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The End of Even Start: The Federal Cuts Begin!



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The Even Start Family Literacy Program appears to be coming to an end, based on a two-week Continuing Resolution just passed by the U.S. House and Senate. The temporary compromise is designed to avoid a government shutdown at the end of this week includes \$4 billion in funding cuts to the federal government's budget this year. Rather than simply pro-rating an across-the-board, two-week share of the House's proposed \$61 billion in draconian budget cuts, the bill features complete elimination of eight programs, including Even Start. President Obama is expected to sign the legislation.

There are an estimated 19 Even Start programs in New York State. New York City-based programs are run by providers including BronxWorks, CAMBA and University Settlement. The Hempstead EvenStart program is run by Family and Children's Association. It is unclear on the timing of how loss of federal funding will affect local programs.

In proposing the targeted reductions, the House noted that President Obama had requested a termination of the program in his proposed budget for FY2011-12 which begins on October 1st. "Three national evaluations have found that participants in this program make no greater literacy gains than non-participants," said the Republican-led House Appropriations Committee. "The Office of Management and Budget has identified this program as 'ineffective'."

Carolyn McLaughlin, Executive Director of BronxWorks, takes issue with this assessment. "These are marvelous programs that help families. Our parents, many of whom are immigrant women, come to us functionally illiterate. They are tested and have shown significant gains in their literacy. The program helps them to be able to read signs, fill out a job application, help their pre-school children, and sit down and read a book to their children. These are huge gains that make an enormous difference for these families. This is a terrible loss."

McLaughlin goes on to note that the BronxWorks program has consistently exceeded the program's official targets. Testing found that 92% of families improved their English Language Proficiency, compared to a target of 50%. Benefits carry over. Families report that in 73% of cases, the family home environment improved; and in 85% of cases, the program strengthened the parent's role as an educator.

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