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# Focus

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## Learnfare: The Wisconsin experience

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This article is followed by a response by Silvia R. Jackson, Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services.

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Learnfare is a welfare reform initiative—first implemented in Wisconsin—designed to encourage teenage recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC) benefits

to attend school on a regular basis. Wisconsin legislation<sup>1</sup> provides that *all* teenagers (13 through 19 years of age) who are included in an AFDC grant must be enrolled in school and meet strict attendance standards to fulfill the participation requirements of the state's work-welfare program unless they have graduated from high school or have received some form of equivalency diploma. As introduced in Wisconsin, the incentive built into the program was primarily negative in character. When teen dependents of parents receiving AFDC or teen mothers on AFDC fail to meet the attendance requirements imposed by the program, their benefits are reduced until they comply with the requirements. Currently, the Wisconsin program covers virtually all teen recipients of AFDC, approximately 30,000 each month during the 1988–89 school year. About half of them are located in Milwaukee County—the state's only large urban area. At the present time, Governor Tommy Thompson is proposing that the program be extended to AFDC recipients ages 6 through 12.

The Learnfare concept represents an expression of the “social contract” model for structuring public assistance, which emerged with considerable force in the mid-1980s. According to this model, government will provide income support and (in some cases) training and education to enhance competitiveness in the labor market on condition that the recipient fulfill an obligation to achieve a level of self-sufficiency consistent with his or her capabilities. Lawrence Mead, a conservative analyst, contributed to the acceptance of the contract premise when he noted that “federal programs that support the disadvantaged and unemployed have been permissive in character,” and stressed that “they have given benefits to their recipients but have set few requirements for how they ought to function in return.”<sup>2</sup>

For adult recipients, participation in a work-welfare program by engaging in job search or vocational training activities serves to fulfill their obligation under the implicit contract. For teenage recipients, such an expectation would be inappropriate. The new “social contract” for this population as envisioned by the New York Task Force on Poverty and Welfare organized by Democratic Governor Mario Cuomo is summarized as follows: “Society, in return for public assistance, can insist that teenagers, including teen parents, must stay in school or in an alternative learning environment if that is more appropriate.”<sup>3</sup> The intuitive appeal of Learnfare as a concept is unmistakable, and many states are studying the Wisconsin experience with great interest.

## **The socio-political context**

Public policy toward the poor has always been in a state of flux. In general, the provision of income support without obligation has been viewed with disfavor throughout much of history. The purpose of the early AFDC program was to keep impoverished mothers out of the labor force so that they could fully attend to their caretaker responsibilities. Their obligation was to provide a “fit” home for their children, a concept that states operationalized by imposing numerous conditions (e.g., no man in the house) on the receipt of public assistance. The sense of obligation attached to welfare was attenuated about two decades ago through a series of court decisions and federal administrative rules. Under the “entitlement” concept that emerged, welfare was to be provided in a simple, equitable, and standardized fashion—based largely on categorical status (number of children, marital state) and economic need. The underlying assumption of the entitlement concept was that people were poor because they didn’t have enough money. The solution was direct: provide them with the shortfall.

The 1980s witnessed a second of what Charles Murray terms a paradigm shift—a transformation in the way basic questions are framed.<sup>4</sup> Perceptions of the poor and the nature of poverty moved from an emphasis on contextual/environmental explanations to those emphasizing personal

responsibility and concerns about “behavioral dependency.”<sup>5</sup> Though “behavioral dependency” and the related notion of a “culture of poverty” are difficult to operationalize and assess empirically, they remain convenient bases for describing the intellectual and political framework within which welfare reform has come to be discussed.<sup>6</sup> When poverty was perceived as situational in character, the poor were seen as victims of environmental and opportunity constraints—a variant of the “blocked opportunity” thesis that had guided the formulation of the War on Poverty in the 1960s. To the extent that the poor are now held responsible for their own circumstances, however, it no longer seems appropriate to supply the means by which they can remain impoverished and dependent. Nor has it escaped the attention of analysts that significant social shifts have occurred; most women, even those with young children, are now in the labor force. The current debate seeks more balance, taking into account both environmental and personal factors that contribute to poverty. Learnfare, to the extent that it imposes conditions on the receipt of public assistance, represents a return to the historic way of structuring welfare.

## **A crisis? Long-term trends and immediate concerns**

Immediately upon assuming office in January 1987, Wisconsin Governor Thompson began treating welfare as a crisis requiring instant remedies. Learnfare became a top welfare reform priority. Negotiations were begun with federal officials to secure necessary waivers. A bipartisan legislative committee was established to work out an agreement that would ensure the passage of authorizing legislation in the 1987–89 biennial budget, to be voted on in June 1987. And the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) was instructed to have an operational program in place for the 1987–88 school year. Although this “fast track” timetable was not met, a partial Learnfare program covering all teen parents and teen dependents ages 13–14 was initiated in spring 1988, and the full program was in place by the beginning of the 1988–89 school year. This was a considerable achievement given the complexity of the undertaking.

It is not clear whether the sense of crisis that apparently motivated the rush to implement Learnfare was justified. When viewed over time, many of the aggregate numbers used to indicate how the poor were faring could be seen as salutary. High school dropout rates, for example, have been declining for some time. Whereas 36.3 percent of white adults (ages 25–29) had not completed high school in 1960, the comparable statistic in 1985 was 13.2 percent.<sup>7</sup> Progress among blacks has been even more striking. Three out of five did not earn a high school diploma in 1960. By 1985 this proportion had fallen to less than one in five (17.6 percent).<sup>8</sup> Indices of literacy also had improved. The proportion of blacks reading at “adept” or “intermediate” levels rose

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from 41.1 percent in 1970 to 65.8 percent in 1985.<sup>9</sup> And despite popular impression, the birthrates for teens have been declining. Since 1960, expected births per teenaged woman have dropped from .80 to .51 for blacks and from .40 to .21 for whites, though a greater proportion of the births are nonmarital.<sup>10</sup>

This apparent progress, far from suggesting that there may be no need for draconian measures for those left behind, tends to focus media and public attention more insistently on the likely long-term poor. If others can make it, what is the matter with those who don't? The welfare dynamics literature indicates that most of those who must resort to welfare require only temporary assistance to help them through a difficult period (such as a divorce or illness). Of new entrants to public assistance, only 30 percent will eventually become chronically dependent—generally defined as welfare careers that exceed eight years. Yet, at any given point in time, 60 percent or more of the caseload will be long-term recipients, and it is these who capture the bulk of the welfare resources and public concern.<sup>11</sup>

Recent empirical work has confirmed what has long been suspected. Those recipients who obtain welfare at an early age, who never marry, and who have low earning capacity (poor work history, lack of a high school diploma) are more likely to become long-term welfare users.<sup>12</sup> And the children of long-term welfare recipients are more likely to become dependent themselves.<sup>13</sup> Furthermore, as the proportion of high school graduates continues to grow, those without a diploma encounter severe disadvantages in a changing labor market. William Julius Wilson stresses that a high school diploma has become the sine qua non for even the most menial jobs in urban areas.<sup>14</sup>

There is another reason for concern about those who fail to complete high school. Society can ill afford to lose the productive capabilities of any of today's youth. Analysts looking into the future predict a labor shortage alongside a chronically unemployed group. They estimate that only 14 percent of new jobs created through the year 2000 will not require a high school education, and that the majority of those entering the work force will be from groups we now call minorities.<sup>15</sup>

Finally, underlying each discussion about Learnfare is a concern about and fear of the "underclass." As discussed in the last issue of *Focus*,<sup>16</sup> this group has not been well defined, though most definitions include such attributes as income poverty, nonproductive behaviors, chronic dependency, and neighborhood environment. Whatever definition is employed, most observers believe the phenomenon has grown, though it still describes only a small proportion of the poor—perhaps 6 to 10 percent.<sup>17</sup> The numbers notwithstanding, the image of the lives of minority children being lost in drug-infested, decaying communities is compelling and an incentive to precipitate action. The message of Learnfare—directed toward those at greatest risk of falling into life patterns marked by chronic poverty—is clear; there will be costs for behaviors associated with what society identifies as counterproductive behavior.

### Implementation: The "fast track" and its cost

Only fourteen months elapsed between the time when Learnfare was proposed and the effective start-up of operations, truly an example of "fast track" enactment and implementation. This is all the more remarkable given that four institutional domains were involved: the federal government, the state legislature, the bureaucracies (welfare and education), and the client advocacy groups. Federal officials were particularly cooperative. Although they balked at the state's original proposal to make school attendance an eligibility factor for AFDC, they were enthusiastic about the sanction approach—suggesting that the initiative might be rationalized as an extension of the participation requirements of the state's work-welfare program. Furthermore, they did not require rigorous experimental evaluation of the

program (as was required for other waivers the state was seeking).

The posture within the state legislature was more cautious but apparently accepting of the initiative in principle, particularly when viewed as a quid pro quo for other reform initiatives favored by the Democratic opposition, who controlled both houses of the legislature. The language approved by the legislature in June 1987 and submitted to the governor for his signature covered *only* teen parents on AFDC; sanctions could be imposed *only* if child care was available; the student had an opportunity to participate in a school-administered service program, "Children at Risk"; and it was reasonable to expect the teen to graduate by age 20.

The bureaucracy energetically confronted the challenge of implementing a statewide program that required the cooperation of 72 county-administered welfare offices and over 400 school districts. The advocacy groups essentially were ignored. Three poorly publicized hearings were held that were attended by a total of 26 individuals.

Between May 1987, when the waiver request was submitted, and March 1988, when a partial program was in place, the implementation process became political and opposition crystallized. In Wisconsin, the so-called line item veto allows the governor to strike out sentences, words, numbers, and even punctuation before signing the budget bill. By striking out selected portions of the Learnfare legislation, the governor, in effect, expanded the program to all teen recipients and removed other conditions (e.g., referral to the "At Risk" program) that were to be met before the sanction could be imposed. In the rush to implement, program architects relied upon the promulgation of emergency rules by DHSS.<sup>18</sup> The September start-up goal was missed when the federal waiver was not received until October 1987. Then, on November 4, the Legislative Joint Committee for Review of Administrative Rules (JCRAR) voted to suspend the proposed rules and presented DHSS with twenty concerns, several stemming from the governor's vetoes and others representing questions raised by the celerity with which the complex program was being implemented. By this point public support for the program was undeniable, so a deal was cut to stagger the implementation (start with teen parents and young teen dependents). JCRAR rescinded the suspension in December 1987, but negative feelings persisted about the process by which the program was enacted.<sup>19</sup>

Putting Learnfare together was not easy. In January 1988, DHSS learned that a substantial number of errors were being made in identifying those potentially subject to a sanction, particularly in Milwaukee County. By now recipients had been notified several times that the program was about to begin only to have the start-up delayed again. Concerned about the possible magnitude of suspected information-processing errors, Timothy Cullen, who was Secretary of DHSS at the time, ordered state staff to contact by phone or in person every AFDC family that would be affected by the

legislation to explain the program and verify the status of children subject to the attendance requirement. According to DHSS officials, this was accomplished by March 1, and the limited version of Learnfare was under way. The full program, covering all AFDC teens, was implemented in September 1988. Whether or not the myriad of technical and procedural problems were resolved is unclear. The Milwaukee office of Legal Action of Wisconsin (LAW) claims that they are winning two-thirds of the several hundred appeals they have initiated on behalf of sanctioned clients.

## Essentials of the Wisconsin Learnfare program

Learnfare in Wisconsin depends upon a system of close monitoring of student attendance and the prompt imposition of sanctions. At every six-month AFDC interview, the attendance record of each teen covered by the program is examined. If the student has ten or more unexcused absences or has dropped out of school, compliance with the Learnfare provisions is monitored by the county income maintenance office. Each month, the agency mails a list of students to be monitored to the appropriate school district. The schools send back a record of the number of full days the monitored student is absent.

A monitored student may have no more than two unexcused, full-day absences in a month. If the record shows more, the family's AFDC check is reduced in the second month after the noncompliant behavior. To set the amount of the sanction, the noncompliant member of the AFDC family is ignored in calculating the grant amount. Sanctions vary from \$58 in large families to \$192 in two-person families, the average sanction being about \$100. If a sanctioned dependent teen (a nonparent) is the only minor in the AFDC family, a partial grant will be continued for three months, after which the case will be closed.<sup>20</sup> The full grant is restored when compliance has been documented.

Some students are exempted. Good-cause exemptions from the rule of unexcused absences include the following:

1. The student is expelled from school and alternative schooling is not available.
2. The teen has a child under 3 months of age.
3. No licensed day care is available for the child(ren) of teen parents subject to Learnfare.
4. Prohibitive transportation problems exist (e.g., to and from day care).
5. The teen is over 16 years of age and not expected to graduate from high school by age 20.

No fact-finding is undertaken before the sanction process is initiated (that is, nothing is done to verify that the unexcused absences have actually occurred). AFDC families who are subject to a sanction can appeal that decision. Generally, the family is notified of the impending sanction between the 10th and 13th day of the month following that month during which

the attendance irregularities were documented. If the family files an appeal before the sanction is actually imposed (on the first day of the month following their notification), the family will be entitled to full benefits until the validity of the appeal has been determined. If the appeal is denied in this circumstance, the state will recover that portion of their grant subject to the sanction for the period of time the sanction was in force. Families also have 45 days to file an appeal after the sanction is imposed. In this circumstance, the sanction will remain in effect, though the state will be required to make up any underpayment should the appeal subsequently be decided in the client's favor.

### **The first full year: A lost opportunity to learn**

Despite political and procedural difficulties, a working Learnfare program was in place for the 1988–89 school year. Given the national interest in the initiative, the program provided a marvelous opportunity to examine the numerous process and outcome issues attendant on Learnfare—an opportunity that was not capitalized upon. Federal officials did not insist upon an experimental evaluation as a condition for granting the waiver. State officials eschewed legislative suggestions that the concept be piloted and evaluated before being fully implemented. Baseline data on school attendance patterns were not collected in a systematic fashion, so carrying out meaningful analyses will be extremely difficult. The Employment and Training Institute (ETI) of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee will carry out a formal evaluation, but the enabling contract has only recently been signed—a year after the program was initiated.

Based upon preliminary administrative data available in August 1989,<sup>21</sup> claims have been made that the program is a success. It has been noted, for example, that the average length of a sanction during the 1988–89 school year was about three months and that some 70 percent of students sanctioned were penalized for three months or less. The conclusion drawn from these numbers, as publicized by DHSS, is that the sanction induced students to return to the classroom. While this could very well be the case, it is impossible to make such an inference from the data. For one thing, the sanctions could have been terminated for a variety of reasons—people move and/or leave welfare all the time; they appeal and have their grant restored; they find ways to circumvent regulations; they “age into” (turn 13) and/or “age out of” (turn 20) the program during the school year. For another, DHSS apparently assumes that the sanction months were consecutive (two or three months of noncompliance followed by continuing compliance with the attendance requirements). This may not be the case. Nor is there a way of knowing if it was the sanction that induced the change in behavior. Some other factor could have been responsible, such as the availability of child care.

The dangers associated with rushing judgment about the success of the program are exemplified by a subsequent DHSS

analysis of the data, done in September 1989.<sup>22</sup> This analysis looked only at teens who were monitored by Learnfare for at least four consecutive months during the school year. Fewer than half of all teens sanctioned over the course of the year met that criterion (3,233 out of 7,234). Of those 3,233 teens, slightly more than half (54 percent) returned to school *within* three months, but only 38 percent returned to school and were *still* there after three months. These numbers are decidedly less optimistic than those publicized earlier.

The bottom line is that the available numbers tell us nothing about the effectiveness of the program. It may well be that the actual—though unmeasured—success of Learnfare is attributable to the extent to which it deters teens from engaging in noncompliant behavior in the first place. Given the limitations of these data, we simply do not know. Since there is no control group or even some reasonable nonequivalent comparison group, the numbers can only serve as descriptive outcomes and cannot be used as indicators of program impact. The essential question is what *would* have been the attendance patterns (or school performance or some other measure of success) of the students in the *absence* of the program when compared with those exposed to the program. At this point, that question cannot be answered and, in fact, may never be answered from the initial Wisconsin experience.

The administrative data do provide descriptive information about the first year. Table 1 (on page 6) shows what proportion of Learnfare teens were located in Milwaukee versus the balance of the state and what the sanction rates were for each month of the school year. Ignoring November, a start-up month based upon September's school attendance information, the statewide sanction rates exhibit a curvilinear pattern. They quickly drop from over 9 percent to 7 percent before steadily climbing once again to 10 percent by the end of the school year. It is clear that this pattern is driven by the numbers in Milwaukee, where more than three-fourths of the sanctions occurred. There, the sanction rate evidenced a disturbing climb from about 11 percent in February to almost 17 percent at the end of the school year.

A cursory review of the available administrative data gives us the following picture. As suggested above, the mean number of months a given teen was sanctioned during the nine months of the school year was three months, with virtually no difference between Milwaukee and the rest of the state. The average for younger dependent teens (i.e., those ages 13–14 who are not parents themselves) was the lowest (2.5 months), whereas older dependent teens had the highest mean figure (3.1 months). Excluding the September start-up month, it would appear that no more than one in twenty of those sanctioned at all were penalized for the entire year, with older dependent teens having the highest rate (6 percent).

County size was related to sanction rates. As indicated, the average monthly sanction rate for Milwaukee County was in

**Table 1**  
**Percentage of Learnfare Teens in Milwaukee County**  
**and Balance of State and Percentage Sanctioned,**  
**1988-89 School Year**

Month	Milwaukee <sup>a</sup>		Balance of State <sup>b</sup>		State Totals	
	% of Learnfare Teens	% Sanct.	% of Learnfare Teens	% Sanct.	% of Learnfare Teens	% Sanct.
November	47.9%	7.5%	52.1%	2.5%	100%	4.9%
December	48.1	15.5	51.9	3.3	"	9.2
January	47.9	12.0	52.1	3.2	"	7.4
February	47.5	11.2	52.5	3.1	"	7.0
March	47.3	11.3	52.7	3.5	"	7.2
April	47.2	11.3	52.8	3.5	"	7.2
May	47.0	11.6	53.0	3.5	"	7.4
June	47.5	15.1	52.5	3.9	"	9.3
July	48.0	16.9	52.0	3.7	"	10.0
Total period	47.6	12.5	52.4	3.4	100	7.7

Source: DHSS administrative data.

Note: The sanction is applied two months *after* the attendance requirements are not met.

<sup>a</sup>Average number of teens covered was 14,634.

<sup>b</sup>Average number of teens covered was 16,107.

excess of 12 percent (considerably higher toward the end of the school year). For counties containing 3 to 5 percent of the Learnfare population, the sanction rate was 6.1 percent; for those containing between 2 and 3 percent of the target population, it was 3.8 percent; and for the smaller-sized counties it was less than 3 percent.

Failing to be enrolled in school accounted for about one-fifth of all sanctions. Failure to comply with the minimal monthly attendance requirement accounted for fully half of the sanctions imposed, with the remainder due to a failure by the student to verify his/her situation or some combination of factors. Not surprisingly, dropping out of school as a reason for being sanctioned was found disproportionately among teen parents—accounting for 45 percent of the sanctions in this group—and tended to be found less often among the younger teen dependent group (accounting for less than 10 percent of the sanctions).

Based upon a review of one month's data (April 1989), it would appear that older dependent teens face the highest probability of being sanctioned when they are out of compliance with Learnfare provisions. Of the 11,585 younger dependent teens covered by Learnfare, only 264 (2 percent) were sanctioned, whereas a handful (32) received an exemption. However, of the 14,110 older dependent teens in the program, 1,491 (11 percent) were sanctioned and an additional 91 were exempted. Of 5,208 teen parents covered by

Learnfare, 522 were sanctioned (10 percent) and 597 (11 percent) were presumably liable to a sanction but received an exemption. Not being expected to graduate by age 20 and lack of child care accounted for over 80 percent of the exemptions. This suggests that while about 20 percent of teen parents nominally are out of compliance with Learnfare provisions, they are more likely to be exempted from a penalty than other covered groups.

### **Without good numbers, the debate remains normative**

From a purely political perspective, the rush to implement was defensible. It did not matter that, as noted earlier, the long-term school attendance and literacy indices had been moving in a positive direction, nor that the state's AFDC rolls had begun to decline in mid-1986—presumably in response to an improved economy. The perception of a welfare crisis, an education crisis, and an urban underclass crisis remained. Herbert Grover, the Wisconsin Superintendent of Public Instruction, recently stressed that any measure that gets children into the classroom is worthwhile and, while noting that high school dropout rates from the Milwaukee public school system still exceed 40 percent, indicated support for finding some way to extend the Learnfare principle beyond the welfare population.<sup>23</sup> The fact that—as recently headlined in the *Milwaukee Journal*<sup>24</sup>—over half of

all births in Milwaukee in 1988 were out of wedlock heightens the sense of crisis. (That there were fewer births to married women—which partly accounted for the high proportion of nonmarital births—remains an obscure sidenote.) The sense of crisis persists. Getting the program going can be seen as a no-lose situation. If it succeeds in keeping teens in school, it may help improve their long-term prospects. If it does not, the state will save money by invoking the sanctions.

We interviewed a number of persons involved in the planning and implementing of Learnfare and found widespread support for the program in principle, even among those who were initially cool to the idea (e.g., the educational bureaucracy and Milwaukee County officials). There is considerably more agreement than might be expected for the proposition that welfare recipients—as part of a social contract—owe something to the state in exchange for the benefits they receive. And increasing school attendance was something that virtually all observers wanted, or as one Milwaukee official put it, “this at least gets their attention and into the front door where we have a shot at helping them.” What is far less clear, and is a matter of continuing debate, is whether government is living up to its responsibilities under the general premise of the new “social contract.”

The failure to develop the Learnfare concept carefully, to implement it with deliberation, and to conduct thorough process and impact evaluations right from the start leaves policymakers debating values and perceptions rather than focusing on useful information and analyzable experience. Proponents bend “so what” data (outcome numbers that cannot be compared to similar individuals not in the program) in order to make claims of success that cannot be substantiated. Opponents rely upon anecdote and impression to argue the case against the program. Virtually all of the issues raised at the beginning of the program remain today as the legislature considers expansion and as other states consider initiating such a program. We briefly review a few of these outstanding issues.

### **What will it accomplish?**

Success depends upon what is expected. If the objective is increased attendance *and* if the underlying theoretical model that poor attendance and dropping out of high school result from impoverished motivation and lack of parental supervision is accurate, the Learnfare intervention is at least plausible. From the beginning, however, the stated goals have been more ambitious: to “break the cycle of poverty” and “restore the firm hand of the missing father.”<sup>25</sup> It is a matter of debate whether sanction-induced class attendance will overcome the multiple disadvantages faced by some of the families at which the program is aimed. Some critics see it as an inexpensive “silver bullet” designed to avoid the kinds of service interventions needed to address the complex set of social and behavioral challenges posed by the chronically dependent.

### **Is it fair?**

The program continues to evoke a plethora of equity issues. Shouldn't there be penalties for all truant students and not just those who are economically disadvantaged and on welfare? Is it fair to penalize an entire family for the behavior of one member—particularly if the offender is an older and incorrigible teen? Are all teens at equal risk given the (allegedly) wide variance in local attitudes toward the program and—more critically—variance in administrative procedures? Is the lack of due process—the kind of fact-finding and mediation available to adult recipients participating in work-welfare—prima facie evidence of inequity?

### **Unknown impacts on families and schools**

A sensitive balance exists between teens and their parents. Learnfare presumably alters that balance by putting an economic weapon in the hands of teens, since their behavior now determines the size of the welfare grant. It is also conceivable that the economic insecurity introduced by Learnfare can increase intrafamily stress and counteract the behavioral changes intended by the sanctions. In any event, it is plausibly argued that the loss of income for those already facing economic hardship will have harsh effects on these families. Such impacts remain speculative given how little has been learned to date. It is also conceivable that Learnfare might adversely affect the general learning environment in some classrooms if unmotivated Learnfare-induced returnees disrupt classes or require disproportionate attention.<sup>26</sup> We posed such hypothetical possibilities to a number of individuals involved in the Learnfare initiative as well as to some critical of the program. There were no informed guesses as to the validity of these possibilities.

### **Is government in breach of contract?**

As part of the compromise whereby JCRAR rescinded its suspension of the DHSS emergency rules, funds were made available to support child care and transportation expenses for teen mothers. Beyond that, the Learnfare initiative is little more than a sanction. The governor has continued to resist providing additional resources to support outreach and family-based interventions to address the numerous factors associated with truancy and educational maladjustment (vetoing attempts to increase the availability and accessibility of such services in the 1989–91 biennial budget). His rationale is that guaranteeing services to teens at risk of sanction would impose an inordinate burden on local governments and school districts. It had been assumed that the Department of Public Instruction's Children-at-Risk program, if made available to all children at risk of dropping out of school, would be sufficient for this need, but this assumption was not borne out by subsequent experience. For some, the lack of services is evidence that government is not living up to its part of the “social contract.”<sup>27</sup>

### **Continuing administrative difficulties**

Learnfare is a complex undertaking, requiring coordination and cooperation among many institutions—state agencies,

county social service agencies, public school districts, private schools, and independent service agencies. Significant efforts were made to pull the various actors together and coordinate their activities, particularly in Milwaukee County, where a task force was established. Still, the information processing requirements are extraordinary and, if the client advocates are correct, numerous errors continue to be made. On a more systemic level, variation in key definitions and practices abounds. In some parts of northern Wisconsin, absence from school during hunting season is excused; in Milwaukee it is not. Some school districts require a written note from the parent when their child is absent; others will accept a phone message. Some counties hired specialists to help start the program; others did not. Some counties expended resources to provide services to teens likely to be sanctioned; and, again, others did not. Even in small matters, such as the number of times attendance is monitored during a day and how much discretion is permitted school officials in determining an excused absence, the program varies. No systematic attempt was made—nor would it likely have succeeded—to impose uniformity across the state nor (with the exception of large districts like Milwaukee) to ensure the adequacy of administrative practices.<sup>28</sup>

## Getting back on track

Learnfare is an expression of quaint, enduring concepts such as civic virtue, self-reliance, and personal responsibility. It positions education and human capital development at the very center of government's responsibility to the disadvantaged:

The moral foundation of the modern welfare state rests on linked assumptions about welfare and education. Welfare fills the gap occasioned by the absence of work. For the able bodied, welfare is meant to be transient; education, for every member of society, is meant to be lasting. The latter should obviate the need for the former. Long-term welfare dependency—as distinct from the actual receipt of welfare by an individual for a specified period of time—should not exist.<sup>29</sup>

As a concept, Learnfare represents an initiative quite consistent with the main thrust of contemporary debate and invokes comparisons with the “hand up, not handout” theme of the War on Poverty: government help should enhance individual opportunity rather than correct unequal economic outcomes; programs that emphasize mutual obligations (government and recipient) should replace entitlements; and services should be reintegrated with the provision of income support.

Ultimately, the Learnfare debate—as with most reform issues—must move beyond philosophical and political disputes. Teens must stay in school and avoid nonmarital births if their life prospects are to be improved. By the end of their teen years, about 20 percent of white women and 45 percent of black women will have become pregnant. Most of these

pregnancies will result in out-of-wedlock births—about one in two for white teens (an eightfold increase over the past three decades) and about nine out of ten for black teens. Moreover, teen mothers are about half as likely to finish high school as their peers and, if unmarried, have a 50 percent probability of being on welfare within two years. Although a high school diploma does not ensure economic well-being, it continues to be related to one's relative economic position. In the mid-1980s, men 25–29 years old could expect to earn less in real dollars than their counterparts in the early 1970s irrespective of how many years of schooling they had completed. However, those with a high school diploma could expect to earn roughly 60 percent more than those with less schooling, and college graduates could expect to earn 60 percent more than those with only a high school education. The decline in real earnings since the early 1970s has been most severe for those with less education.<sup>30</sup>

The continuing debate about Learnfare in Wisconsin involves conceptions about approach rather than the essential merit of the idea. In this respect, Mickey Kaus makes a simple yet useful distinction between what he terms the “hardheads” and the “softheads” in the basic approach to welfare reform.<sup>31</sup> The “hards” tend to focus on dependency and favor short-term interventions that emphasize deterrence. The “softs,” on the other hand, place more credence in the ability of positive economic incentives to induce desirable behaviors and in the capacity of services to overcome personal and structural barriers to the attainment of self-sufficiency.

Most critics of the Learnfare initiative concur that the program has improved communication between the welfare and education systems in Wisconsin. Some anticipate that this forced marriage will ultimately result in coordinated programs that go beyond attendance to grapple honestly with the challenges associated with improving the human capital of the severely disadvantaged. But the critics assert—not without justification—that the Wisconsin model is incomplete and fails to achieve the *mutual obligation* required by the new “social contract.” Particularly for the “softs,” the lack of outreach and family intervention, the absence of in-depth fact-finding before the initiation of the sanction process, the lack of positive inducements, and the failure to ensure (rather than assume the existence of) a broader array of support services for Learnfare students constitute major flaws in the program as introduced.

Interest in the Learnfare concept is extensive. One DHSS official notes that some forty states had inquired about the Wisconsin program. According to Josie Fohrenbach, most of the states actively attempting to develop similar programs in 1987–88 adopted “softer” and more balanced strategies.<sup>32</sup> The typical plan called for a case manager to work directly with at-risk teens and for supportive services to the target population. The Minnesota plan, for example, would require a contract specifying an individualized educational plan. In Ohio the search for balance led to a proposal containing both positive *and* negative economic incentives.



What other states seemed to grasp is that “breaking the cycle of poverty” requires intensive collaboration between the education and welfare bureaucracies. The Ford Foundation overviews the extraordinary outpouring of experimental efforts to enhance the opportunities and performance of disadvantaged students in its report titled *The Common Good: Social Welfare and the American Future*.<sup>33</sup> These experiments include (1) incentive programs to keep youth in school and introduce reforms to make their educational experience more rewarding; (2) interventions designed to integrate remedial study, work experience, and vocational preparation; and (3) collaborative efforts between schools and the business community on the local level. For example, some 22 percent of 9,000 school districts surveyed in 1984 had adopted some form of business-sponsored “adopt a school” program.

The sense of immediacy surrounding the implementation of Learnfare in Wisconsin precluded a careful consideration of the problematic issues inherent in such a program. As other states entertain plans to start, expand, or revise such an initiative, it may be prudent to carefully consider the following:

- Who should be covered by the program? Teen parents are a natural target group but what about other teens or younger children on AFDC? There are compelling arguments for starting with younger children, who are more controllable and have not yet internalized counterproductive habits.
- How expansive should the program be? Moving to cover a broad target group may result in an effort that is “a mile wide and an inch deep.” Limited resources may suggest that efforts be targeted on the more disadvantaged students.
- What is the nature of the client obligation? Is attendance all that will be required? Conceivably, the program can build in provisions for acknowledging performance, for including other activities to help teens in adulthood (work experience, parenting classes, etc.), and for supporting other behaviors consistent with good citizenship.
- What is to be the nature of the incentives? Manipulating welfare guarantees is a most accessible lever for inducing desired behaviors. Both positive and negative incentives would ensure a more balanced program.
- What support and parallel services will be provided? Clearly, child care for teen parents is necessary. But the array of alternative educational settings, special intervention models, and individualized curricula upon which to build a comprehensive program is extensive. The structure of the model is critical if the program is to be focused on education rather than attendance.
- What about the host of process questions: case management and decision-making, ensuring confidentiality and the protection of rights, providing for administrative comparability across jurisdictions, and so forth. It

takes little imagination to envision the complex issues in this area.

- How can one know if it is working? This involves thinking through what the program is really about and making the investment to ensure that more than “so what” numbers are available when the hard, political questions are asked.

Wisconsin has demonstrated that sanctions can be imposed on the school-aged welfare population on a large scale. A fuller expression of the new “social contract,” one that realistically addresses the challenges posed by the severely disadvantaged, remains to be tested.<sup>34</sup>

## Conclusion: A concept in transition

The logistical and operational obstacles to mounting a program of this magnitude were formidable. Indeed, some of the expedient measures employed to “get the program going” may well have been necessary and the consequent shortcomings unavoidable. Taking the time to work out all definitions fully, to put in place a sophisticated evaluation component before commencing operations, and to develop a comprehensive supportive case-management plan would have delayed implementation considerably. Whether the apparent costs associated with the “fast track” approach to implementation are offset by the success of actually initiating a program remains a normative question that goes beyond this brief review.

“Doing” public policy, fortunately, is a continuing process. The state’s initial experience with the program does not necessarily capture the dynamics of how the program is evolving or where it may be going. As noted more fully in the second Learnfare article in this issue (“Learnfare: The State’s Perspective”), the seeds of a more complete and mature social contract were present in the original version of the program and are clearly evidenced in the proposal to expand the program. For example, some funds to support alternative education opportunities for older teens in Milwaukee County were made available during the first year of operations. More important, the proposal to expand the program to children ages 6–12 who are recipients of AFDC incorporates into its design a fuller complement of case-management initiatives.

The Learnfare concept, much like Workfare for adult AFDC recipients, is in transition. Both were envisioned as representing the perspective of the “hards”—strategies for moving welfare clients toward self-sufficiency by imposing costs on dependency-perpetuating behaviors. During the early years of the Reagan presidency, for example, there was a considerable push for conventional workfare initiatives, one outcome of which was the Community Work Experience Program (CWEP). That push for workfare slowly evolved toward more broadly conceptualized employment and training programs for welfare recipients that combine work requirements with training and education opportunities—a

public policy outcome illustrated in the design of the JOBS component of the recently enacted Family Support Act. A similar evolution can be anticipated for Learnfare, as policy-makers struggle with the challenge of “breaking the cycle of poverty.” ■

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<sup>1</sup>1987 Wisconsin Act 27, Section 49.50(7).

<sup>2</sup>Lawrence Mead, *Beyond Entitlement: The Social Obligation of Citizenship* (New York: The Free Press, 1986), p. 1.

<sup>3</sup>New York State Task Force, “A New Social Contract—Rethinking the Nature and Purpose of Public Assistance,” Report of the Task Force on Poverty and Welfare, submitted to Governor Mario Cuomo, 1986, as quoted in *Welfare Policy for the 1990s*, ed. Phoebe H. Cottingham and David T. Ellwood (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1989), p. 162.

<sup>4</sup>Murray, *Losing Ground: American Social Policy, 1950–1980* (New York: Basic Books, 1984).

<sup>5</sup>See Michael Novak et al., *A Community of Self-Reliance: The New Consensus on Family and Welfare* (Washington, D.C.: American Enterprise Institute for Public Policy Research, 1987).

<sup>6</sup>See the popular works of George Gilder (*Wealth and Poverty* [New York: Basic Books, 1981]); Ken Auletta (*The Underclass* [New York: Random House, 1982]); Murray (*Losing Ground*); and Mead (*Beyond Entitlement*).

<sup>7</sup>Christopher Jencks, “What Is the Underclass—And Is It Growing?” *Focus*, 12:1 (Spring and Summer 1989), p. 24.

<sup>8</sup>Ibid.

<sup>9</sup>Ibid.

<sup>10</sup>Ibid., p. 22.

<sup>11</sup>See, for example, Mary Jo Bane and David Ellwood, *The Dynamics of Dependence: The Routes to Self-Sufficiency* (Cambridge, Mass.: Urban Systems Research, 1983); and “Slipping Into and Out of Poverty: The Dynamics of Spells,” *Journal of Human Resources*, 21 (Winter 1986), 1–23.

<sup>12</sup>David Ellwood, “Targeting ‘Would-Be’ Long-Term Recipients of AFDC,” Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., Princeton, N.J., 1986.

<sup>13</sup>See Irwin Garfinkel and Sara McLanahan, *Single Mothers and Their Children* (Washington D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1986).

<sup>14</sup>Wilson, *The Truly Disadvantaged: The Inner City, the Underclass, and Public Policy* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1987).

<sup>15</sup>Another way to view the relationship between the labor market and poverty/dependency is to focus on structural changes in the economy and concentrated, chronic impoverishment in urban areas. See William Julius Wilson and Loïc J. D. Wacquant, “Poverty, Joblessness, and the Social Transformation of the Inner City,” in *Welfare Policy for the 1990s*, pp. 70–102.

<sup>16</sup>*Focus*, 12:1. The entire issue explores definitions of the underclass.

<sup>17</sup>Isabel Sawhill, ed., *Challenge to Leadership: Economic and Social Issues for the Next Decade* (Washington, D.C.: Urban Institute Press, 1988), Chap. 7.

<sup>18</sup>Emergency rules are those proposed by an executive agency for the purpose of implementing legislative intent without requiring complete legislative review and public input.

<sup>19</sup>One client advocacy group, Legal Action of Wisconsin, filed a suit questioning the legality of Learnfare as implemented. The action was dismissed in November 1988.

<sup>20</sup>As of July 1, 1989, if the only dependent child is sanctioned, the AFDC grant continues indefinitely for the parent as permitted under a change in federal law provided in the JOBS regulations of the Family Support Act. Prior to July 1989, benefits to the parent were provided for only three months at 100 percent state expense. According to DHSS officials, the state incurred this expense so parents could maintain a home while they worked with the child to get him or her to return to school or to improve attendance.

<sup>21</sup>This section relies on DHSS administrative data prepared by Neil Gleason and Carol Weidel.

<sup>22</sup>Based upon an internal DHSS memo from Carol Weidel to Diane Waller, September 11, 1989.

<sup>23</sup>Comments made by Mr. Grover on “Wisconsin Week,” WHA-TV, shown on September 22, 1989.

<sup>24</sup>*Milwaukee Journal*, September 8, 1989, p. 1.

<sup>25</sup>These were cited often as the program goals by Timothy Cullen when he served as Secretary of DHSS.

<sup>26</sup>Rutgers sociologist Jackson Toby argues that it is counterproductive to force apathetic and hostile students to return to school. See “The Dropout Controversy—Coercion or Choice?” in *The Public Interest*, No. 96 (Summer 1989), pp. 134–136.

<sup>27</sup>A number of counties have pushed for intensive services targeted on the most disadvantaged students. For example, Dane County developed “Project Bootstraps” and Milwaukee County is planning, with DHSS assistance, a program called “Project Crossroads.” These are very modest efforts—the Milwaukee program will only reach 100 students and their families.

<sup>28</sup>DHSS provided Milwaukee County with four staff persons during the Learnfare start-up period.

<sup>29</sup>Denis Doyle, “Welfare Dependency and Education: Is There a Connection?” in *Ladders Out of Poverty*, ed. Jack Meyer (Washington D.C.: American Horizons Foundation, 1986), p. 129.

<sup>30</sup>The material in this paragraph was drawn from *The Common Good: Social Welfare and the American Future*, Ford Foundation Project on Social Welfare and the American Future (New York: The Ford Foundation, 1989), Chap. 3.

<sup>31</sup>Kaus, “Revenge of the Softheads,” *New Republic*, June 19, 1989, pp. 24–27.

<sup>32</sup>Josie Fohrenbach, “Learnfare: A Questionable Experiment,” Center for Law and Social Policy, Washington, D.C., 1988.

<sup>33</sup>See *The Common Good*.

<sup>34</sup>A substantial amount of experimentation on how to intervene effectively with “at risk” teens, particularly teen parents, continues. See Patricia Auspos, with Marilyn Price, *Launching Jobstart: A Demonstration for Dropouts in the JTPA System* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1987); Denise Polit, Janet Quint, and James Riccio, *The Challenge of Serving Teenage Mothers* (New York: Manpower Demonstration Research Corporation, 1988). More recent intervention models in Newark and Camden, N.J., and Chicago are being evaluated by Mathematica Policy Research, Inc.