

Learnfare: The state's perspective

by Silvia R. Jackson

Silvia R. Jackson, Administrator, Division of Economic Support, Department of Health and Social Services of the State of Wisconsin, reviewed the preceding article and comments on it here. Her comments are divided into four sections: clarifications of main themes presented in the article; objections to specific statements; comment on questions raised by Learnfare; and a conclusion.

Clarifications of major themes presented in the article

Services to the at-risk population

The article does not mention many of the significant program components that have contributed greatly to the overall success of Learnfare to date. For instance, the Department allocated \$1.2 million in the 1988-89 school year for alternative education for 18 and 19 year old Learnfare teens. The availability of this funding has encouraged and enabled many teen dropouts to return to school. Alternative programs funded through Learnfare offer specialized programming to meet the special needs of students. Many also offer on-site day care, parenting skills training, and other programming designed to benefit the student. Alternative education funding is available statewide to assist teens who have dropped out of school to return.

The Department also provides funding for three Learnfare case managers in Milwaukee County to assist teen dropouts. During the 1988-89 school year, 300 Milwaukee teens who had dropped out of school returned to alternative education programs as a direct result of the intervention by these Learnfare case managers. An additional 387 dropouts under age 18 agreed to return to the Milwaukee Public School system (MPS) again after being contacted and assisted by Learnfare case managers. Many counties in addition to Milwaukee have implemented similar procedures through funding made available through Learnfare Income Maintenance Administration and the Job Opportunity and Basic Skills Training (JOBS) program of the Family Support Act of 1988.

The article indicates in several places that the Learnfare program is strictly punitive and that no services are offered. This is simply not correct. State and county staff statewide did outreach to "at-risk" teens before Learnfare sanctions began and have increased their efforts since program implementation. In Milwaukee, in addition to the three case managers mentioned above, the Department now funds six full-time positions in the Milwaukee County Department of Social Services, assigned to operate the Learnfare Hotline, to respond to client inquiries about Learnfare, to ensure the accuracy of sanctions, and to address fair hearing issues. Beginning January 1, 1990, the Department will also fund two full-time Milwaukee Public School positions, again assigned to ensure the integrity of the program and provide services.

Changes in the proposed expansion of the program

I would especially like to clarify that the proposed expansion of Learnfare is not simply an expansion of the existing program. Significant changes are anticipated, including the addition of a case-management component designed to serve at-risk AFDC children. Concerns with the current program will also be addressed during the expansion effort. For example, the Department of Health and Social Services and the Department of Public Instruction will work closely with local schools and social service agencies to develop a definition of "at-risk" for Learnfare purposes that is consistent with the state's Children-at-Risk, truancy, and compulsory attendance laws. Under the expanded program, families with children at risk will receive case-management services to address problems which contribute to poor school attendance. The case-management component will include referrals to treatment for alcohol and other drug abuse and for child abuse, and it will make referrals for other social services as appropriate, in addition to working with the family and school to assure that the child is placed in an appropriate educational program. As long as the family complies with the provisions of the case-management plan, no sanction will be imposed.

Input of advocacy groups

To say that "advocacy groups essentially were ignored" is not at all accurate. Many of the provisions in the current law

and rule are there, at least in part, as a result of input we received from various advocates, including

- Basing sanctions on full days of unexcused absence and not allowing partial days to be counted at all;
- Inclusion of the name and phone number of a contact person at the school for the Children-at-Risk program on the Learnfare notices, in addition to referring children to the at-risk program;
- Confidentiality provisions limiting access of Learnfare information to the school attendance officers;
- The good-cause provision that allows the income maintenance agency to override an unexcused absence for several reasons.

We have also had numerous meetings with advocates since the implementation of Learnfare to discuss concerns they have with the program. They are also represented at the monthly Learnfare meetings in Milwaukee. It is very misleading and incorrect for this article to indicate that advocates have been ignored.

The Department held three public hearings on the Learnfare rules in Madison, Milwaukee, and Wausau on April 19, 21, and 26, 1988. The Department followed the procedure that is used for all changes to income maintenance policy in notifying counties and other interested persons of the hearings. For Learnfare, the notice of the hearings appeared in the *Wisconsin Administrative Register* on March 31, 1988. A notice of hearing was mailed out on March 9, 1988, to all persons on the Division of Community Services mailing list. This list includes advocacy organizations as well as many others. A notice was also sent to all counties and tribal agencies on April 5, 1988.

Status of AFDC recipient if only dependent child is sanctioned

As of July 1, 1989, if the only dependent child is sanctioned, the AFDC grant continues indefinitely for the parent because of a change in federal law included in the JOBS provisions of the Family Support Act of 1988. Prior to July 1989, payment was provided for three months at 100 percent state expense. This was not an allowable expense under our federal waiver. We provided this support using state dollars so parents could maintain a home while they worked with their children to help them get back to school or improve attendance.

Shortcomings of available data

DHSS recognizes the shortcomings of the August data and is in the process of obtaining additional information.

DHSS did not assume in the original report that all sanction months were consecutive. In fact, there is no validity to the later analysis that sanctions must be consecutive followed by months of no sanction for Learnfare to be having an impact. If a teen with poor prior attendance improves attendance

sufficiently to only be sanctioned in three or fewer months while being subject to Learnfare for the entire school year, then Learnfare has had a positive impact. As mentioned elsewhere in the article, the real benefit of Learnfare may be that teens improve their attendance without first being penalized.

The subsequent “analysis” done in September by a DHSS staff person included as many or more shortcomings as the original summary. These will be avoided in the report that is now being prepared. As just one example, the September analysis is limited to the first month a teen is sanctioned and the third month after that. This means that a teen who is subject to the monthly attendance requirements for the entire school year, but is not sanctioned until one of the last three months of the school year, is not considered in the analysis. This teen certainly has improved attendance and should not be exempted from any analysis. In addition, a teen who was in school and subject to Learnfare attendance requirements for the entire school year, but was sanctioned only in December and March, would be considered a teen who was “still not in school” after three months. In fact, this analysis has removed many teens who improved their attendance under Learnfare, yet it still shows that 54 percent of sanctioned teens improved attendance and were sanctioned for three or fewer months. It is invalid to assume that sanction months must be consecutive, followed by months of no sanction, for Learnfare to be having a positive impact.

Our experience over the first full year of Learnfare leads us to believe that Learnfare has made an impact on helping to get teens to return to school or improve attendance. We realize that Learnfare may not be the only motivator to get some of the teens to return. Learnfare was combined together with other programs such as the Children-at-Risk program and the new truancy and compulsory attendance laws to help ensure that teens get the education they need to be productive adults.

Sanctions at the end of the school year

The article indicates that sanctions were higher near the end of the school year. While school districts have indicated that attendance declines in spring owing to spring fever, there is another more significant contributor to this increase in sanctions that should be pointed out. Late in the 1988–89 school year, Milwaukee County reviewed cases with a teenager to assure that they were properly coded for Learnfare. In this process they identified several teens who had poor prior attendance but had not been properly coded for monthly monitoring. The addition of these individuals to the Learnfare monthly attendance requirement resulted in an increase in the number of teens sanctioned.

Objections to specific statements

“Strict attendance standards”

We do not believe this is an accurate description of the Learnfare attendance requirements; they are far from strict.

Program requirements are based on “Children-at-Risk” legislation, but whereas “at risk” legislation counts *all* absences, Learnfare counts only unexcused absences. Under Learnfare, the teen is allowed two full days of unexcused absences each month without penalty. Additionally, partial-day absences and those absences for which an excuse is provided are not considered at all in the Learnfare requirements.

“Lack of a rigorous experimental evaluation”

The article states that federal officials are “not requiring a rigorous experimental evaluation.” This is inaccurate; a rigorous evaluation for Learnfare is required just as for other waivers. Federal officials have reviewed and approved all steps of the evaluation, including the RFP (Request for Proposals), the evaluation proposal selected, the contract with the Employment and Training Institute of the University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee, and the draft research design. The Low Income Opportunity Board, while requiring rigorous evaluations for all demonstrations, has agreed that control groups are not necessary in all instances to accomplish a meaningful evaluation.

We are late in signing the ETI evaluation contract because of the numerous steps we were required to take in getting federal review and approval for the evaluation. We are very anxious to begin the evaluation.

The role of the governor

The Governor’s veto did not remove the provisions to make child care available and refer children to the “At Risk” program. The 1987–89 budget bill included funding specifically for child care and transportation for Learnfare teens. It was always the intent that teen parents would be exempt from Learnfare if regulated child care was not available. The Governor’s veto did not affect this. Also, referral to the Children-at-Risk program was a part of the original Learnfare planning process that was not eliminated by the Governor’s veto.

“The state will save money by invoking sanctions”

The intent of Learnfare was never to save money through sanctions. Any “savings” from sanctions are more than offset by costs for day care, transportation, and funding for alternative education. The only money the program intends to save is welfare benefits in future years by having teens on AFDC get a high school education so they can be productive adults and not be dependent on our programs in the future.

“Virtually all of the issues raised at the beginning of the program remain today”

This is an incorrect statement. Many of the issues have already been addressed; others will be addressed as we work on expansion of the program.

Comment on questions raised about Learnfare

What will it accomplish?

The article indicates that the current program avoids service intervention. This is not the case. The current program provides service interventions through funding for day care, transportation, and alternative education. Outreach and case-management services are provided in some counties through funding included in Income Maintenance Administration, the JOBS program, and additional funding that we have put into Milwaukee County specifically for Learnfare. Some counties have also contributed their own dollars to provide Learnfare service interventions.

Is it fair?

The article indicates a wide variety of local attitudes. We have found that most local staff statewide are in favor of the Learnfare program. We are aware of only one school district in the state that does not fully support it. County social services have also been supportive.

Is there due process?

The Learnfare program certainly provides for due process as required under the law and our federal waiver. This was addressed in the decision to dismiss all claims included in the Learnfare law suit. While the current program provides ample opportunity for families to present good cause and avoid or reverse sanctions, the expanded program will greatly enhance this opportunity through the case-management component.

Are there unknown impacts on families and schools?

It should be pointed out in the article that all of the issues raised are being addressed in the evaluation we have contracted for. It continues to concern me that an argument we hear against Learnfare is that these Learnfare teens might adversely affect the general learning environment in some classes. Schools are required by law to teach all children. If regular school programs do not meet the needs of the students, thus causing them to be disruptive, schools must provide appropriate programs to meet their needs. This is one of the primary purposes of the Children-at-Risk legislation. This certainly is not a reason for allowing children not to attend school and get a high school education.

Are there continuing administrative difficulties?

It is important that the article point out where the administrative difficulties occurred and the numerous changes that have been made to address the difficulties that were encountered. Problems were almost exclusively in Milwaukee County. To address these, several things were done in addition to the monthly coordination meetings. The first step was adding the Learnfare Hotline in Milwaukee County DSS and including the phone number of the Hotline on all Learnfare

negative notices. We have recently added staff to the Hotline and will also be funding staff at MPS specifically to address Learnfare administrative difficulties. As I mentioned earlier, all staff will help to assure the accuracy of Learnfare attendance information and sanctions. In addition, late in the 1988-89 school year MPS instituted an internal reverification process for all teens potentially subject to Learnfare sanctions. For any individual identified in the monthly match as having more than two unexcused absences in the month, the school attendance officer must reverify that the number of reported absences is correct and that the absences were in fact unexcused. If any errors in the original information are found, the information is reported to the county prior to the effective date of the sanction, and the sanction is reversed if appropriate. MPS has also conducted training of school personnel so they understand the Learnfare program and the importance of providing correct attendance information. All of these changes, along with the continuing cooperation and collaboration of the various agencies involved, have done a great deal to reduce or eliminate any errors that were occurring. Any remaining administrative issues, such as deer hunting being excused in one part of the state and not another, are being addressed as we look at expansion of the program.

Conclusion

The article states that Learnfare has proven only that sanctions can be imposed on the school-aged welfare population on a large scale. We disagree strongly with this conclusion. We believe that Learnfare has also shown that some teens will return to school or improve attendance at least in part because of a program like Learnfare. While we can't tell the exact number of teens who returned to school or improved attendance, or if Learnfare was the only reason for this change, there is no question that Learnfare has already had a positive impact on helping teens in Wisconsin get a high school education. We further believe that by expanding Learnfare as proposed, there will be an even greater impact by preventing problems at an early age and helping these kids get on the right track before they fall behind and drop out of school. ■

Joseph Pechman 1918-1989

Dr. Joseph Pechman served on the National Advisory Committee of the Institute for Research on Poverty from 1975 until 1988. His counsel helped guide the Institute through a period when federal funding priorities shifted away from questions related to poverty in America. During that time he urged that national attention continue to be given to the nature, causes, and consequences of poverty, and he provided strong support for the work of IRP.

Drawing on his special knowledge of the distribution of income, the actual and potential effects of taxation, and the nature of income inequality in the United States, Dr. Pechman made important contributions to the discussions of the Advisory Committee, which in turn helped shape the Institute's research agenda.