

## Maine Policy Review

---

Volume 17 | Issue 1

---

2008

# The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine Success Story

Sandra S. Butler

*University of Maine*, [sbutler@maine.edu](mailto:sbutler@maine.edu)

Luisa S. Deprez

*University of Southern Maine*

Follow this and additional works at: <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr>



Part of the [Social Policy Commons](#), and the [Social Welfare Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Butler, Sandra S., and Luisa S. Deprez. "The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine Success Story." *Maine Policy Review* 17.1 (2008) : 40-53, <https://digitalcommons.library.umaine.edu/mpr/vol17/iss1/7>.

This Article is brought to you for free and open access by DigitalCommons@UMaine.

# The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine Success Story

by Sandra S. Butler and Luisa S. Deprez



*Federal “welfare reform” enacted in 1996 strongly discouraged states from including post-secondary education in their welfare reform programs. As Sandra Butler and Luisa Deprez discuss here, Maine persevered through its Parent as Scholars (PaS) program to make college possible for low-income parents. In this article they report on their long-term follow-up of a cohort of PaS participants, all of them women, who have benefitted greatly from participation in the program. Butler and Deprez note that Maine’s PaS improves welfare recipients’ chances of moving out of poverty. The program itself remains as a model for other states. 🐉*

## INTRODUCTION

When Congress enacted “welfare reform” in 1996, decades of progress that had helped low-income mothers obtain a college education so that they could pull themselves and their children out of poverty were nearly eradicated. These families predominantly headed by women, among the poorest and most vulnerable in our country, were confronted with an almost unthinkable and daunting challenge: “end dependency” and “become self-sufficient” without access to advanced education. The new federal law—the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act (PRWORA)—strongly discouraged states from incorporating post-secondary education into their individual state welfare-reform programs and focused instead on “work-first” policies. These restrictions had a devastating impact on the three-quarters of a million welfare recipients in college: decreases in enrollment among recipients ranged from 29 percent to 82 percent (Finney 1998); hundreds of thousands of low-income mothers across the country were forced to drop out of college and find jobs in order to comply with strict work-first welfare rules.

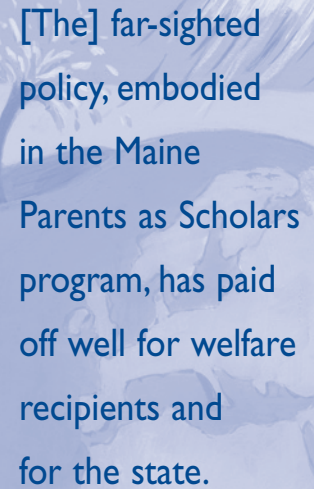
The 1996 welfare reform altered the fundamental basis of the social contract, in place since the enactment of the Social Security Act of 1935: it ended low-income parents’ entitlement to assistance, imposed a lifetime limit of five years of federally funded assistance, and dramatically changed the financial arrangement between the states and the federal government. Under PRWORA, states were allowed to design welfare programs that, in their judgment, best met the needs of their welfare population. Despite awareness that education is one of the most effective poverty-prevention programs and, in the long run, the least-expensive anti-poverty measure, all but two states—Maine and Wyoming—followed the federal, work-first lead and opted to restrict recipients’ access to higher education as an acceptable alternative to work. The fear of federal financial reprisal, coupled with the political hazards inherent in the failure to follow the path of tough, work-based reform, led most states to abandon programs offering post-secondary education to welfare recipients. As time passed, some states reconsidered these actions and sought to rein-

state some higher education options, but most remain time and focus limited (i.e., training for specific job categories, vocational education only).

Despite the pressure imposed by the federal law, however, the state of Maine persevered in its effort to continue 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 toward changing the position of women in the labor market, especially those that would relieve poverty for low-income single mothers. As we will show, this far-sighted policy, embodied in the Maine Parents as Scholars program, has paid off well for welfare recipients and for the state. We also reveal the importance of collaborative advocacy efforts that work to ensure the creation of programs and policies that reflect the state’s concern for its citizenry.

## SETTING THE STAGE FOR ENACTMENT

In the early 1990s, the Women’s Economic Security Project (WESP)—a coalition of groups in Maine representing women, low-income families, religious and labor organizations, and social service agencies—began an aggressive campaign to counter the powerful anti-welfare sentiment sweeping the country. When threatened with the passage of PRWORA in 1996, they escalated their activities, taking their campaign “on the road.” To engage news media boards, legislators, and community groups in dialogues about welfare, women, and the economy, campaign representatives redirected traditional stereotypical individualistic claims about welfare receipt back to the broader societal problems of unemployment, low-wage jobs, gender inequity, and poverty. Everywhere they went, they reiterated the same message: welfare reform must be about raising families out of poverty, and this won’t happen until we change the economic position of women in the labor



[The] far-sighted policy, embodied in the Maine Parents as Scholars program, has paid off well for welfare recipients and for the state.

market. Securing access to post-secondary education for low-income families was high on the list of necessary outcomes. While it is always difficult to evaluate the impact of such a campaign, it is clear that the public debate about welfare in Maine was better informed than it was in many other states. It was also better organized and more broadly constructed. The coalition's determined and systematic effort to change the terms of the debate, coupled with an understanding of the crucial connection between women's economic security, labor market access and success, and post-secondary education, helped to create a political climate that enabled passage of legislation that would honor these connections.

The Parents as Scholars program exemplifies the state's promotion of a welfare-reform strategy that in its judgment would best serve the goals of moving families out of poverty and empowering them to secure their own futures.

Thus in 1997, the Maine legislature rejected the route prescribed by PRWORA and enacted the Parents as Scholars (PaS) program after hearing testimony from many welfare recipients about the value of education and about their difficulties in obtaining it. Parents as Scholars was established as a separate, state-funded program—outside of the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program—limited to 2,000 TANF-eligible participants. Enrollees in two- or four-year post-secondary education programs receive the same cash benefits as they would through TANF and the same supportive services they would be eligible for in ASPIRE<sup>1</sup> (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 range of student

services available from the post-secondary institutions they attend (personal counseling, on-campus health care, job opportunities, job-search assistance, campus housing, child care, financial aid, support groups, academic advising, wellness facilities and programs). They are required to “work,” but can count both school and study time toward these hours and are expected to complete their degree within a reasonable time while maintaining at least a 2.0 grade point average.

Maine took a bold step of enacting a law to institutionalize access to post-secondary education for low-income parents. This approach presumed that when PaS families left welfare they would earn higher wages, be more likely to have employment-based health insurance, and be less likely to return to welfare than their TANF counterparts. As our forthcoming discussion will show, these expectations have been realized. But what caused Maine to take a path different from so many other states? The answer involves a mix of historical, technical, and political factors.

Advocates in Maine had three points in their favor when they began efforts to enact the PaS legislation in early 1997. First, Maine had a tradition of providing access to two- and four-year post-secondary education in its welfare-to-work programs,<sup>2</sup> and fundamental access was intact at the time that PRWORA was implemented. Because post-secondary education had been part of the welfare-to-work landscape for a long time, a pool of dedicated and eloquent spokeswomen rose up to offer first-hand evidence of the critical importance of this approach to self-sufficiency.

Secondly, WESP conducted a campaign that shifted the terms of the welfare debate from a focus on behavior to a broader understanding of how the economy keeps women, and particularly single parents, poor. In 1994, WESP surveyed 3,000 AFDC families (Butler and Nevin 1997; Butler and Seguino 1998). Stephanie Seguino, an economist then at the Margaret Chase Smith Policy Center, was asked to place the experiences of the survey respondents into the context of a labor market analysis for all Maine women. The resulting report, *Living on the Edge: Women Working and Providing for Families in the Maine Economy*, was groundbreaking in its description of the labor market opportunities available and not available to low-skilled working women. Replete with evidence that nearly

two-thirds of single parents with young children lived below the poverty level and that the average wage of welfare recipients was \$5.37 per hour, the report dramatically reinforced the point that “real” welfare reform had to focus on the condition of women in the labor market (Seguino 1995).

Armed with this new evidence, members of WESP made visits to the editorial boards of every major Maine newspaper, held a series of educational lunches for legislators, and dispatched volunteer members of a speaker’s bureau throughout the state to engage community groups in dialogue about welfare, women, and the economy. Dozens of women came to the State House to oppose stereotype-based legislation calling for family caps, “learnfare,” and time limits. Their message was clear: welfare reform must raise families out of poverty, which requires changing the economic position of women in the labor market.

In late 1996, another event occurred that had a significant impact on the PaS legislation. An employee from a community action program in the Portland area organized a “Walk-a-Mile” project, pairing legislators with welfare recipients throughout the state. This project’s purpose was to help lawmakers better understand welfare by spending a month sharing experiences with a partner who was on welfare; more than 50 legislators participated. By sheer coincidence, the ranking Republican member of the legislature’s Health and Human Services Committee was paired with a young woman who was struggling to overcome bureaucratic obstacles preventing her from enrolling in college. The young mother realized that college was her only hope of escaping poverty, and together they worked to get her enrolled with the services she needed. That experience made a lasting impression, and the legislator became a strong ally of the PaS effort.

Thus, by the time that the PaS legislation was presented to legislators in early 1997, a considerable amount of political groundwork had already been laid. A broad coalition of groups and individuals including representatives from the university and technical college systems quickly organized in support of the bill. After hearing from dozens of people, including powerful testimony from many past and present welfare recipients, the bill won strong bipartisan support from the Health and Human Services Committee. While the

Department of Human Services was initially reluctant to take the untested step of using its maintenance-of-effort (MOE)<sup>3</sup> dollars, it was eventually persuaded to do so and an agreement was reached.

A final advantage was the active role that the bill’s sponsor played in its success. At the same time that this bill was introduced, the Maine legislature made history by electing a majority of women to legislative leadership positions. One of those leaders, the senate majority leader, was the sponsor of the Parents as Scholars legislation. She lobbied tirelessly in support of the bill with her colleagues, in the press, and with Maine’s Commissioner of Human Services. Her commitment to the goal of helping low-income women escape poverty through access to education never faltered and her tenacity paid off.

Maine women have benefitted tremendously from the work of legislative leaders and advocacy groups who understand the significance of women’s economic roles in families today and are committed to bettering their economic status. The Parents as Scholars program exemplifies the state’s promotion of a welfare-reform strategy that in its judgment would best serve the goals of moving families out of poverty and empowering them to secure their own futures. It is to the accomplishment of these goals that we now turn.

#### ASSESSING THE PARENTS AS SCHOLARS PROGRAM OVER TIME

Since 1999, we have been collecting data from one cohort of PaS participants. We have surveyed members of this cohort three times—in 1999, 2001, and 2006—to learn about their educational experiences, employment status, and family life. We began our inquiry two years after the program’s inception, when, in collaboration with the Department of Human Services, we sent a 19-page survey to each of the 848 adults then participating in the PaS program. From this initial mailing, we received 222 completed surveys, giving us a response rate of 26 percent. Names were not linked to this original survey, but we invited interested respondents to provide us with their names and addresses in a separate mailing if they were interested in being involved in an ongoing longitudinal study. The vast majority (n = 192, 86 percent) provided us

with their contact information. We wrote to these 192 individuals one year later (2000) requesting their participation in a second survey; 127 individuals (66 percent) were located and responded affirmatively at that time. One year later (2001), we sent a second survey to this sub-sample of 127 and received 65 completed surveys—a response rate of 51 percent. This second survey provided us with data about how these individuals were faring as they completed, or neared completing, their degrees and moved into the labor force.

In September 2006, we sent a third survey to the 65 individuals who had responded in 2001. Even with contact information on friends or family members who would know how to locate respondents if they moved, we were still not successful in locating many of the individuals in our sample. Of the 40 we located, 20 completed the survey (31 percent for the full sample of 65, and 50 percent for those who actually received the survey). It was not surprising that we lost track of many individuals over the years, since low-income families frequently move; that half those whom we were able to find, seven years after our first contact in 1999, were still willing to complete a lengthy survey instrument is remarkable and attests to the respondents' commitment to the PaS program and of their desire to let people know of their experiences.

We have reported on the findings from the 1999 and 2001 surveys elsewhere (see Butler and Deprez 2002; Butler, Deprez and Smith 2004; Deprez and Butler 2007, 2001; Smith, Deprez and Butler 2003). In this article, our focus is on what we have learned from our most recent survey and what it tells us about the longer-term impact of higher education for low-income individuals and their families. Quantitative data were analyzed through descriptive, t-test, and chi-square statistics. The qualitative data from the open-ended questions was subjected to a thematic analysis using an open-coding process (Strauss and Corbin 1990).

To determine whether there were significant differences between those individuals who responded to the 2006 survey and those who did not, we compared the 2001 and 2006 respondents on a variety of variables (e.g., employment status, status in PaS program, whether or not sole caretaker of children); the samples did not differ significantly

except on the variable of age. Respondents to the 2006 survey were three years older on average than non-respondents. Similar to the 2001 survey, this third survey was nine pages long and comprised both close-ended and open-ended questions pertaining to the respondents' employment and financial status, education and experience in PaS, and how they assessed their current lives and goals. Given that we had first contacted these individuals in 1999 while they were pursuing their degrees, we were especially interested to learn about their lives several years after graduation.

### SAMPLE DESCRIPTION

All 2006 respondents were women as was the case in 2001. (The sample in 1999 included seven men.) Nine of the 2006 respondents were married or partnered; eight were separated, divorced, or widowed (and not remarried); and three were single and had never married. They reported having one to three children, with a sample average of 1.95 children; 18 of the respondents (90 percent) still had at least one child under 18 in their households. Half the sample (10) reported being the only adult in the household, while the remaining 10 respondents lived with one other adult. Similarly, among the 19 respondents who were employed, nine were the sole earners in the household, while 10 reported a second wage earner.

Ninety percent of the respondents had received their degrees (either two-year or four-year) and were employed; two respondents had not completed their degrees, but they both continued to take classes when they were able to. One respondent had dropped out of PaS due to a disability; this woman received Supplemental Security Income (SSI) and was the only respondent in 2006 who was not employed. The other respondent who did not complete her degree had left school and the PaS program when she found going to school, working, and raising children was more than she could handle at one time. She was one of the few respondents who felt as though her situation was worse in 2006 than five years earlier, but she hoped to eventually complete her degree. Among the 18 who had finished their degrees through the PaS program, 10 had completed associate-level degrees (56 percent) and eight had completed bachelor-level degrees (44

percent). Seventy-five percent of the 2006 sample (15) had obtained their degree by 2001, and thus had been out of school for five years when they completed this most recent survey. Seven respondents (35 percent) had pursued additional education or training since receiving their degrees through PaS.

## EMPLOYMENT

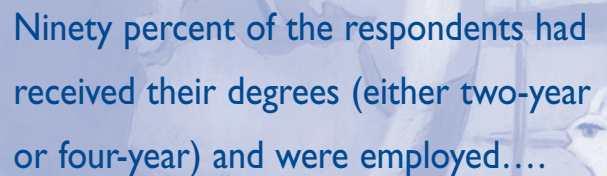
Nineteen of the 20 respondents (95 percent) were employed at the time of the 2006 survey. On average, they worked 38 hours per week with wages ranging from \$7.80 to \$23.81 per hour. (Six respondents reported their earnings in salary; for ease of comparison these were converted to hourly wages. Salaries ranged from \$26,000 to \$46,700 per year.) The median wage was \$14.31 per hour, an increase over the \$11.75 median wage reported by the entire sample in 2001. Among the 18 respondents who were working in both 2001 and 2006, there was a statistically significant increase in average wages from \$10.38 to \$14.92. Moreover, there appeared to be considerable stability in employment, with respondents reporting having been in their jobs for an average of three years.

Nearly all the respondents were employed in jobs that provided benefits (94.7 percent), but 57.9 percent of them (11) could not afford to take advantage of all the benefits offered. While only three respondents could not afford to pay the employee portion of health benefits for themselves, 10 were unable to take advantage of family health plans. Seven of these respondents received MaineCare benefits for their children. Most respondents were in jobs that offered paid vacation (90 percent) and paid sick leave (84 percent). It is noteworthy that the level of benefits received by respondents in 2006 had increased substantially since 2001. For example, among the 20 respondents, twice as many received health benefits through employment in 2006 as compared to 2001, and those in jobs offering sick leave also nearly doubled.

## LEVEL OF ECONOMIC SECURITY

We were curious to learn about the economic security and stability for this group of low-income mothers who had had access to post-secondary

education. Only three (16.7 percent) of the 18 respondents who had completed their degrees had received TANF right after graduation, and all three reported being employed while receiving the welfare benefits. Of these three respondents, one had received TANF for five months, one for one year, and one for six years. As reported in 2006, the respondent who had received TANF for six years after graduation, worked two part-time jobs in a technical field (soil and plant technology) in which she had gotten her associate's degree. Making from \$9 to \$10.50 at these jobs, she continued to struggle to make ends meet, although she had been off TANF for over 18 months at the time of the survey. Among all 20 respondents, only two (10 percent) reported needing to return to TANF after having stopped receiving benefits in the preceding five years. None of the respondents received TANF at the time of the survey.



Ninety percent of the respondents had received their degrees (either two-year or four-year) and were employed....

Among other government-sponsored programs, two respondents received food stamps, seven received MaineCare, two received Women, Infants and Children (WIC) assistance, and one received a housing subsidy in 2006. There was a reduction in the use of government assistance from 2001 to 2006 for all the respondents. Five years earlier, for example, among the 20 respondents, two had received TANF, seven had received food stamps, one had received WIC, 11 had received Medicaid (now MaineCare), and six had received a child care subsidy. (No respondent received a child care subsidy in 2006, and we did not ask specifically about housing subsidies in 2001.) In 2006, fewer respondents used child care than in 2001, no doubt because their children were more likely to be school-aged. Nonetheless, four of the five of those who did need child care (80 percent), continued to face problems in securing it. Affordability and availability of quality care remained central problems for these working mothers.

TABLE 1: **Financial Difficulties in Preceding Five Years**

Financial problem experienced	2001 (%)	2006 (%)
Fell behind on rent/mortgage	20	35
Received utilities cut-off notice	35	45
Had utilities shut off	10	5
Evicted from apartment	10	5
Used homeless shelter	0	0
Moved in with family/friends	10	20
Used food pantry/food bank	20	15
Skipped meals to save money	25	25
Fell behind on car payments	25	20
Had transportation problems (other than car payment)	30	30
Applied for General Assistance	15	5
Borrowed significant money from family/friend	30	10
Unable to get medical help for self	5	10
Unable to get medical help for child	0	15
Unable to get dental help for self	45	20
Unable to get dental help for child	10	10
Lost day care	0	5

Despite the seeming increase in financial security from 2001 to 2006, many of the respondents continued to live very close to the margin. In both 2001 and 2006, we asked respondents to let us know if they had experienced particular financial hardships within the preceding five years, and in both surveys respondents indicated considerable hardship. (See Table 1.) While respondents were earning higher wages at jobs that provided more extensive benefits, many were continuing to have a difficult time meeting basic needs. This is perhaps not surprising given that the median wage of \$14.31 per hour for 2006 respondents is nearly two dollars per hour less than the livable wage (amount needed to meet a basic needs budget) calculated by the Maine Center for Economic Policy (MECEP) in 2006 for a single parent with one child (\$16.17) and nearly five dollars per hour less than that calculated for a family of three (\$19.20) (Cervone et al. 2007).

## RESPONDENT REFLECTIONS ON THEIR LIVES

In the final pages of the 2006 survey, we asked the respondents several open-ended questions about how their lives and goals had changed over the preceding five years, what obstacles and successes they had experienced, and what they envisioned for themselves and their families five years in the future. The narrative responses to these questions were examined for recurring themes. Three thematic categories emerged, based in part on how we posed our questions to respondents: “So Many Positive Changes,” “Ongoing Struggles,” and “Aspirations for the Future.” These three themes are described below, illustrated with respondent quotes and followed by respondent reflections on the PaS program.

### *So Many Positive Changes*

All but two of the respondents (90 percent) described positive changes in their lives over the preceding five years. They reported promotions at work, buying their own homes, that their children were doing well at school, and that their financial situations were substantially improved. In response to the question regarding changes in their lives since the previous survey five years earlier, most respondents listed many positive events. For example, a 43-year-old single woman with one child, an associate’s degree in nursing and working as a registered nurse, stated:

In the last five years I purchased a used car and just this week I purchased a brand new car.... I was promoted last year to relief supervisor for my branch office of Visiting Nurses.... My daughter is now 11 years old and in the 6th grade. She is an A student.

In a similarly positive vein, a 31-year-old single woman with one child and a bachelor’s degree in mental health and human services responded as follows:

I have left an abusive relationship, which has greatly benefited myself and my daughter. I previously was on medication for depression and now am med-free. I am more healthy physically, emotionally and spiritually. I have control over my life, my finances, my choices



and decisions. My daughter has just started high school and her first job and has been working four months and on the honor roll.

In terms of her financial situation, this same respondent wrote, “Even though I had a setback when I left my last relationship three years ago I am back on track. [I] have perfect credit history and have almost tripled my income.”

Similarly, a 42-year-old, formerly married case manager, with one child and a four-year degree in administration of justice, compared her current financial situation to her former one and reflected on the improvements:

I am making \$33,000 per year compared to about \$5,000 per year when I was a waitress. My quality of life is so much greater. I now have a health care plan, retirement plan. I have security and stability in my life.

A 36-year-old respondent, who had re-partnered after her divorce, now lived in a blended family with four children and two incomes and worked as a U.S. postal service carrier for a salary of \$42,000; she had received a four-year degree in social and behavioral sciences. She wrote in glowing terms about her life:

My goodness, where do I begin? My life is great. Yeah, sometimes, the hum-drum of everyday routine dulls me into asking, “why?” But I remind myself how very blessed I am and because of that, so are all those around me. Ever since getting the postal job, my life has changed much for the good. I’m in line for training to become managerial staff. I’m in no hurry, as mail carrying is fun...and I get paid nine and a half hours a day no matter how long it takes me to deliver... I have more time to do other things. My children are growing up. They are healthy and strong.... None of them use drugs or drink alcohol (that I know of). They are 17, 15, 14, and 13, three boys and a girl. My husband has a wonderful job that he loves...I wish I could describe to you what life is like for me now: How happy and well-adjusted we seem.

With some awe, this respondent compares her family’s financial situation in 2006 to that of what they had known previously:

I cannot believe that we survived on less than \$1,000 a month, once upon a time. Now, goodness, between my salary and his, we bring home \$4,000 a month in wages. Plus another \$1,200 from him being a widower and more even from odd jobs he does on the side. We have excellent credit.

But despite these very positive changes reported by most respondents, there were still many challenges in their lives, often caused by incomes that were still not high enough to cover their families’ basic needs.

### *Ongoing Struggles*

Among the 20 respondents, nearly two-thirds (65 percent) wrote about financial challenges in their lives. Just three respondents (15 percent) stated that their lives were more difficult than in 2001, but others continued to struggle to make ends meet. Among the three respondents who believed they were worse off financially than five years earlier were the two who had not finished their degrees and the one described earlier who had received TANF for six years after completing her degree. One respondent had not completed her degree due to a back injury. Once she began to receive SSI, she was no longer eligible for the PaS program. This 48-year-old single mother with two children described her situation in less positive terms than those respondents described in the previous section:

My health is not good. I have arthritis and back pain that is chronic and debilitating to me. Panic disorder keeps me housebound at times. I live in a three-bedroom house with my two girls, one a freshman and the other a senior in high school. They are great. My greatest problem is financial. I am almost \$10,000 in credit card debt, along with \$5,000 in student loans. I cannot make my basic living expenses most months, so require credit cards to pick up the slack.... There is no way I can ever pay my debts back.

The respondent mentioned earlier, who had an associate's degree in plant and soil technology and was working two part-time jobs, also struggled financially. At the time of the survey, she was 40 years old, divorced, and with three children who had all recently moved out of her home. She described her situation as difficult:

My health is still OK, but I have no health insurance now. I still reside at the same address but I'm behind on my rent, and I have no heating oil for the winter. All my children have moved out. My son went to college for which we had to borrow huge sums of money. I am unable to help him at all financially. My daughters moved out at ages 15 and 16 and now at 17 are finally in fairly stable environments. I am unable to help them financially either.

While she loved her work, she believed she would need to find different employment in the future that she would be physically able to do and that would provide greater financial reward:

Five years ago, my goals and aspirations were to have a career I enjoyed and would support me. I have now a career I love, but I cannot support myself, nor can I fulfill the physical obligations required for my career for many more years. My goals and aspirations are now to find other employment that will provide me with greater financial income, insurance benefits, and less physical labor, not to mention retirement plans. I think I will have to sacrifice employment satisfaction for financial security. It makes me sad to have to compromise so.

Even those respondents who felt they were much better off than five years earlier still could not meet all their basic needs. For example, the 42-year-old case manager quoted in the previous section could not afford health insurance for her daughter. She wrote about her worries as follows:

My only concern in the past few years has been around medical insurance. I make too

much money to qualify for MaineCare and I spend all that I make in rent, utilities, car payments, food, and clothes. There isn't any left for \$400 a month medical insurance for a very healthy child.... I have a hard time paying for her prescriptions: one is \$155 per month and one \$20 per month. I pay out of pocket for her doctor visits, which cost me less than \$400 per month.

A 36-year-old respondent raising two children on her own reported the difficulties of making ends meet as an administrative assistant—a job she had held for six years—making \$14.20 per hour, a wage that is considerably less than the \$19.20 per hour that MECEP estimates is needed for a family of three to meet basic needs (Cervone et al. 2007). She described how her life had changed since the 2001 survey:

I have since bought my own home, it was cheaper than rent. I still receive no financial support from the kids' father, so things are very difficult financially. I am in the process of looking for a second part-time job to get me through the winter months.

She stated that she was financially better off than five years earlier, but that her bills were also bigger. She liked the company for which she worked, but felt her wages were too low. She noted that she had learned over the five years "that a two-year degree does not get a high-paying job a single parent needs to survive."

### *Aspirations for the Future*

We asked the respondents to tell us how their goals and aspirations had changed over the past five years and to envision what they hoped would be true for themselves and their families five years in the future. More than one-third wrote about how their confidence had increased and consequently their goals had changed—heightened—since the previous survey. For example, several respondents commented that they had moved beyond the central goal of survival, which had been their primary focus five years earlier. A 38-year-old, partnered mother of one child, who was pursuing a master's degree at the time of the survey and worked as a clinical intern, described her goals as follows:

“They have become more attainable. They are also more based on life-long dreams and personal interests vs. just surviving.” Similarly, a remarried 41-year-old mother of two children, who worked as an assistant store manager, reported: “Now I look forward to a future growing old with the ones I love. Before I was just looking forward to surviving to the next day.”

Nine respondents (45 percent) wrote specifically about what they hoped for in terms of their careers. One 39-year-old woman, a registered nurse case manager with a salary of \$45,000, stated that in five years she hoped to “either work in or own my own nurse consulting firm” as she really loved “research, critical thinking, and education.” The large majority (80 percent) of respondents wrote about their hopes for their children’s successes over the next five years and nearly as many (75 percent) described personal goals for themselves (e.g., buying homes, finding life partners). For example, a 35-year-old married accounting associate with two children and an associate’s degree in business management provided a multifaceted vision for her life in five years time:

There is so much I envision for my life in the next five years. Both my girls will be in school (9 and 16), which will put a little more cash in our wallets—no more paying \$120 a week for child care. More time for me to pursue a better-paying, more-rewarding job, to pick my hobbies back up like singing at weddings and other functions, building a garage and patio. I want to be more financially stable in five years. My oldest daughter has quite an interest in clothes design—I see her actively pursuing a college education and career in design. I see my 9-year-old wanting to be just like her big sister. I see my husband continuing his career as an electrician—taking a more serious role in the family business by becoming a master and taking over management of the business. I really would like to own my own business but that is a goal that is much longer term, maybe 10 to 15 years from now.

Other respondents were more modest in their expectations, hoping for increased stability finan-

cially and personally. For example, a single, 31-year-old social services worker with one child had the following hopes:

Five years from now, I am hoping that my daughter will be in college and I can assist/support her financially. I don’t see myself changing jobs or getting a huge salary increase—but would like to have my student loans paid, and be in my own home. I would like to have a savings account that has something in it, so I’m not living paycheck to paycheck. And I want to be in a healthy relationship and possibly get married.

Another respondent raising three children on her own at 37, with a bachelor’s degree in sociology and working as a child support enforcement agent, also had similar aspirations that she kept simple and realistic:

I hope to own my own home and be in a healthy long-term relationship. I hope that my oldest child will be finished with college and living independently. Right now the biggest thing I am trying to achieve in my life is balance: financial, emotional, physical.

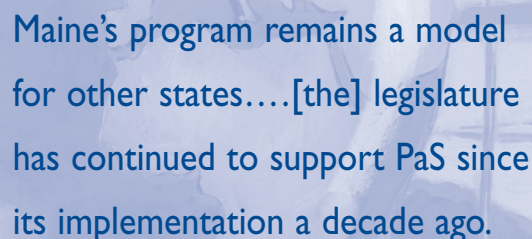
The respondent narratives paint a picture of families that are better off than they had been before receiving their education, yet still struggling to make ends meet, often as single mothers.

## IMPACT OF PARENTS AS SCHOLARS PROGRAM

The respondent narratives paint a picture of families that are better off than they had been before receiving their education, yet still struggling to make ends meet, often as single mothers. They continued to set new goals for their children and for themselves,

even as they were aware of how far they had already come. The following ambitious, yet cautious, quote from the 42-year-old case worker, illustrates this appreciation of her family's progress to date, in part due to the PaS program, along with her hopes for what her family's next steps might be:

I would like to continue my education. I would like to work on my master's degree. If my daughter decides to go to college next year, I will need to help her financially so I will wait on my degree. I have strongly encouraged her to continue on with her education; however, she may need a year or two to realize how important a degree is to her. I would like to buy a house. Even though I qualify for some programs that would help me financially to buy my own house, I still have not been able to save money for a down payment and closing costs. I live a very comfortable life. We do not go without and I am very grateful for that; however, we do not have any extra to save. My life is 10 times what it would have been had I continued on without an education. I still have a ways to go. I would like to some day be successful in my personal relationships. I have been divorced for 14 years. My daughter and I have a very close, good relationship, which I attribute to several classes I was required to take for my degree. I became a better parent.



Maine's program remains a model for other states....[the] legislature has continued to support PaS since its implementation a decade ago.

Six respondents (30 percent) wrote quite specifically about what the PaS program had meant to them and their hope that it would continue to help women such as themselves in the future. A 43-year-old single

mother of one, with an associate's degree in nursing wrote: "PaS was the best program. I would like to see it continue.... I was in the top of my class with the highest GPA of 3.8. I don't even want to think of where I would be now without PaS." Even the respondent with the degree in plant and soil technology who continued to struggle financially with two part-time jobs spoke of PaS in glowing terms: "[The PaS program] was a huge success for me in that it gave me direction, self-confidence, and the helping hand I needed to make a better life for myself."

Many respondents credited higher education for turning their lives around in dramatic and positive ways. This is clearly illustrated by a quote from the UPS worker presented in the section on positive change:

I sincerely hope PaS is not cut. I wish more people knew about it. College was the best thing to ever happen to me. It was so hard and so stressful, but even though I often didn't think I could do it, I did. I'm a good person now. I have a good job, a good man, and a good family. I have had the complete opposite of all and so know that what I have is good. People tell me how much they like my children. I have lots of friends. I am not afraid. I am not a prisoner of my head anymore.

The reflections of the survey respondents mirror what has been found in the literature. Higher education is one of the most promising pathways out of poverty and one of most promising pathways to gender equity. Although the complexity of gender equity is compounded by issues beyond education such as pay equity, segregated labor, sex discrimination, and comparable worth, for women, the need for an education to increase earnings, escape poverty, and provide adequately for their families is inescapable. In an exhaustive contemporary study tracing trends in the well-being of American women from 1970 to 1995, economist Francine Blau affirmed the well-known strong positive associations between educational attainment and labor force participation, increased earnings, and general well-being. She found that although women have made substantial progress over the last 25 years, it has been the rising rate of participation in higher education that has made the most difference,

especially in wage gains and increased labor force participation (Blau 1998). A five-state study conducted in 1997 found that a college education enabled the majority of women surveyed (81 percent) to become financially independent; an average of 70 percent attributed their success in securing employment to a college degree (One Dupont Welfare Reform Coalition 1997). This corroborates the findings of Kathleen Harris's study of welfare recipients (1996) that established the importance of post-secondary education in reducing reliance on welfare.

Additionally, discussions that we have had with Department of Health and Human Services' (DHHS) staff and PaS program participants in Maine reveal similar findings, including participants' increased self-esteem and confidence, fewer family crises, and strengthened family interactions particularly around issues related to education. Children of participants experience a heightened quality of life and have elevated aspirations and comfort with higher education. DHHS staff find that participants require fewer support services and less employee time and energy; employers have access to a more well-rounded and educated work force; and the state of Maine sees genuine prospects of higher earning power and a stronger tax base along with a more educated citizenry.

## POLICY IMPLICATIONS

The results from this longitudinal study of one cohort of PaS participants provides continuing evidence of the importance of higher education as a key factor to securing increased economic independence for Maine's low-income families. In the five years that passed between the 2001 and 2006 survey, we saw significant improvement in the wage levels, access to employment benefits, and general family stability and happiness in our cohort of PaS participants. Granted, many remained among the "working poor," with wages still below those estimated by MECEP as necessary to meet living expenses (Cervone et al. 2007). But, they appear to be far better off than if they had not pursued post-secondary degrees

The importance of post-secondary education was already clear in our analysis of the 2001 survey, at which time we compared the wages of our cohort

(who had been in PaS in 1999) with those of a sample of individuals who had been receiving TANF in 1997 and who had not been a part of PaS (Butler, Deprez, and Smith 2004; Pohlmann 2002). This comparison revealed that wages of our PaS cohort were more than \$2.00 per hour higher than those of the TANF sample, and importantly, the chances of the PaS respondents being in jobs with benefits were far greater, especially for those in our sample who had graduated. Moreover, from 1997 to 2002, 30 percent of the sample of individuals who had been receiving TANF in 1997 needed to return to welfare again some time after leaving (Pohlmann 2002), twice the rate of return to TANF that we found in our 2006 survey of PaS participants.

Maine's program remains a model for other states. Fortunately, Maine's legislature has continued to support PaS since its implementation a decade ago. This investment of state dollars appeals to the common sense of Maine citizens and supports state efforts to build human capital. We see these efforts expanding in the first regular session of the 123rd Legislature with the passage of LD 1884, "An Act to Create the Competitiveness Training Fund and Improve Maine Employment Security Programs." This legislation allocates \$3 million to the Department of Labor to support the preparation of people with earnings below 200 percent of the poverty level for jobs in high-growth, high-wage industry clusters by helping them to pursue post-secondary education. In addition, SP 717, "Joint Study Order Establishing the Commission to Develop Strategies to Increase Postsecondary Access, Retention and Completion for Low-Wage, Low-Skilled Adults," introduced by Senate President Beth Edmunds, was also enacted by the 123rd Legislature in Spring 2007 (Maine Women's Lobby and Policy Center 2007). This legislation authorizes the formation of a commission charged with making recommendations to the legislature on ways to improve access to higher education for low-income students (C. Hastedt personal communication).


Expanding access to higher education for Maine citizens not otherwise eligible for TANF only makes sense. When asked what parts of the PaS program had been most helpful to them as they pursued their degrees, the 2006 survey respondents cited MaineCare

(90 percent), assistance with books (90 percent), child care subsidy (85 percent), and transportation subsidy (75 percent) as even more important than the monthly cash benefit (60 percent). Providing such supports to an increased number of low-wage workers in Maine will undoubtedly create more success stories similar to those documented in this article.

But we would be remiss if we did not also highlight the financial struggles reported by many of the respondents. Wages, although significantly higher than five years earlier, remain too low for many to meet all their basic needs. We applaud the passage of LD 1445, “An Act to Calculate the Livable Wage and Measure the Bureaucratic Costs to Subsidize Workers Paid Less than a Livable Wage,” as a first step toward recognizing the need for higher wages in Maine. Furthermore, we are encouraged by the passage of LD 1697, “An Act to Ensure Fair Wages.” This will increase the minimum wage in Maine to \$7.25 in 2008 and \$7.50 in 2009 (LD 1697, Public Law, Chapter 640). Such increases would “trickle up” to affect the respondents of our survey who earn more, but remain among the working poor who are unable to meet all their living expenses.

For those survey respondents still needing child care, access, quality, and affordability remained concerns. Increasing affordability and accessibility of child care remains a daunting problem for working parents throughout the state; this issue also deserves focused attention by our legislature. Providing health insurance for their children remained out of reach for some respondents, although access to MaineCare helped. Until we as a nation join the rest of the industrialized world by providing health care universally, it is important that Maine continue to expand public health care programs to low-income workers (e.g., MaineCare, Dirigo Health).

Maine’s decision in 1996 to resist the work-first philosophy of national welfare reform was visionary. Instead of rejecting education, Maine committed to continuing the route it had embarked upon 15 years earlier—a long-term vision to help low-income mothers move into and sustain themselves and their families in the workforce. The idea was novel at the time and still is: a humane and thoughtful approach to welfare reform. Maine’s Parents as Scholars program provides welfare recipients with access to post-

secondary education programs that can improve their prospects for a life without poverty. While the program is not an absolute guarantee of escaping poverty, low-income women and their families face greatly enhanced chances of secure living when their opportunities for obtaining and maintaining successful, supportive, and fulfilling work are increased. 

## ENDNOTES

1. ASPIRE (Additional Support for People in Retraining and Employment) is Maine’s welfare-to-work program.
2. In 1982 when the first Work Incentive Demonstration (WIN) projects were announced by then President Reagan, advocates persuaded the Maine Department of Human Services to take this opportunity to demonstrate the anti-poverty impact of providing access to post-secondary education to welfare recipients. This program, originally called “WEET,” was eventually renamed “ASPIRE.” Throughout the 1980s, the program enjoyed considerable popularity, but as the recession of the early 1990s took hold and the national attitude toward welfare began to shift dramatically, it came under criticism for being “too generous.”
3. To receive a full TANF block grant, a state must satisfy a maintenance-of-effort (MOE) requirement by expending at least 80 percent of a historic spending level (or 75 percent, if the state meets federal TANF participation rate requirements) for certain qualified expenditures for eligible families.

## REFERENCES

- Blau, Francine D. 1998. “Trends in the Well-Being of American Women, 1970–1995.” *Journal of American Economic Literature* 36:112–165.
- Butler, Sandra S. and Luisa S. Deprez. 2002. “Something Worth Fighting For: Higher Education for Women on Welfare.” *Affilia: Journal of Women & Social Work* 17(1): 30–54.
- Butler, Sandra S., Luisa S. Deprez and Rebekah J. Smith. 2004. “Education: The One Factor that Can Keep Me from Sliding into Hopeless Poverty.” *Journal of Poverty: Innovations in Social Political, & Economic Inequalities* 8(2): 1–24.

Butler, Sandra S. and Mary K. Nevin. 1997. "Welfare Mothers Speak: One State's Effort to Bring Recipient Voices to the Welfare Debate." *Journal of Poverty: Innovations in Social, Political and Economic Inequalities* 1(2): 25–61.

Butler, Sandra S. and Stephanie Seguino. 2000. "Working in Coalition: Advocates and Academics Join Together to Promote Welfare Policies." *Journal of Community Practice* 7(4): 1–20.

Cervone, Ed, Judy Ward, Lisa Pohlmann and Christopher St. John. 2007. "Getting By: Maine Livable Wages in 2006." *Choices: Ideas for Shared Prosperity* 13(6): 1–6.

Deprez, Luisa S. and Sandra S. Butler. 2001. "In Defense of Women's Security: Securing Access to Higher Education under Welfare Reform." *Social Politics* 8(2): 210–227.

Deprez, Luisa and Sandra S. Butler. 2007. "Higher Education and Well Being." *Amartya Sen's Capability Approach and Social Justice in Education*, ed. Melanie Walker and Elaine Unterhalter. Palgrave Macmillan, London. pp. 215–235.

Finney, Johanna. 1998. "Welfare Reform and Post-secondary Education: Research and Policy Update." *IWPR Welfare Reform Network News* 2(1): 2.

Harris, Kathleen Mullan. 1996. "Life after Welfare: Women, Work, and Repeat Dependency." *American Sociological Review* 61:407–426.

Maine Women's Lobby & Policy Center. 2007. "Legislative Wrap-Up." *The Maine Women's Advocate* (Summer): 1–2, and insert.

One Dupont Welfare Reform Coalition. 1997. *Welfare Reform and Higher Education: A Fact Sheet*. One Dupont Welfare Reform Coalition, Washington, DC.

Pohlmann, Lisa. 2002. *Welfare Reform: Lessons from Maine*. Maine Center for Economic Policy, Augusta.

Seguino, Stephanie. 1995. *Living on the Edge: Women Working and Providing for Families in the Maine Economy, 1979–1993*. Margaret Chase Smith Public Policy Center, Orono, ME.

Smith, Rebekah J., Luisa S. Deprez and Sandra S. Butler. 2003. "The Miseducation of Welfare Reform: Denying the Promise of Post-Secondary Education." *Maine Law Review* 55(1): 211–240.

Strauss, Anselm and Juliet Corbin. 1990. *Basics of Qualitative Research: Grounded Theory Procedures and Techniques*. Sage, Newbury Park, CA.



**Sandra S. Butler** is a professor and the coordinator of the Masters of Social Work program at the University of Maine. Her research has focused primarily on women's financial security across the lifespan and successful aging, particularly in rural environments. She is the author of *Middle-aged Female and Homeless* (1994) and co-editor of *Gerontological Social Work in Small Towns and Rural Communities* (2003) and *Shut-Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education* (2004) and more than 50 articles and book chapters.



**Luisa S. Deprez** is professor in the Department of Sociology and in the Women and Gender Studies Program and former dean of the College of Arts and Sciences and director of the Women's Studies Program at the University of Southern Maine. She has written *The Family Support Act of 1988: A Case Study of Welfare Policy in the 1980s* (2002), co-edited *Shut-Out: Low Income Mothers and Higher Education in Post-Welfare America* (2004), and numerous articles and book chapters about the restrictions of current welfare policy on low-income women seeking to access higher education.