



Alabama's BEE Program— Enhancing School Readiness in Underserved Populations

Impact Statement

The Issue:

The quality of parental care and involvement in the first five years is critical to the development of the physical, social, emotional and intellectual skills children will need in order to succeed in domains outside the family, particularly in school. Parents require information that offers them knowledge, skills and alternatives for interacting with their children to develop these skills.

What's Been Done:

The Begin Education Early program is helping parents enhance their children's readiness for school in five West Alabama counties – Bibb, Choctaw, Pickens, Tuscaloosa and Wilcox. The program is designed to provide geographically isolated and limited-resource families access to parenting and early childhood education as well as to youth, family and community support networks. It provides parents with information and support to help them make a positive impact on their children's development. This includes increasing parents' knowledge and use of positive discipline skills and alternatives to harsh or physical punishment and increasing skills to provide appropriate support for their children's intellectual, social and emotional needs.

Paraprofessional educators work with participant families who have at least one child under the age of 5. Participant families are enrolled for a minimum of 10 one-hour session over a three-month period. Participants attend their sessions in their homes or aboard a van converted into a classroom on wheels.

With parents, educators used the Principles of Parenting and Basic Parenting curricula, supplemented, as appropriate, with the Building Strong Families and/or Parents as Teachers curricula. With children, educators used either an original, developmentally appropriate early childhood curriculum or the Parents as Teachers curriculum.

A competitive grant proposal, written and submitted in the fall of 2002 to USDA's CYFAR initiative to support three counties to implement an expanded BEE program, was funded for 2003 through 2008. New programmatic efforts are focusing on broadening the scope of the BEE program to include health literacy and co-parenting

education to supplement the school readiness information that parents received in the original BEE program.

Three educators/BEE program coordinators were hired in Wilcox, Macon and Perry counties and have received training to implement BEE programming.

Why We Care:

Helping children grow and develop into productive citizens is good for children, their families and for the state.

Due to state budget cuts in funding to non-state agencies, the BEE program—in place since 1997—was suspended in mid-summer. It is unfortunate that such a successful program fell victim to budget shortfalls. Until July, when programs were shut down, BEE educators in these counties had worked with and graduated a total of 73 participants. Each adult and child in participating families received a minimum of 10 hours of education over 3 months.

In open-ended questions, 79 percent of parents were able to identify one or more specific ways in which their relationships with their children had been positively influenced by the program including increased involvement, attention, or affection (33 percent); understanding (13 percent), the use of positive discipline (16 percent), and increased interest and activity in their children's learning (13 percent).

The three items assessing parental attitudes about the use of guidance strategies showed an average increase of 31 percent in appropriate responses from pre- to post-test.

When asked initially how they prepare their preschool-aged children for school, relatively few parents described behaviors other than teaching young children basic facts or skills (ABC's, counting, tying shoes, etc.). After completing the program, more parents described school-readying behaviors that went beyond teaching basic facts: the percentage of parents reporting behaviors encouraging language skills increased from 26 percent to 69 percent; reporting self-control-related behaviors increased from 12 percent to 33 percent; reports of social skills-related behaviors increased from 12 percent to 13 percent; and reports of behaviors motivating children to learn (such as doing special projects together and creating special places for learning in the home) increased from 7 percent to 15 percent.

In May 2003, \$150,000 in USDA grant funds were made available to further develop and implement expanded BEE programming in Wilcox, Macon and Perry counties. Programmatic efforts with the expanded BEE program in Wilcox, Macon and Perry counties are under way and new assessment tools are being created. Three employees were hired to develop and coordinate community collaborations with other agencies and organizations concerned with the parenting and co-parenting skills of parents of young children and with health and school readiness issues. A second year of funding has been applied for to begin May 2004.

Future plans are to continue to seek external grant funding from Children's Trust Fund, if and when those funds may once again become available, and from other agencies to support county programs. Applications for

continuing USDA funding will be submitted as necessary.