

**Report on Travelers & Immigrants AID/Chicago Connection's**

**El Centro Educacion y Cultura Even Start Program**

**2000 Program Year**

**Compiled by the Mid-America Institute on Poverty**

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## **Introduction**

This report examines the accomplishments of El Centro de Educacion y Cultura (hereafter referred to as El Centro) Even Start program in light of the three program objectives stated in the national Even Start evaluation. The objectives are as follows:

1. The literacy of participating families will improve;
2. Even Start projects will reach their target population of families that are most in need of services; and
3. Local Even Start projects will provide comprehensive, instructional and support services of high quality to all families in a cost-effective measure.

El Centro is a family literacy program operated by Travelers & Immigrants Aid/Chicago Connections (TIA/CC)<sup>1</sup>. Travelers & Immigrants AID/Chicago Connections is an affiliated partner of Heartland Alliance for Human Needs & Human Rights, an anti-poverty agency providing housing, health care, and social services to poor and low-income persons in the Chicago area. El Centro serves immigrant families with literacy needs and is located in the Logan Square Neighborhood of Chicago. The program serves families whose primary language is Spanish and who have literacy difficulties in both Spanish and English. Most families served are immigrants from Mexico, though that is not a requirement to enroll in the program.

This report provides a supplement to the national Even Start project evaluation effort and is an attempt to provide additional information about the program's operations and achievements.

## **Program Overview**

The program offers the following services:

- Home visit activity and teaching sessions,
- School-based Spanish and English literacy instruction for parents,
- A school-based after school homework assistance and educational enrichment program for school age children,
- A school-based family activity program, and
- Occasional family outings and events.
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El Centro began its Even Start program in 1996 as a partnership with a local public elementary school. In 1998, the program expanded to include a second local public elementary school. El Centro operates out of two school-based sites where after school homework assistance and educational enrichment program for children, Spanish and English language literacy instruction for parents, and family activity program are held. Partnership agreements with these two local Chicago Public Schools allow El Centro staff access to the buildings and teachers and other staff.

A description of each of the program services is provided below.

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<sup>1</sup> TIA/CC has since changed their name to Chicago Connections, effective July 1, 1999.

*After school homework assistance and educational enrichment:* Because parents of children in the program were struggling with literacy issues, staff recognized that children participants were in need of educational supports to help them achieve in school and to supplement their literacy development outside of school. To address this issue, El Centro operates an educational enhancement program for children three days a week at two elementary schools in the community. One program offers two hours of services, the other three. Children must first complete their homework with the assistance of El Centro staff and a volunteer and then are free to participate in a variety of activities including arts and crafts, trips to the local library, and age appropriate play, games and songs.

*Spanish and English Literacy Instruction for Adults:* El Centro staff, recognizing parents' native language literacy problems, offer a Spanish literacy class for adult participants at each school site. Sessions are offered three days a week at the same sites as the school homework assistance and educational enrichment program. Reading and writing for everyday needs are the focus of these sessions. The Spanish language instructor also tries to incorporate time for parents to talk about any problems they are having in hopes of building a trusting and supportive relationship with families that will engage them for longer periods of time.

English literacy instruction is provided by four volunteers, two at each school site. These sessions focus on teaching parents English skills needed for daily living such as how to address mail, how to ask questions, and simple reading and writing tasks. Each of the adult sessions is divided equally between Spanish and English language instruction.

*Family Activity Program:* One day of the week, a "family activity" program is offered at each school site. Activities include presentations on health, violence prevention and other quality of life issues, parent-child crafts and projects, parent-child educational activities such as completing workbooks) and holiday and birthday celebrations.

*Home visits and teaching sessions:* Staff conduct home visits (usually on weekends) during which they organize family activities and teach parents how to engage their children's learning potential in everyday activities and settings. The home visit activities are based on what the family has identified that it would like to learn. Staff reported that families seemed to be reluctant to welcome home visits probably due to concerns that staff were there to inspect the cleanliness and order of homes or because families were ashamed of their home furnishings. As a result, staff do not feel that teaching in the home is as productive as classrooms session.

*Family outings and events:* El Centro offers parents and children opportunities to go on field trips and cultural outings as a means to encourage family learning and exposure of children and parents to new challenges. In program year 2000, field trips were taken to the Planetarium, Aquarium, and the Botanic Gardens. An average of 21 families participated in these outings. Additionally, El Centro sponsors a family literacy night and a poetry reading event that a number of Even Start families attend.

## Participant Overview:

In program year 2000, El Centro enrolled 44 families with 90 children among them. Due to staff changes data is available only for 52% of these children, but we have no reason to believe that the missing data would be any different from that available.

All of the families in the El Centro program were Hispanic; 90%, were Mexican in origin, 6% were Puerto Rican and the remaining 3% were Ecuadorian. Almost all (97%) reported that Spanish is the primary language used at home. Almost all (97%) of the families had lived in the United States for more than five years.

The majority of families derived their income through earned wages (85%), only ten percent relied on public assistance alone for their household's support, and five percent relied on a combination of public assistance and work for their household income.

The majority of families (68%) were two parent families. A number of families included multiple generations and had more than two adults living in the household. The families generally had low incomes – no family had an annual income of more than \$25,000 and most were under \$15,000.

## Program outcomes in terms of national objectives

*Objective 1: The literacy of participating families will improve;*

### ***Children's Literacy***

We examined three aspects of educational development for children: the development of social skills, the development of educational skills, and changes in school performance. We measured social skills because we know that the presence of appropriate social skills can facilitate the educational development and school performance of children. Without these skills, children often struggle to participate in educational activities and with the requirements of school. We measured educational skill development because it becomes the foundation upon which school performance is based. And we measured school performance because it represents the bringing together of social and educational skills – how a child applies educational skills in a social setting. The progress of children participating in Even Start for program year 2000 was based on assessments of participant children by El Centro staff. The results follow below.

### *Social Skill Development*

No improvement	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Appropriate Progression	Not applicable	No data available
0%	2.6%	45.3%	0%	0%	52%

*Educational Skill Development*

No improvement	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Appropriate Progression	Not applicable	No data available
0%	13.9%	25.4%	8.9%	0%	52%

*School Performance*

No improvement	Some improvement	Significant improvement	Appropriate Progression	Not applicable	No data available
0%	18%	19.6%	10.2%	0%	52%

***Adult Literacy***

Literacy improvements for parents were determined by a comparison of pre- and post-test TABE scores in reading and math. Note that pre- and post-test comparisons are only available for 12 of the 44 families that participated regularly in the program. The lack of post-test data may indicate a problem with attendance and class participation for parents.

The pre-test data indicate that the program is serving people with a range of literacy and math starting points from lows in the 300s to highs in the 700s.

The average improvement in reading scores was 96 points. The average improvement in math scores was 102 points. The average point gains indicate significant improvement for participants in both reading and math skills. The national Even Start evaluation reports gains of between 20 and 25 points at pre- and post-test comparisons.

*Objective 2: Even Start Projects will reach their target population of families that are most in need of services.*

The families served by the El Centro Even Start program are predominately low-income. Approximately 46 percent of families had incomes below the federal poverty level (based on family size)<sup>2</sup>. And almost three-quarters (73%) had incomes below 130 percent of the federal poverty level for their family size. All families had incomes equal to or below 150 percent of the federal poverty line (based on family size).

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<sup>2</sup> In actuality the percentage of families living below the poverty line is likely to be higher due to the way the program collected income data. The program collected income data in five ranges that did not correspond to the federal poverty line amounts. Therefore, in numerous instances, the actual income of program participants could have fallen below the federal poverty line but fit into a range that had an upper limit above the federal poverty line. In these cases we used the upper end of the range to determine poverty status.

Almost all of the El Centro adult Even Start participants had very low levels of education – 97 percent lacked a high school diploma. The majority had eight years or fewer of formal education and most of that education occurred in their country of origin.

As is expected based on the low educational attainment of parents, the adult participants are significantly challenged in terms of literacy. Staff assessments indicate that the majority of participants cannot read or write in Spanish and are unfamiliar with English. Spanish is the primary and often the only language spoken at home. Interviews with staff also indicated that these parents are often embarrassed about their lack of literacy and feel a sense of shame about needing help. These issues have motivated staff to do extensive outreach to recruit adult participants.

Given the very low incomes and lack of education experienced by nearly all of El Centro Even Start families it appears as the program is successfully reaching its objective in serving a significantly disadvantaged population.

*Objective 3: Local Even Start projects will provide comprehensive instructional and support services of high quality to all families in a cost-effective measure.*

El Centro Even Start has provided a variety of instructional and support services to enrolled families in program year 2000. They include:

- Approximately 285 hours of English language instruction
- Approximately 285 hours of Spanish literacy instruction
- Approximately 570 hours of educational enhancement for children
- Approximately 190 hours of family activities (including fieldtrips, cultural outings, and family activity nights)
- Over 20 individual family home visits and instruction sessions.

The services offered include a variety of instructional methods and are operated in settings designed to accommodate participants.

The program had three paid staff in program year 2000, a Spanish literacy instructor and program coordinator and two children's program coordinators. El Centro's director who is also responsible for administering other programs out of the El Centro community center supervises the program.

In program year 2000, the services of paid staff were supplemented by four English language instruction volunteers and one volunteer who worked with the children's activities full-time over a five-month period.

### **Utilization of Program Services:**

Initially 52 families enrolled in the El Centro Even Start program. Less than half -- 42 percent of those families were still participating at the program year-end when literacy post-tests were given. The top reasons stated for leaving the program were that the family moved out of the area served by the program, the participating parent found employment that prevented further participation or the participating parent did not like the instructional style of the class or felt that the class moved too slowly. El Centro staff attempted to address student dissatisfaction with instructor style with a change in staffing effective toward the latter part of the program year, but by then families unhappy with the classes had stopped participating.

One of the issues program staff struggle with in delivering services to families is the age limits for serving children. Many families have children with ages outside the 3 to 8 limit set for Even Start. Staff want to encourage the family working together on literacy, but are frustrated when they must limit their services to the 3 to 8 age range. Some members of families are left out, creating awkward situations. This may be a factor in some families' failure to participate after enrolling.

### **Conclusion:**

The El Centro Even Start program appears to be reaching the three objectives as set forward in the national Even Start performance plan – its participants have demonstrated improvements in literacy, the program serves significantly disadvantaged families, and the program provides over 1,000 hours of instruction and activities within a constrained budget.

The program offers a variety of instructional services and uses a combination of modalities to reach this audience. Services are offered to adults and children both in class room and community settings. Additionally enrichment supports are offered through home visits.

Based on El Centro's performance with regard to national Even Start objectives the program appears to be performing up to standards set in the program performance plan.

### **Recommendations:**

While the program offers an extensive array of services, it appears that these services are not fully utilized by enrolled participants. We recommend that program staff spend some time exploring reasons for under utilization and adapt the program services accordingly.

In particular, issues of post-enrollment retention should be examined for potential opportunities for improvement. Program staff have taken some steps in this direction with attempts at revising the English language instruction portion of the program, however further analysis and action may benefit the program and its participants.