

Testimony before the Health and Human Services Committee  
March 25, 2014

Re: LD 1842:  
"An Act To Amend the Laws Governing the Temporary Assistance for Needy  
Families Program"

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and

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OPENING THE DOORS TO HIGHER EDUCATION FOR LOW-INCOME WOMEN:  
THE SUCCESS OF MAINE'S PARENTS AS SCHOLARS PROGRAM

Maine's decision in 1996 to resist the force-welfare-recipients-into-any-job philosophy of national reform was visionary. Instead of cutting off possibilities for higher education for poor people temporarily in need of public assistance, Maine continued along the route it had embarked upon 15 years earlier. The state would continue to help low-income mothers improve their job prospects through higher education, so they could enjoy better workforce opportunities in the future. Taking such a thoughtful and humane approach to welfare reform was novel at the time, and still is. Maine's approach has proved itself over time and has spread to more states: Hawaii, Pennsylvania, Kentucky, Illinois, Nebraska, and California are among them.

As Maine demonstrated, providing welfare recipients with access to postsecondary education can improve their prospects for a life without poverty. Everyone benefits when that happens.

**The Evidence Shows Positive Gains**

Across the United States, only about six percent of welfare recipients are enrolled in some kind of educational program, but 90 percent of them find jobs paying two to three times more than the typical wages earned by people on welfare. Good outcomes for Maine's college students on welfare are well-documented. We surveyed members of this cohort three times – in 1999, 2001, and 2006 – to learn about their educational experiences, employment status, and family life. Our findings parallel what has been found in many studies showing that higher education is one of the most promising pathways out of poverty:

- Nine out of ten of the beneficiaries of Maine's program report positive changes in their lives – including improved family finances, promotions at work, home ownership, fewer family crises, and good outcomes at school for their children.

Compared to other welfare recipients, parent-scholars require fewer publicly funded support services.

- More than one-third reported that their confidence had increased and consequently their goals had changed – heightened – for both themselves and their children. Many respondents credited higher education for turning their lives around in dramatic and positive ways.
- Maine’s employers have benefitted from access to a better-educated work force.
- In our final survey, 44 percent of Maine welfare-students who had received a degree reported earning a bachelor’s degree. This helps Maine’s tax base, because U.S. Census data show that people who complete two years of college earn around 30 percent more than those with just high school diplomas, and those who earn four-year bachelor’s degrees earn 32 percent more than the two-year graduates.

### **Education: The Road to Independence**

Education beyond high school is the door to the middle class in twenty-first century America. Studies have consistently found that educational success after high school leads to gains for individuals and the country as a whole. The economic benefits are clear and logical: increased access to jobs with good wages and health benefits; lower risks of unemployment; and better chances to hold onto jobs during economic downturns. In addition, people who have successfully continued their education beyond high school enjoy enriched personal lives, greater self-esteem and confidence, improved family relationships, and higher aspirations for their children.

With so many good things connected to continuing education, it makes little sense to prevent poor women on welfare from attending college. The 1996 federal rules ignored – and threatened to discontinue – decades of earlier progress in helping low-income mothers obtain a college education so they could pull themselves and their children out of poverty. Among the most vulnerable in our country, poor families mostly headed by women were suddenly told to “end dependency” and “become self-sufficient” without any access to advanced education.

Thoughtfully and strategically, the state of Maine decided to persevere in its longstanding efforts to make college attendance possible for low-income mothers on welfare so as to improve their prospects in the labor market. The Maine “Parents as Scholars” program has paid off well for the state as well as people on public assistance, providing them with access to postsecondary education programs that can improve their prospects for a life without poverty.