in press).

Family support and education programs are undergoing a major and challenging transition to which the state initiatives described here attest. They are moving from being primarily locally-initiated programs to a stage where, through state sponsorship and funding, they are becoming a new element of American public policy for families. As this transition continues, and state bureaucracies assume more control and ownership of the programs, all concerned will need to work to maintain the flexibility, vitality, local responsiveness, and other underpinnings of the service delivery ideology that distinguishes these programs and contributes to their popularity and effectiveness.

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National Governors' Association & the Council of State Governments.


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