

*Soaring to Success
Through Books and Play...*



**The Parent-Child
Home Program**
SINCE 1965

House Education and Labor Committee

Hearing on Legislation to Expand Early Childhood Support Programs for American Families

The Education Begins at Home Act, H.R. 2343

Testimony submitted by The Parent-Child Home Program

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Testimony of Sarah E. Walzer, Executive Director, The Parent-Child Home Program

The Parent-Child Home Program is pleased to submit this testimony in support of the Education Begins at Home Act, H.R. 2343. We thank the Committee for holding this important hearing on legislation that will make a tremendous difference in the lives of children and families across the country. We are pleased to be part of a national coalition of home visiting organizations and advocates for early childhood and family support services that has been supporting the passage of the Education Begins at Home Act.

As a nation, we cannot really begin to talk about “No Child Left Behind” until we have successfully ensured that “No Child Starts Behind”. Today, too many children in the United States enter school never having seen or held a book, without the basic literacy and language skills they need to participate successfully in the classroom. As a result their teachers in pre-kindergarten or kindergarten have to slow or stop the curriculum they had planned, to help these children catch up. Unfortunately, the data shows us that most children who start behind will never catch up. Children who do not know their letters when they enter kindergarten are behind in reading at the end of kindergarten, at the end of first grade, and are still having trouble reading at the end of fourth grade.¹

We also know that preschool is not the sole solution to this lack of readiness. Children arrive in pre-kindergarten not ready just as they have been arriving in kindergarten not ready. Children are more likely to be ready at any age when they have a family that knows what it needs to do to help them get ready. All families want their children to be successful, to do well in school, but many

¹ “A policy Primer: Quality Pre-Kindergarten,” Trust for Early Education, Fall 2004.

families do not know how to prepare their children to be successful in school. If you are not educated yourself, did not grow up in the American education system, and/or do not have the means to purchase books and educational toys, you may need some guidance to help you get your child ready for school. The Education Begins at Home Act (EBAH) is designed to do just that by ensuring that families receive the supports they need to prepare their children to enter school ready to be successful students and to go on to graduate from high school.

The Parent-Child Home Program is a research-based, research-validated early literacy, school readiness, and parenting education home visiting program developed in 1965. For over 40 years, the Program has been serving families challenged by poverty, limited education, language and literacy barriers, and other obstacles to school readiness and educational success. The Parent-Child Home Program currently serves over 6,500 families through more than 150 local sites in 14 states. Many more families could be served in each of these communities, as all of our sites have waiting lists at least equal to the number of families they are currently serving. And many more families remain in need of these services in communities that have not been able to develop funding streams for this critical early childhood service.

The Parent-Child Home Program works with a broad range of families whose children are at risk of entering school unprepared: teen parent families, single parent families, homeless families, immigrant and non-native English-speaking families, and grandparents raising grandchildren. Working with parents and children in their own homes helps families create language-rich home environments and lays the foundation for school readiness and parent involvement as their children enter school. Parents are able to continue to build their children's language and literacy skills after the Program finishes and their children enter school ready to succeed. The Program erases the "preparation gap" and prevents the "achievement gap."

The funding that would be provided by EBAH is critical to ensuring that home visiting programs like these can reach families in need of services and enable children to enter school ready to be successful students. The families reached by home visiting are families who are not accessing center-based early childhood or school readiness services, including the library, play groups or parenting workshops. They do not have transportation or access to transportation to get to these services; the services are not open or available when the parents are available to attend; they have language or literacy barriers; and/or they have no money to pay for programs.

I would like to provide you with some background on The Parent-Child Home Program to highlight the extent of its evaluation and validation and the depth of the Program's experience working with families across the country. For over 40 years, we have been preparing young children and their families to enter school ready to learn. As a result, four decades of research and evaluation demonstrates that Parent-Child Home Program participants in communities throughout the country enter school ready to learn and go on to succeed in school. In fact, peer-reviewed research demonstrates that program participants go on to graduate from high school at the rates of middle-class children nationally, a 20% higher graduation rate than their socio-economic peers nationally and a 30% higher rate than the control group in the study. From the first day of school, Program participants perform as well or better than their classmates

regardless of income level. This research, published in peer-reviewed journals, demonstrates not only the immediate, but also the very long-term impacts of home visiting.

Not only do child participants perform better in school, but their parents also become actively involved in their education, as noted by principals and teachers at the schools they attend. In addition, the parents go on to make changes in their own lives as well, obtaining their GEDs, returning to school, and improving their employment situations. At least 30% of our Home Visitors across the country are parents who were in the Program as parents; for many of them, this is an entry into the workforce. All of these changes have significant ramifications for their children's futures. The Parent-Child Home Program proves that when programs are available to support parents and children from an early age, delivering services in a way that is accessible and meaningful to them, we can ensure that economically and educationally disadvantaged children will enter school ready to learn, never experience the achievement gap, and attain high levels of academic success.

The Program's primary goal is to ensure that all parents have the opportunity to be their children's first and most important teacher and to prepare their children to enter school ready to succeed. The Program's hallmark is its combination of intensiveness and light touch. Each family receives two home visits a week from a trained home visitor from their community who models verbal interaction and learning through reading and play. The families receive a carefully-chosen book or educational toy each week so that they may continue quality play and interaction between home visits and long after they have completed the Program. Often the books are the first books in the home, not just the first children's books, and the toys are the first puzzles, games or blocks that the child has ever experienced. The materials are the tools the parents use to work with their children. The materials ensure that when these children enter pre-kindergarten or kindergarten they have experience with the materials that teachers expect all children to know.

Most importantly, the Program is fun for families, demonstrating for parents both the joy and the educational value of reading, playing, and talking with their children. Children's language and early literacy skills progress rapidly, and parents find an enormous sense of satisfaction in the progress that comes from their work with their children. This combination of fun and the dramatic changes families see in their children are the reason that on average 85% of the families who start in the Program complete the 2 years. The majority of families who do not complete the Program fail to do so because they move to a community where it is not available.

We know The Parent-Child Home Program is successful because of the changes we see in the families and the success the children have when they enter school. We also know it is successful because of the positive responses from the local community sponsors, including school districts, family resource centers, community health clinics, and many community-based organizations, and from the way the Program is continuing to expand across the country. We see that home visiting is a service delivery method that is able to reach families whose children would otherwise show up in pre-K or kindergarten never having held a book, been read a story, engaged in a conversation, been encouraged to use their imagination, played a game that involves taking turns, or put together a puzzle.

I would just like to share with you one brief anecdote demonstrating the long-term impact of the Program on the families who participate. As I mentioned earlier, we have followed program participants through high school graduation and beyond and have collected many wonderful examples of the Program's impact on children's lives. I think the long-term success of the Program is most clearly depicted by an interview that was conducted recently with a program graduate from one of our sites in New York, which has been implementing the Program for over 35 years. The son of immigrants from Columbia, he noted that of the 40 native Spanish-speaking students in his grade, only 3 went on to college. He observes that all these children went through the same schools and participated in the same activities, the only difference was The Parent-Child Home Program. He says it got him on the right track early; he entered school ready to learn and has soared ever since. He still has vivid memories of how confident he felt when he started kindergarten, how the books and toys were familiar and how he was the only native-Spanish-speaking child who knew the words to London Bridge is Falling Down. For him, the Program was a critical bridge to the rest of his education and for his mother it was empowering. She went back to school herself, and he noted she regularly would call his teachers to tell them to give him more homework because what they had given him was too easy. This young man is now a lawyer at a major New York City law firm, and he is the first Program graduate to become a member of The Parent-Child Home Program's national board of directors. His story is both extraordinary and typical of the kinds of success parents and children can achieve when home visiting is available to reach them where they are most comfortable and help them build the language and literacy skills they need to enter school ready to learn.

Thank you for holding this hearing and considering the Education Begins at Home Act, which will provide funding to support vital services for children who would otherwise enter school unprepared and be unsuccessful. Thank you for helping to ensure that all parents struggling to help their children succeed receive the support they need to bring the joy of reading, playing, learning, and school success into their children's lives. We hope that you will move forward with this legislation to enable states to provide families with high quality, research-validated home visiting services that are a critical component of successful school readiness, early childhood education, and parent support efforts. It is truly a cost-effective way to ensure that all children have the opportunity to enter school ready to succeed.