

TANF VERSUS SCHOOL SUCCESS

ISSUE: We have two conflicting federal and legislative priorities:

- Bring young children to school ready to succeed
- Require women on TANF to work 40 hours a week

In Michigan parents receiving Temporary Assistance to Needy Families are obligated to work for 40 hours a week. In addition to employment, work requirements can be satisfied by seeking work, training with respect to job search or job skills, or in the case of adolescents, completing high school. Up to 28 percent of the caseload can be exempted or deferred from work for specified reasons. In Michigan, mothers of newborns can be deferred for 3 months, although federal specifications would permit deferral until the child is one year of age.

Federal mandates for education have placed emphasis on success in school as measured in Michigan by the MEAP test at fourth grade. Bringing children to school ready to succeed has received attention in Michigan through the efforts of the Ready to Succeed Coalition, the ASAP-PIE initiative and the successor Great Start Great Parents grants to ISDs. The first 5 years of life are critical for brain development.

Those children least likely to succeed in school are children of unmarried mothers living in poverty. Nurturing efforts over the first five years of life, as well as parent involvement during the school years, are key to school success. Michigan's management of TANF with a sole focus on welfare to work is operating at cross purposes to Michigan's avowed goal for school success.

PROPOSAL: Include accomplishment of parenting tasks as part of the work hours expected to TANF recipients. This could be accomplished by FIA guidelines to local offices or by legislative direction, e.g.,

The required work time for TANF recipients shall include not less than 10 hours a week for parenting tasks related to the health, social-emotional development, and emergent literacy of their infant/toddler/preschool children and to the health and school performance of their school age children.

Activities would be specified in a service plan or agreement and could be monitored through self report checklist and signoffs or spot check reports from service providers. Appropriate parenting tasks would include:

- Speaking or singing to infant/toddler during child care tasks; talking to/reading to infant/toddler/preschool child ½ hour a day.
- Taking the child to medical appointments; enrolling in Medicaid, SCHIP, or WIC.
- Participating in intensive home visiting services such as infant mental health services.
- Participating in Early On or Special Education in accordance with an IFSP / IEP
- Participating in Even Start, Parents as Teachers, or library activities.
- Volunteering in Early Head Start, Head Start, or school; attending PTA meetings
- Facilitating homework.
- Other activities related to promoting the health, social-emotional development and emergent literacy/literacy of children