

**Evaluation Report on Chicago Connection's**  
***El Centro de Educacion y Cultura* Even Start Program**  
**2001 Program Year**

*Compiled by the Mid-America Institute on Poverty*

**Angelique N. Miller and Amy Rynell**

**November 2001**



*Providing paths from harm to hope since 1888*

**Mid-America Institute on Poverty**  
**208 S. LaSalle St., Suite 1818**  
**Chicago, IL 60604**  
**(312) 660-1342**



## **Mid-America Institute on Poverty**

Heartland Alliance's Mid-America Institute on Poverty (MAIP) serves as a catalyst for the amelioration and eradication of poverty and disadvantage. The Institute prioritizes improving access to quality and affordable health care, housing and human services as a means of promoting human rights.

MAIP strategies are rooted in:

- Stakeholder involvement in problem identification and the development and implementation of solutions;
- Practice-based research and action-oriented analysis and policy development;
- Diverse collaborations and partnerships to provide full information, a variety of perspectives and whenever possible, consensus implementation;
- Evaluation toward ever-more effective services and policies; and
- Heartland Alliance's mission of providing for the human needs and advancing the human rights of impoverished, endangered and isolated populations (particularly the very poor, the homeless, and new immigrants).



## INTRODUCTION

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The Mid-America Institute on Poverty has evaluated the Even Start Program of El Centro de Educacion y Cultura (hereafter referred to as El Centro) and this report is a summary of its findings for the 2001 program year. The stated objectives of the El Centro Even Start Program are that the literacy of participating families will improve, they will reach their target population of families most in need of services and lastly that local Even Start projects will provide comprehensive, instructional and support services that are of high quality to all families in a cost-effective way. The evaluation was structured to examine progress made towards achieving these objectives.

El Centro is operated by the 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 primarily immigrant families from Mexico whose primary language is Spanish and who have literacy difficulties in both Spanish and English.

El Centro is located in the Logan Square community, which is on the near northwest side of Chicago. The state and local neighborhood context have shaped the program. In Illinois nearly one in five residents speak a language other than English in their homes. The number of Illinoisans who speak Spanish at home jumped from 728,000 in 1990 to 1.2 million in 2000, about 11% of the state population<sup>1</sup>. The population of Logan Square as per the 2000 census is 82,688 persons. The racial demographics are 65 percent Hispanic, 26.3 percent White (non-Hispanic), 5.2 percent Black (non-Hispanic) and 1.3 percent Asian. The median family income for Logan Square residents is \$40,181, which is double what the majority (89%) of El Centro program participants make. The community housing stock is comprised primarily of multifamily units (70.5%) and the rest are single-family units.<sup>2</sup>

Throughout this report the demographics of the El Centro Even Start Program were compared with the 1995 National Evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program (NESFL)<sup>3</sup> in order to try to understand where differences and similarities exist among demographics such as race, language spoken, income, and educational background. We used the National Even Start Evaluation concepts in defining the characteristics of Even Start families, services provided, participation, whether the program is serving families most in need, educational and developmental outcomes of Even Start participants.

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<sup>1</sup> Mendell, D., & Obejas, A. (August 6, 2001). English on wane in Illinois Households. Chicago Tribune [on-line]. Available: [www.chicagotribune.com/news](http://www.chicagotribune.com/news)

<sup>2</sup> Steele, J. (July 24, 2001). Logan Square: A community of contrasts. Chicago Tribune [on-line]. Available: [www.chicagotribune.com](http://www.chicagotribune.com)

<sup>3</sup> Tao, F., Swartz, J., St. Pierre, R., Tarr, H. (1997). National Evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program: 1995 Interim Report (Contract Number EA94068001). Prepared for: U.S. Department of Education Planning and Evaluation Services.

## **Program Overview**

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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. These schools, Darwin and Funston, are part of the Chicago Public School system. El Centro operates its program out of the two school-based sites year-round. El Centro and the Chicago Public Schools have a partnership agreement, which allows the program access to the building, teachers and other supportive staff.

The program offers the following services:

- A school-based, after-school homework assistance and educational enrichment program
- School-based Spanish and English literacy instruction for parents
- A school-based family activity program
- Presentations of topics of interest to families during family activity program
- Home visit activity and teaching sessions
- Occasional family outings and events

*The After-School Homework Assistance and Educational Enrichment Program:* This program was created in response to Even Start program children's struggles with literacy issues. Staff recognized that the children were in need of educational supports to help them achieve in school and to supplement their literacy development outside of school. El Centro operates an educational enhancement program for children three days a week at the schools. School-age children first complete their homework with the assistance of staff and volunteers. After homework is completed, children are free to participate in a variety of activities such as arts and crafts, trips to the local library, and age appropriate play, games and songs.

*Spanish and English Literacy Instruction for Adults:* Spanish literacy classes for adults are held at each school site. Sessions are offered three days a week while the After-School Homework Assistance and Educational Enrichment programs are being held. Basic reading and writing for everyday needs are the focus of these sessions. Four volunteers, two at each school site, provide English literacy instruction. These sessions, run by the volunteers, focus on teaching parents English skills needed for daily living, such as how to address mail, how to ask general questions, and how to perform simple reading and writing tasks.

*Family Activity Program:* This program is held one day a week and lasts anywhere from an hour to a three hour class session. Activities such as presentations typically last an hour and include topics such as health issues, violence prevention and other quality of life issues. Activities that may take up the whole session are parent-child crafts and projects and parent-child educational activities such as completing workbooks, and holiday or 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.

*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 2001, field trips were taken to the Mexican Fine Arts Museum, Brookfield Zoo and various other museums. El Centro also sponsors a family literacy night and a poetry-reading event for families.

## LITERATURE SUMMARY

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Studies show that pre-school enrollment increases have been confined to children from highly educated and more financially well-off families. The 1995 National Household Education Survey shows that 61% of 3-year-olds and 81% of 4-year-olds from upper-income families (those with \$50,000 or more) were enrolled in some form of pre-primary program. In comparison, only 24% of 3-year-olds and 52% of 4-year-olds from poor families participated in pre-primary programs. Those numbers drop by half for Hispanic children, particularly children of mothers whose first language is Spanish, who are in early childhood programs.<sup>4</sup>

The lower preschool participation of Hispanic children means that they will enter kindergarten without the behavioral experience of a preprimary program or without the chance to develop the skills that set a foundation for early school success. The result is that Hispanic children are much less likely than non-Hispanic children to enter kindergarten displaying skills that denote readiness for school. Pre-primary programs such as Even Start that target those truly in need, especially the poor, are beneficial to the children of today and also to the workforce of the future.

Roderick, in her article titled “Hispanics and Education”, proves that children do better in school and stay in school longer when their parents and families (1) provide educational resources in the home; (2) interact with children about education and provide day-to-day monitoring and support of schoolwork; (3) set high expectations and educational aspirations; (4) use parenting strategies that promote problem-solving and thinking skills. (Cafferty 139). Hispanic families have more difficulty than other ethnic groups in creating an environment with these types of supports. Partly due to the fact that Hispanic adults, especially Mexicans, have the lowest level of education of any racial or ethnic group in America. Hispanic families are poorer and have language and cultural barriers. Therefore, school-age children need these types of educational programs provide much needed assistance in helping children who are already in school and are having difficulty or require encouragement for continued success. For pre-school aged children such a program has been shown to help children to learn to succeed at a very young age. The Even-Start Program helps children in need of services develop a positive experience with education.

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<sup>4</sup> Cafferty, P., & Engstrom, D. W. (Eds.). (2000). Hispanics in the United States. New Jersey: Transaction Publishers.



## 2001 PROGRAM PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

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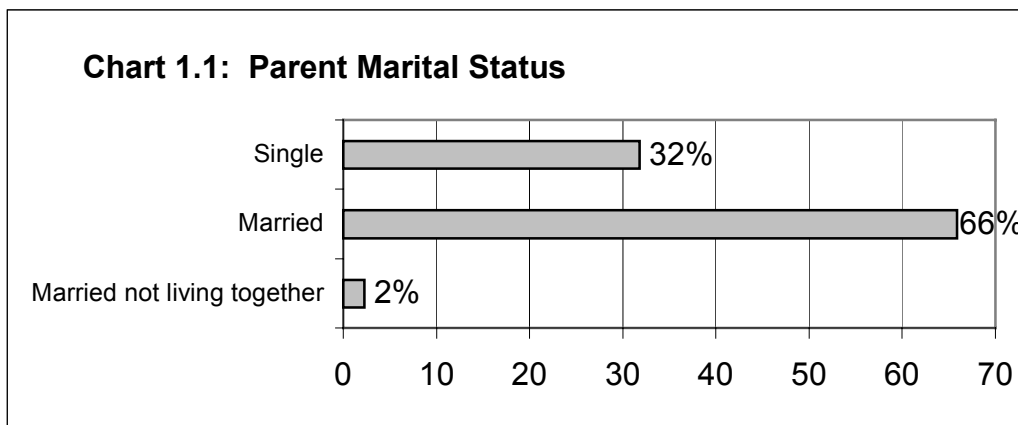
This section describes the characteristics of El Centro Even Start families, including family structure and size, parents' age and ethnicity, level and sources of income, and length of residence in the U.S.

The information collected was gathered from a review of the program families' files. The information is based on answers from parent's initial intake into the literacy program. The term program parent is used interchangeably with the term participant; it is used to refer to the parents enrolled in the literacy program.

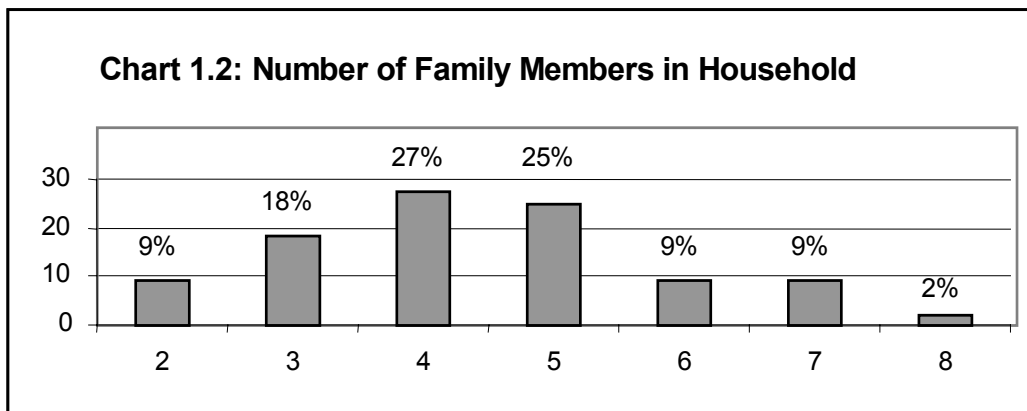
In program year 2001, the El Centro Even Start program worked with 44 families.

### Family Structure and Size

As shown in Chart 1.1, at least sixty-six percent of families were two parents with children. Approximately one-third (32%) of families are single parent, primarily female headed. In the NESFL Program the single-parent headed families are slightly more prevalent (39%), and dual headed household participation is lower (48%) than El Centro.

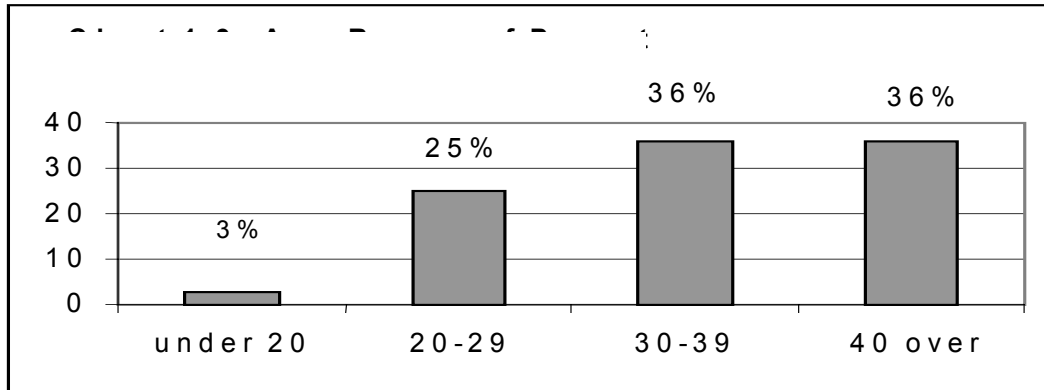


As shown in Chart 1.2 almost three-quarters (72%) of families consist of four to eight persons. The average size of Even Start families is 4.5 persons. The average number of children is 2.5; with the majority of families (69%) having two to four children.

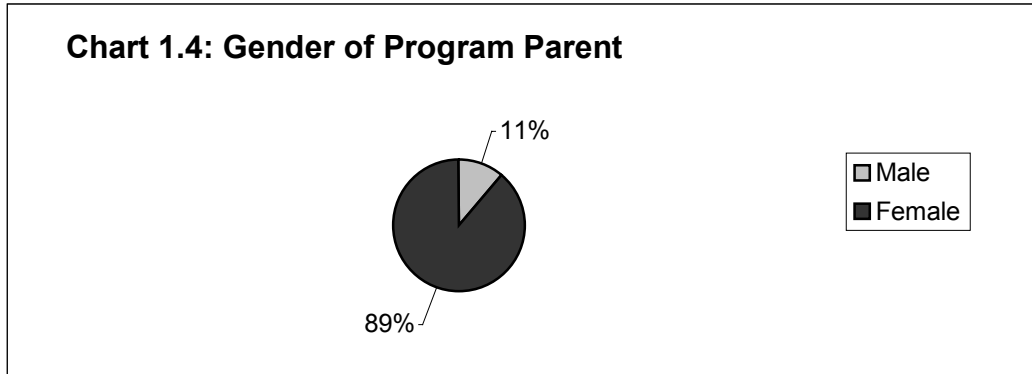


## Family Demographics

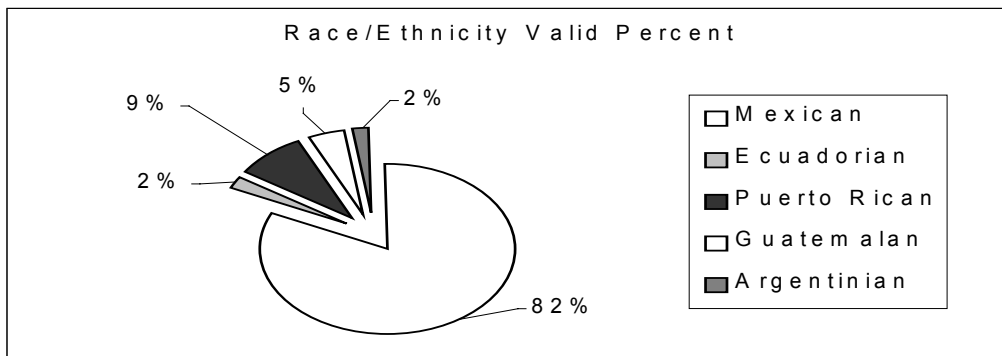
As shown in Chart 1.3, most Even Start parents are in their 30s and 40s. The average age is 36; the majority (72%) is age 30 and over, while parents 20 to 29 account for just one quarter of parents in Even Start. The NESFL Program saw a higher percentage in the 20-29 Age Range (49%) than the El Centro Program.



The overwhelming majority of adult participants are women, primarily the children's mothers. The gender breakdown of the El Centro Even Start Program is fairly consistent with the NESFL Program gender breakdown of male (16%) and female (84%).

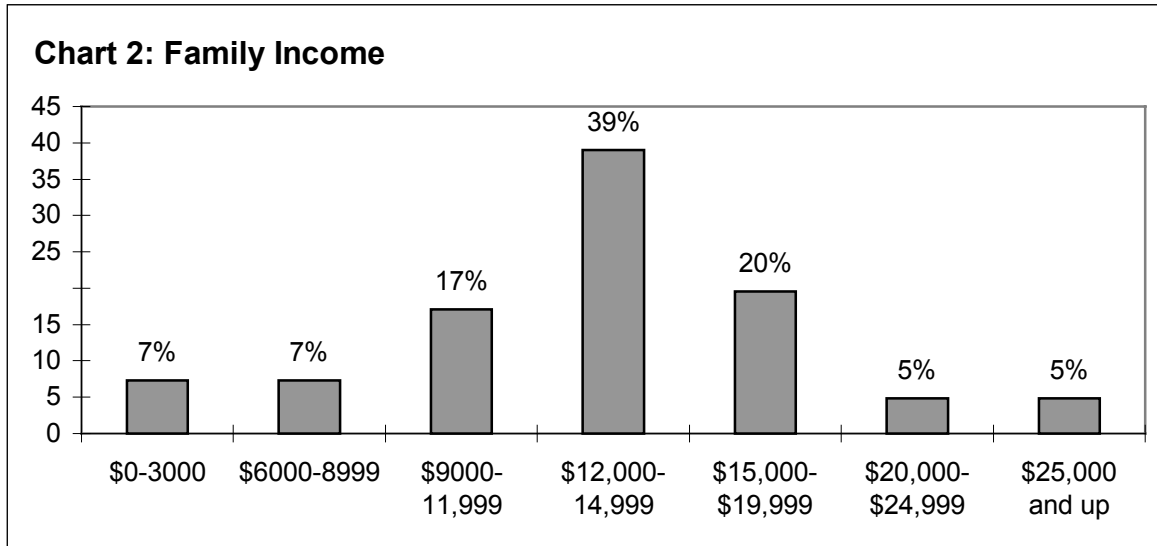


The largest ethnic group served by El Centro is Mexican (82%), followed by Puerto Rican (9%). This is not consistent at all with the NESFL Program where Hispanics comprised only thirty-six percent of all participants.

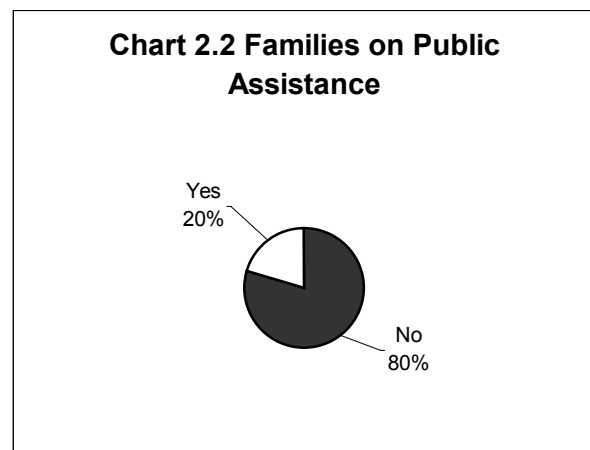


## **Family Income**

As shown in Chart 2, the vast majority (90%) of Even Start families have annual incomes of less than \$19,999. In the NESFL Program, the breakdown is similar to El Centro Even Start, with the majority (92%) having annual family incomes of less than \$19,999.

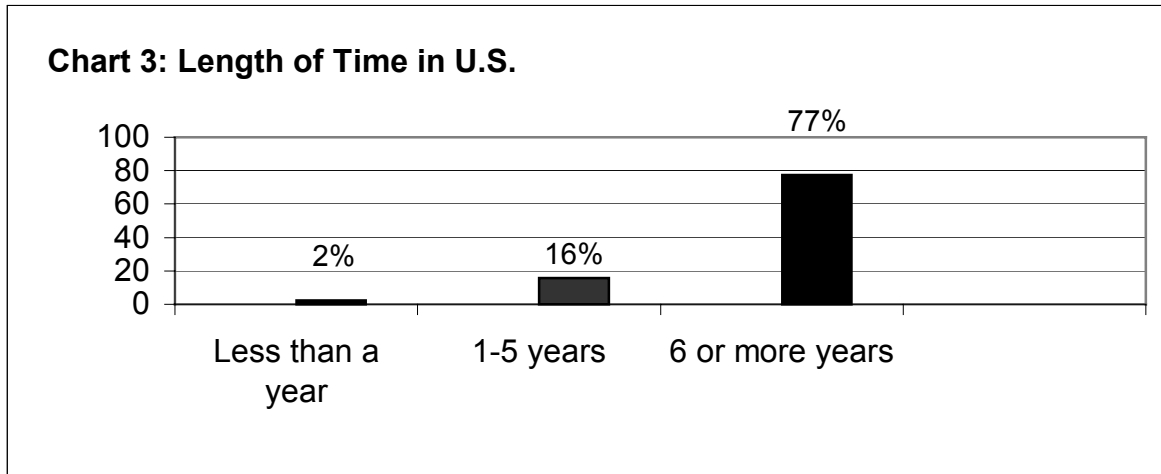


As shown in Chart 2.1, in the Even Start program, the majority (63%) of the program parents were not employed; one-third were employed and a few were retired or disabled. One-fifth of all families (20.5%) were receiving some form of public assistance. In the NESFL Program, a higher proportion of families (47%) were receiving government assistance compared to the El Centro program. As we looked at data we collected on employment and income and took into account cultural considerations, it seems that most of the program participants were homemakers with spouses who worked to provide income support for the family.



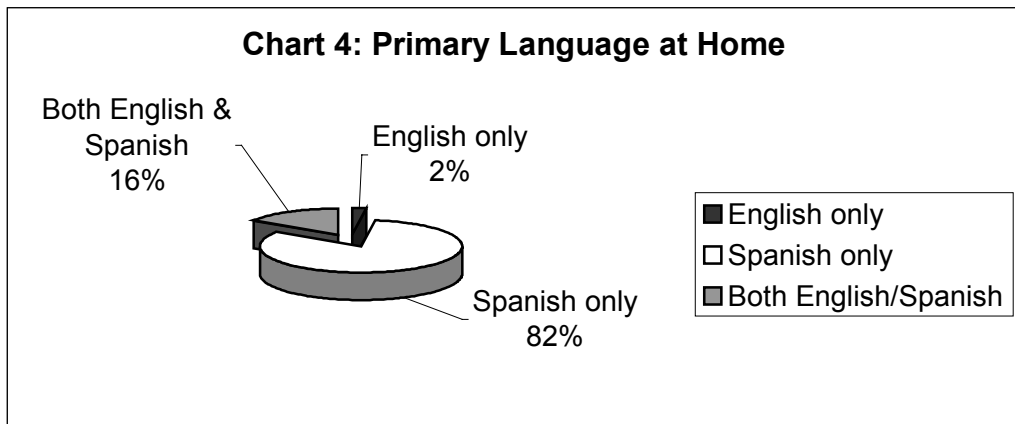
### Length of residence in the United States

The average length of time in the U.S. for the El Centro Even Start families is 10 years. As Chart 3 shows, the majority (77%) has been in the U.S. six or more years and just less than one-fifth (16%) have been in the U.S. less than five years. In the NESFL Program, the percent of families by ethnicity (Hispanic) and length of residence in the U.S. had a similar number (69%) of families who were here more than five years.



### Language and Education

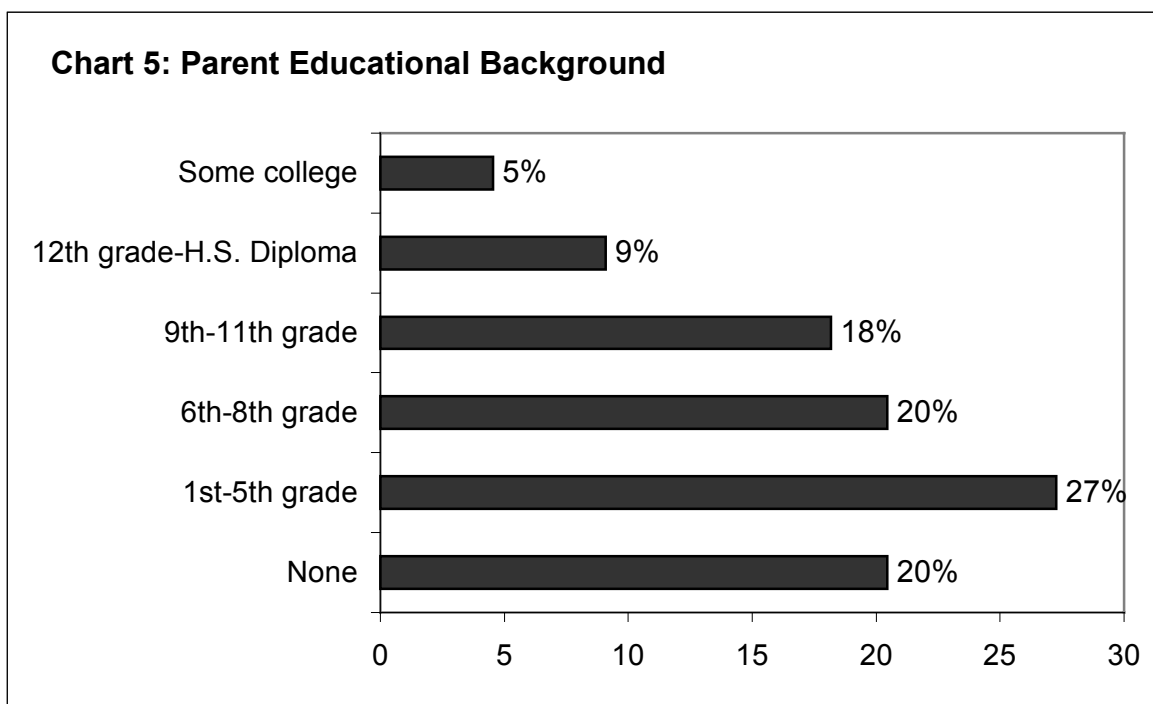
As Chart 4 shows, the majority of families enrolled in El Centro Even Start program, (82%) speak only Spanish in their home, while less than one-fifth (16%) speak both English and Spanish and only a few (2%) speak English only. The NESFL Program families (using the Hispanic ethnicity category) who spoke Spanish at home accounted for similar percentages of Spanish (82%) and English only spoken at home (14%).



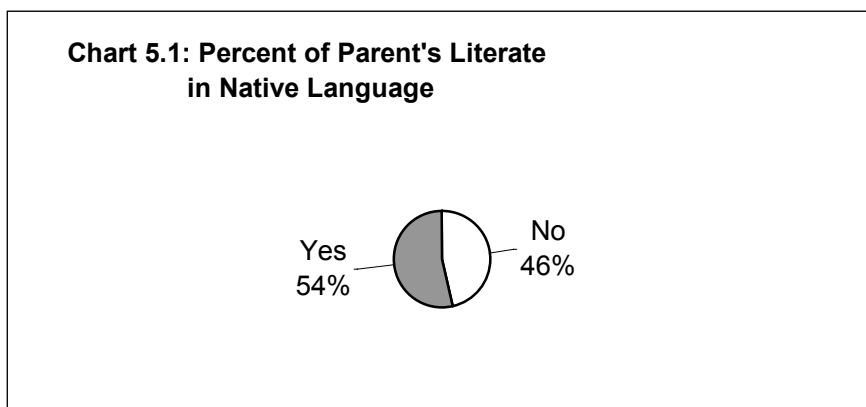
## **Educational Background of Program Parents**

One-fifth (20%) of parents have no formal schooling. Nearly half of parents have an education of 8<sup>th</sup> grade or less (48%) and over a quarter have educations of 9<sup>th</sup> to 12<sup>th</sup> grade.

This is a major difference from the 1995 National Even Start program participants in which only 2 percent had no schooling. Due to the different data collection methodologies, we can only provide a rough comparison between the parent's educational levels. For the NESFL; 42 percent had a 1<sup>st</sup>–9<sup>th</sup> grade education, 41 percent had a 10<sup>th</sup>–12<sup>th</sup>-grade education and 11 percent had a High School Diploma or GED.

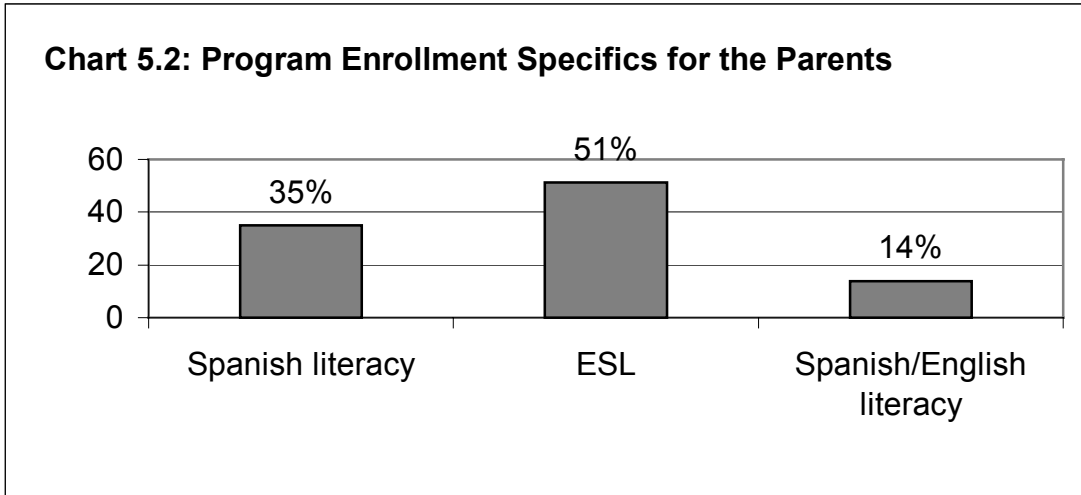


Coinciding with that educational information, nearly half (46%) of parents are not literate in their native language of Spanish, as shown in Table 5.1.



## **Program Enrollment**

Over one-third of parents are enrolled in the Spanish literacy program; 14 percent are enrolled in Spanish/English literacy and half are enrolled in ESL as shown in table 5.2



## OUTCOMES

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The stated objectives of the El Centro Even Start Program were:

1. Did the literacy of participating families improve,
2. Did El Centro reach its target population of families most in need of services, and
3. Did El Centro provide comprehensive, instructional and support services that are of high quality to all families in a cost-effective way?

### **Progress on Objective 1: *What were the Educational and Developmental Outcomes of Even Start Participants***

The adult education outcomes are based on data gathered from the Test of Adult Basic Education (TABE). The TABE is designed to measure achievement in reading, mathematics, language and spelling. The El Centro Even Start program administered TABE tests only for the mathematics and reading sections, consistent with that of the Sample Study in the National Evaluation of the Even Start Family Literacy Program.

The reading test assesses:

- vocabulary (e.g., synonyms, antonyms, words in context, meaning of prefixes and suffixes)
- comprehension (e.g., extracting details from text, analyzing characters, identifying main ideas, and interpreting events)

The mathematics test measures:

- computation (e.g., addition, subtraction, multiplication, division, fractions, and percents)
- concepts and applications (e.g., numeration, problem solving, measurement, and geometry)

### *Gains on the TABE from Pretest to Posttest*

There were 25 program parents who took the TABE Pre-and Post Reading test. The score gains for the TABE Reading test are:

- 31% had score gains between 82-192 points
- 50% had score gains between 226-292 points
- 18% had score gains between 304-326 points

There were 16 program parents who took the TABE Pre-and Post Math test. The score gains for the TABE Math test are:

- 19% had score gains between 80-112 points
- 44% had score gains between 215-291 points
- 37% had score gains of 300 and up

These gains are above normal for TABE Pre-and Post Math and Reading Tests.

*Gains on the New York State Literacy Tests*

All families were enrolled in one of the literacy classes that El Centro offered. Those enrolled in literacy classes, whether its Spanish literacy, English as a Second Language or both Spanish and English literacy showed improvements on the NYS Literacy tests.

- 25% had literacy improvements of 9.2 points or less
- 25% had literacy improvements of 9.3 to 14.8 points
- 25% had literacy improvements of 14.9 to 24 points
- 25% had literacy improvements of 24.1 to 39.3 points

These gains are consistent with normal NYS Literacy scores. However the NYS Literacy tests were not administered in their entirety because of time limitations.

El Centro Even Start program participants showed gains in both literacy programs and TABE programs. Though the NYS literacy tests were not taken in their entirety it is likely that with full administration the gains may still exist and be larger, showing more progress made than was conveyed in the abbreviated tests. The large gains compared to the NESFL Program in the TABE tests may be due to the fact that a smaller version of the short survey was given to participants. It is recommended that El Centro administer the 30-minute short survey version of the test to better capture the gains participants make.

**Progress on Objective 2: *Is El Centro Even Start Serving the Families Most in Need?***

The ultimate goal of Even Start is to break the cycle of poverty and illiteracy by expanding educational opportunities available to low-income families with limited educational experiences. The National Even Start program selected seven features to define families in need; those same features are used in defining El Centro program families below:

These are the characteristics defining El Centro’s families in need:

- Low income: A majority of program families are living at or below the poverty level
- Single Parent Family: 32% are single-parent families; primarily female headed
- Parent’s limited educational experience: 67% have a 8<sup>th</sup> grade education or less
- No earned income: 63% of program parents are not employed
- Currently receiving government assistance: 20% of families are receiving assistance
- English as a second language: 81% speak only Spanish in their home.
- Multiple children: 89% of families have 3-6 children.

*Did El Centro reach their target population of families most in need of services?* The El Centro program is meeting this goal in terms of serving families with very low incomes. Nearly all (95%) of El Centro program families have an income of less than \$24,999 a year, based on enrollment in the program in the year 2000. The 2000 Health and Human Services



(HHS) Poverty Guidelines list for a family of four; two adults and two children is \$17,050 which 50% of our families fall into and 89% have a family size of 6 or less. Due to the way family income was collected we are unable to report accurate percentages of how many families were living at or around the poverty guidelines. Table 1 below gives an estimate of where EL Centro families fit within the 2000 HHS Poverty Guidelines.

**Table 1: El Centro Family Incomes as Compared with HHS Poverty Guidelines**

This chart shows what percentage of El Centro program families live in poverty.<sup>5</sup>

Family Size (2 adults, +children)	HHS Poverty Guidelines	El Centro family size	Income of El Centro Families	Percent of El Centro families
3	\$14,150	18%	\$0-11,999	31%
4	\$17,050	32%	\$12-14,999	39%
5	\$19,950	25%	\$15-19,999	20%
6	\$22,850	14%	N/A	
7	\$25,750	7%	\$20-24,999	5%
8	\$28,650	5%	\$25,000+	5%

The program is also meeting this goal in terms of serving people with low educational attainment as the vast majority of families have less than an 8<sup>th</sup> grade education. One-fifth (20%) of El Centro parent program participants had no formal schooling, 47% have a 1-8<sup>th</sup> grade education, 18% have a 9<sup>th</sup> – 11<sup>th</sup> grade education, 14% have a 12<sup>th</sup> grade or higher education. In addition 41% of parent participants are illiterate in their native language.

*Recommendations for El Centro Even Start in Serving the Families Most in Need:*

The El Centro program does excellent work in recruiting families whose income and educational needs are the greatest, though more effort could be made to recruit young families and families who have been in the U.S. for a shorter amount of time.

Currently 72 percent of El Centro program parents are age 30 and over. More efforts could be made to target parents in the age range of 20-29 as the children of these families will be younger in age and will benefit most from the El Centro Even Start program.

Over three-fourths of El Centro program parents have been in the U.S. six years or more. More efforts could be made to target families that have been in the U.S. for a shorter period of time as only 18 percent of families in the El Centro program are recent immigrants living here fewer than 5 years.

**Progress on Objective 3: *Did El Centro provide comprehensive instructional and support services that are of high quality to all families in a cost-effective way?***

<sup>5</sup> Federal Register, Vol. 65, No. 31, February 15, 2000, pp. 7555-7557.

Of the participating families in the El Centro Even Start program the majority (79%) received over 100 hours of instruction over the year. There was a drop in hours attended by participants in the months of December and June. The low attendance during these months is largely due to the Christmas holiday break and the start of summer vacation. The average hours of instruction that families participated in are broken down below:

- 12% received 0-50 hours of instruction
- 9% received 51-100 hours of instruction
- 33% received 101-150 hours of instruction
- 21% received 151-250 hours of instruction
- 25% received 251-400 hours on instruction

The El Centro relies largely on volunteers and its partnership with the Chicago Public School system to provide quality services in a cost effective way.

The hours of instructional and support services that El Centro Even Start staff and volunteers have provided to enrolled families in program year 2001 are:

- Approximately 310 hours of English language instruction
- Approximately 370 hours of Spanish literacy instruction
- Approximately 680 hours of Spanish literacy instruction
- Approximately 680 hours of educational enhancement for children
- Approximately 160 hours of family activities (including fieldtrips, cultural outings, and family activity night)
- Twelve individual family home visits and instruction sessions.

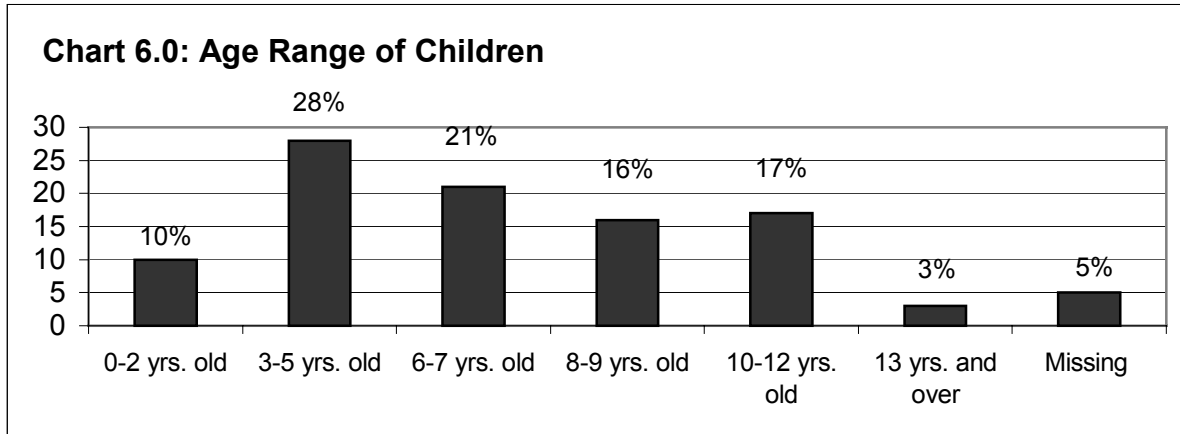
The El Centro Even Start program's partnership with the Chicago Public School system saves the program costs of renting a space, teachers and other supportive staff. Volunteer literacy teachers largely run the program but the program does have three paid staff members including the El Centro's director who supervises the program.

In program year 2000, one children's activity volunteer and one English as a Second Language (ESL) volunteer supplemented the services of paid staff.

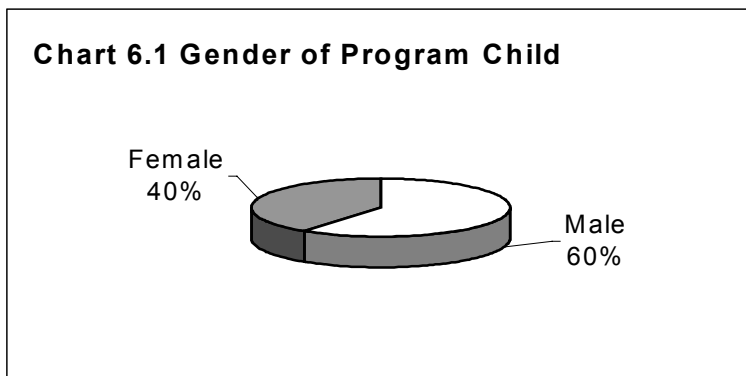
Regarding the *Home Visits and Teaching Sessions*, El Centro staff reported that families seemed to be reluctant to welcome home visits. They speculate that this is due to concerns that the program staff were there to inspect the cleanliness of homes or because families were ashamed of their home furnishings. As a result, staff does not feel that teaching in the home is as productive as the classroom sessions therefore home visits are kept to a minimum. Staff would want to look at ways to increase home visits while respecting family's cultural differences.

## 2001 CHILDREN PARTICIPANT CHARACTERISTICS

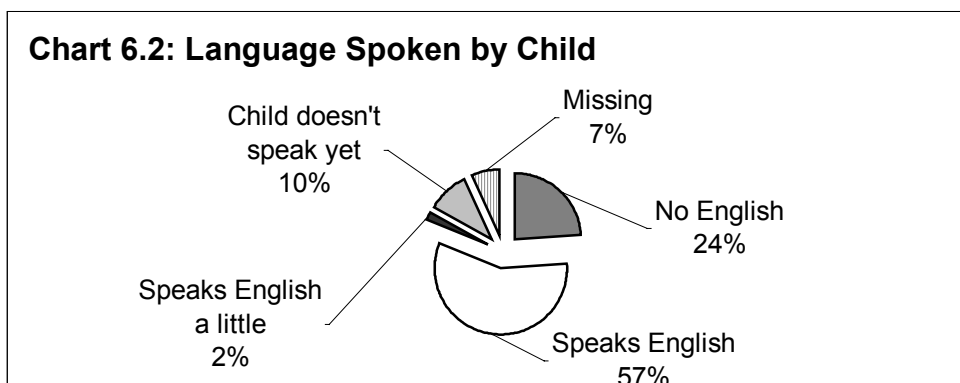
As shown in Chart 6.0 the vast majority (75%) of the one hundred and seven children participants are in the Even Start age range of zero-eight. The children who are now out of the target age range of the program are continuing services they were receiving when they met the target age range and many of those have younger siblings in the program so they are worked with as a family.



As shown in Chart 6.1 the majority of program children are male (60%) and the remaining (40%) are females.



As shown in Chart 6.2 a smaller percentage of children (24%) do not speak English in comparison to their parents. The majority of children (57%) speak English daily.



## CHILDREN'S DEVELOPMENTAL OUTCOMES

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There were some limitations in evaluating the developmental progress of children in the program. Due to the large number of children in the program and the reliance on volunteers to assist in teaching it is difficult to get a formal record of progress. The assessment of progress was made on staff observation and it is important that El Centro create a more formal record process.

The children's progress was based on assessments of social skill development; educational skill development and school performance. Social skill development was measured because it is a key to appropriate progression of educational development and school performance. Educational skill development was measured because it key in ensuring that children have the skills to make appropriate grade progression. Lastly school performance was measured because it encompasses the prior skills and serves as an indicator of how the Even Start program is affecting the performance of children in school. The progress of children enrolled in the 2001 El Centro Even Start program was based on assessments of El Centro staff and the results are shown in Table 2.

**Table 2: Outcomes of Children Enrolled in El Centro**

	<i>No Improvement</i>	<i>Some Improvement</i>	<i>Significant Improvement</i>
<b>Social Skill Development</b>	0%	20%	80%
<b>Educational Skill Development</b>	0%	10%	90%
<b>School Performance</b>	0%	15%	85%

*Social Skill Development* is an important factor for young and school age children. For the younger children, who make up thirty-eight percent of the program, the El Centro Preschool program allows interaction with others in a classroom setting, which accustoms the children to learning behavior that they will continue to experience in the coming years. Preschool is important because it promotes early school success among children, improves health and behavioral outcomes, reduces the likelihood of grade retention, and promotes literacy environments in the home. For the school-age children this part of the program gives them an opportunity to get increases attention of their homework or their struggles with different subjects.

*Educational Skill Development* is an important component of the program and it is where the most gains were made. This is an important area because it fosters educational development and sets the foundation for further learning.

Education has always played a vital role in upward mobility in immigrants and non-immigrants alike. Through education young adults gain better jobs and better pay. This has a trickle effect that passes from generation to generation so it is important to begin with children, especially newly arrived immigrant children where gains will be the highest.

## SUMMARY

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For the 2001 Program Year the El Centro Even Start Program served 44 families with 107 children. This program primarily served Spanish-speaking families, with the largest group being Mexican. A majority of the parents were age thirty and over, married and living with income at or below the poverty line. A vast majority of parents have lived here six years or more and spoke only Spanish in the home. Slightly under half of the parents were literate in their native language of Spanish and thus were enrolled in English and Spanish literacy classes.

Overall the program parents show improvements from when they first entered the program. All of the parents that were enrolled in literacy classes have shown large improvements. In addition, all of the parents who were enrolled in TABE classes made gains in scores.

Three quarters of the 107 children served in the El Centro program were within the Even Start program age range of zero to eight. Over half of the children spoke English and less than a quarter spoke Spanish only.

Overall the children show improvements in school and school readiness. Progress was made in the children's social skill development, educational skill development, and school performance in the 2001 program year.