FAMILIES FIRST: IMPLICATIONS OF WELFARE REFORM FOR TENNESSEE ADULT BASIC EDUCATION

by

Connie White, Mary Ziegler, and Beth Bingman
Center for Literacy Studies
University of Tennessee

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> *The sixty (60) month time limit and the eighteen (18) month time limit stated in subdivision (d) (1) shall not begin to run to a person who functions at or below grade level 8.9 as determined by testing certified by the Department of Education for adult basic education purposes, so long as such person is enrolled at least twenty (20) hours per week in a departmentally approved G.E.D. program and is making satisfactory progress as judged by the teacher and the department's case manager, until a person has obtained and functions at a level greater than a grade level above 8.9 as determined by testing certified by the Department of Education for adult basic education purposes. Senate Bill No. 3151 Section 5 (d)(4)*

With these words, Tennessee's welfare reform program diverged from national trends and actively encouraged adult basic education. In many ways the *Families First* program, as welfare reform is called in Tennessee, parallels the national law. But for participants who score below 8.9 on the TABE (Tests of Adult Basic Education) the clock does not start ticking. In order to continue receiving benefits, they are not required to immediately look for work and instead must spend twenty hours a week in adult basic education classes until their TABE score reaches 8.9.

The Center for Literacy Studies (CLS), a not-for-profit organization, has been involved in *Families First* in several ways. CLS staff worked with local community organizations to develop educational materials about the *Families First* program. We worked with the Tennessee Department of Adult and Community Education to train *Families First* teachers. We continue to support these teachers in a variety of ways.

This paper describes the Tennessee experience with *Families First*, from policy to program implementation, with particular focus on the impact of policies and practice on adult basic education. For this paper we have talked to policy makers involved in developing *Families First*. Interviews were conducted with key players in 1998 and quotes from those interviews are presented throughout the paper. We have drawn on ongoing work with 200 *Families First* teachers, and we have had informal conversations with students in *Families First* classes. We present here the program design, the legislative process, and the implementation of

Families First as described by those involved in this ongoing policy experiment. We discuss the impacts of *Families First* on adult basic education

practitioners, and we share the observations of students in *Families First* classes. Finally, we offer some closing observations and questions.

The Road to *Families First*

Policy makers reflect on the development of *Families First*

This section of the paper examines the inclusion of adult education in Tennessee's version of welfare reform, *Families First*, as it journeyed from concept to design, to legislation, to federal waiver, and finally to implementation. Tennessee Governor Don Sundquist's campaign promise to make systemic changes in welfare became law—a law that would change the way the state helps poor families. On May 15, 1996, Governor Sundquist signed Senate Bill 3151, the *Families First* Act, into law. *Families First* represents a dramatic change in Tennessee's social policy as well as a fundamental transformation for the Tennessee Department of Human Services (DHS) and in some ways, for the Division of Adult and Community Education (ABE). This change required a sweeping overhaul of the massive welfare system. How did it go from a political campaign promise to a fully implemented program?

Designing the program

A special Welfare Reform Task Force convened in May 1995 to design a welfare reform plan. The governor gave only a few mandates to the task force: that the plan be fair, have time limits, and require work. Other than these requirements, the task force had maximum flexibility to design the program. Leonard Bradley, assistant to the governor for policy, assembled the individuals who made up the governor's task force. Bradley said, "If I did anything right, it was to pick the group of people I picked to help with the program design." Task force participants, drawn primarily from state agencies, were individuals who were knowledgeable and had experience at the program level. "If we are going to get rid of a program that supports poor children, then we have to be really careful what we replace it with," said Bradley as he commented on the work of the group:

> *The political winds were blowing so strong in favor of welfare reform, in a way, I was scared that no matter what we designed, it would pass because there was the danger that the legislators would pass the political will of the moment.*

The task force met one day a week for seven months. In responding to the governor's charge, Bradley asked this question of the task force: "If we could do anything, what would it be?" Bradley said that, from the beginning, the goal for the task force was to increase a family's capacity to be self-supporting rather than simply reduce the welfare rolls. A challenge for the group was the need to make welfare reform work for everyone and minimize the possibility of unintended consequences. Throughout the duration of the planning phase, the emphasis on families prevailed. Wanda Moore, task force member and former director of the JOBSWORK program, commented on the name:

> *The first name of the welfare reform program was Tennessee Works. A lot of people were in favor of this name. But in the end, the name* Families First *was chosen because the emphasis has always been on family self-sufficiency and the plan has a family focus. Everyone was concerned about the children.*

Task force members discussed the program needs from the perspective of their organizations, studied the pending federal legislation, examined the plans of other states, listened to the reports of experts, and assembled the information they needed. As the task force convener, Bradley described his job as striking a balance between political agents and program professionals. However, the emerging plan had more tentacles than an octopus. One tentacle of the welfare reform octopus was designing the education and training component. About 50% of the individuals receiving welfare had not completed high school. "From the start, there was an assumption that an educational component would be included in the mix of services that would be made available to *Families First* customers," said Moore.

> *We knew about the research that claimed early attachment to the workforce* [employment] *would ultimately lead to a higher wage. However, our legislature is very education oriented and there was never any effort to move to a 'work first' philosophy. The inclusion of educational services was never debated.*

Basic education activities intentionally postpone employment in favor of increasing the capacity of participants to earn higher wages.

Teddy Cook, task force member and assistant director of adult and community education noted:

> *The Department of Education and the Department of Human Services had a long history of working together. We had worked together on JOBS which was the forerunner of welfare reform.*

> *Because of our earlier relationship it was recognized that adult*
>
> *education had been an important component of helping people gain the basic skills they needed to enter the work force.*

As the *Families First* plan emerged, it called for an eighteen-month limitation of benefits with an additional eighteen months of transitional benefits that included childcare, transportation, and health insurance. In order to participate in *Families First*, an individual was required to sign a Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP) that would include her or his long-term goals. All recipients of welfare without a high school diploma or GED would be tested to determine the grade level at which they were functioning academically. When the bill was originally introduced, it called for a mandatory educational component for those individuals who tested below the sixth grade level. Individuals at this level would be exempt from both the work requirement and the time limitation that would be imposed on others.

The legislative process

The *Families First* bill was introduced and the legislative debate began. Debate was also occurring in community and advocacy organizations, on the pages of newspapers, in public forums, and among neighbors. Seventeen formal hearings were held. Amendments resulting from this vigorous civic dialog helped strengthen the bill, according to Bradley. The original bill eventually had 42 amendments and received major bi-partisan support in the House and Senate.

As the bill was weaving its way through Congress, the task force continued to meet and plan. At one of the meetings, Louise Clifton, an adult education teacher, brought two of her students to report to the task force. The adult education participants described their experiences in an adult education class. "They were very persuasive," commented Bradley. As a result of this visit, Bradley visited their adult education classroom and volunteered to become a mentor.

> *The process taught me that mothers who receive welfare are a lot like other Tennessee mothers in that they are intensely interested in their children having a better life than they have had. It takes a lot of skill to be head of a household when you are only able to read at a sixth grade level. I was mentor to two women. I helped with math and reading, ate lunch with them, learned what was important to them, listened to their children. The experience of getting to know the adult education students, of meeting their children and attending their graduation was like seeing the burning bush. It was an increase of awareness and understanding*

> *of what it meant to be undereducated yet be head of a household and responsible for your children. I have a greater understanding of what it means to be learning the same thing your kids are learning. I learned that kids are proud of their parents for getting a GED and that parents like being able to help their kids with their homework. I didn't understand what it would be like to not be able to read, or express yourself, or do simple math.*

One of the women for whom Bradley was a mentor has since gotten her GED. Bradley's enhanced understanding, Cook's persistance regarding the importance of adult education, and the public debate fueled by advocacy groups led to discussions about the appropriate grade level that a person should attain before being required to participate in the work component of *Families First*. The 5.9 grade level cut off seemed unreasonable to adult educators. Bradley commented that although the Tennessee legislature considers itself very education oriented, few legislators really understood the needs of undereducated adults, or the effort required to significantly improve basic skills. In fact, few people in the Department of Human Services understood those needs except for those involved in the JOBSWORK program.

The decision was made that those below the 8.9 grade level be excused from the work requirement and time limits. "This had some people upset," said Bradley, "because they thought that any easing of the work requirement would undo the entire system." As a result of the public debate, "Everyone's fingerprints were on the bill," Bradley commented. "In the end, it was a better bill." *Families First* was passed in the House and Senate by 132 of the 135 legislators.

The welfare reform legislation resulted in a program that cost 50% more than the cost for providing benefits the way it had been done in the past. According to Bradley:

> *It is a lot more expensive to address the problem than to look for a short term solution. When you try to design a program where the objective is to reduce the welfare rolls, and that is the sole criteria for judging success, you might succeed short term. But if you do not address the problem and build the individual's capacity for success, then it will blow up in the long run.*

Federal waiver

While the bill was going through the legislative process, Tennessee began to prepare the required waiver (permission to be released from certain federal

requirements) for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. Even though the federal government was about to pass TANF, Temporary Assistance for Needy Families, "We wanted to go for a waiver because of the education and training components" related Moore. TANF is a work first program that discourages education and training because participants in education programs cannot be counted in the participation rate.

As amendments were written to the legislation, changes had to be made to the complex federal waiver. "All the while, our offices at the local level were trying to prepare themselves not knowing exactly what the final outcome would be," said Moore. This created a lot of confusion because the plan changed as the public debate ensued and amendments were added to the legislation. One way of dealing with the uncertainty was to involve the local DHS programs in the discussion and the decision making by communicating frequently and holding regular meetings. This helped them to have a sense of ownership of the process. Although this helped local DHS personnel, educational and training providers remained confused, because on some issues, there was no "state-approved" procedure. The procedures for implementing the Families First programs were developed at the local level. Because of the massive size of the change and the organizational transformation that went with it, there was extensive uncertainty about how the whole system would work and considerable organizational confusion. What is noteworthy is not the confusion which is to be expected in any monumental change effort, but the fact that the agencies involved in implementing the change survived and were able to cope with an unprecedented level of new policies and procedures that had been developed in record time. On July 25, 1996, Tennessee's request for a federal waiver was approved. TANF was signed only weeks later. Five weeks after receiving the federal waiver, the massive undertaking of implementing *Families First* across the state was begun.

Implementation of the *Families First* Program

Significant media coverage was given to the program when it first began. The DHS put particular emphasis on dispelling the myths that surrounded those on welfare. The media was at least partially successful in raising awareness and combating stereotypes by helping provide a more accurate picture of the diversity of welfare recipients.

Families First is employment-focused and participation is based on the agreement of welfare recipients to attain employment. Some safeguards, such as those to exempt certain people from the work requirement, are built into the program. There are exemptions for the aged, disabled, incapacitated, and caretakers of disabled relatives. In addition, if a county's unemployment rate is twice the state

rate, then the individuals in that county are exempt until that statistic changes.

The program requires an individual to sign a Personal Responsibility Plan (PRP) in order to continue receiving benefits. The plan calls for parents to ensure children's school attendance, immunize their children, and establish paternity in order to receive child support and cash payments. (In Tennessee this is $185 a month for a family of three.) A work and training component includes the participant's career goals, work plan, and the opportunity to complete high school or obtain a GED. Individuals who sign the PRP receive child care assistance, Medicaid/TennCare coverage, rent freeze for public housing, and food stamps.

Components of *Families First* were drawn, for the most part, from services such as ABE, Job Placement, and Career Search that were already available in the state. The way the components were designed, participants receive services from a number of different providers; however, no cohesive system of services was put in place. Bradley said:

> *One of the things we have done was use a piecemeal approach to designing a group of activities to help clients improve their chances of long-term employment. Now we need to do something that pulls it all together into a cohesive whole. In addition, we don't know enough about how learning disabilities affect a person's ability to succeed. We are not satisfied with the services we currently are providing for the learning disabled.*

Profile of the Tennessee *Families First* family

Department of Human Services commissioned a study of *Families First* participants by the Center for Business and Economic Research, College of Business Administration, The University of Tennessee. *Families First: 1997 Case Characteristics Study*, drawn from the DHS database and a random sample of *Families First* participants who responded to a questionnaire during their regular appointments at DHS, presents a picture of families receiving welfare.

The average family consists of 2.6 persons. Females comprise 95.8% of family caretakers and their average age is 34.2 years. Over 91% have worked at some time during their lives, with 74% having worked during the last twelve months. Over 53% of the caretakers have a high school or GED diploma. The highest average grade completed was the eleventh. Of the 32.8% currently employed, the average wage is $5.42 per hour. Monthly benefits include an average of $148 in TANF (Temporary Aid to Needy Families) and $241 in food stamps.

The adult education component

After the federal waiver was received, the Department of Human Services announced that the Division of Adult and Community Education (ABE) was selected to provide the basic educational services. The adult education office has a statewide infrastructure in that there is at least one adult education program in every county. Many are in local school systems that employ a full-time adult education supervisor. In the first year, funds were provided for 220 adult education classes. Because of the statewide infrastructure of adult education programs in Tennessee, it was possible to start *Families First* classes in 97% of the counties on September 1, 1996. The program was phased in over a six-month period.

What is remarkable about the start-up phase of *Families First* is that the legislation called for agencies to work together on an unprecedented level. The program of services was extraordinarily complex and, while state-level providers had been working together, the local service providers often knew very little about the services provided by others. Workers at the Department of Human Services were unfamiliar with adult education programs. Not having a simple, effective way to communicate critical information about educational needs and progress was a barrier to the smooth functioning of the system, especially while providers were trying to figure out the communication channels.

Cook said, "It was smooth for the implementation of such a large program. A lot of thinking had gone into it ahead of time." In addition to providing adult education classes, the local adult education programs conducted the original assessment using the TABE, which determined an individual's grade level. This level was used to determine in which components of *Families First* the individual would participate.

Teacher training for start-up

The Office of Adult and Community Education asked the Center for Literacy Studies to provide start-up training for ABE teachers in the *Families First* program. Though administrators on the state level seemed confident about the start-up, at the local level many teachers reported that it felt as though the program was being put into place very fast. Training for teachers of the first group of Families First participants took place in August, 1996, and on September 1, 1996, programs began receiving *Families First* students.

As we prepared for *Families First* teacher training at the Center for Literacy

Studies during the summer of 1996, the unanswered questions and uncertainties at times felt overwhelming. But we had to go ahead with the training, despite the ambiguity about how the program would work. Margaret Lindop, a CLS staff person with many years experience as a teacher and teacher trainer, was the lead trainer, with assistance from other CLS staff. We also called on Patsy Medina, a nationally known teacher trainer and former staff person at Bronx Education Services to help us. Patsy became an invaluable member of the training team.

We did three, three-day trainings for teachers--one in Knoxville, one in Nashville, and one in Memphis. There were around 60 participants in each. In terms of content, we tried to do it all. On the first day of training, we asked teachers to reflect on their thoughts and emotions as they prepared to put this brand-new, groundbreaking program into place. In order to help teachers express their feelings, we did murals with participants' drawn or cut-out pictures representing their hopes and fears for the program. We did small group and large group discussions about the myths surrounding welfare recipients. When presented with the profile of the average *Families First* family, participants in the training were consistently surprised, assuming that most welfare recipients have more children, no work history, and better program benefits.

Other parts of the training focused on requirements of the program, particularly inter-agency collaboration and the role of the partners, including DHS and Vocational Rehabilitation, in the program. We involved a *Families First* "customer", a mother who participates in *Families First* and receives TANF, who spoke eloquently about what she saw as the barriers and the opportunities presented by *Families First*. We invited Adult Basic Education administrators and Department of Human Services and Vocational Rehabilitation staff to make presentations about the role of each partner in *Families First*, and expectations of ABE instructors. There were question-and-answer sessions, some of which seemed to leave training participants frustrated because of lack of clarity and conflicting opinion on policy and procedure.

We also attempted to do training about conflict management in the classroom, because both instructors and CLS staff thought that would be a major issue. Teachers we talked with felt unprepared to teach mandated students since most had previously taught students who attended programs voluntarily. We (CLS staff) didn't feel prepared to adequately assist teachers, so we hired a psychologist for that part of the training. Interestingly, neither participants nor CLS staff felt that part of the training went well. We wondered if our assumption about the need for an "outside expert" had been correct.

We also tried to deal with obstacles to student learning, like learning disabilities.

We did sessions on how to identify and informally assess learning disabilities. We reviewed what we knew about the referral system for adults who might need a formal assessment procedure. We did sessions on approaches to reading for adults with learning difficulties and on writing from students' experience.

As the trainings ended, and we read and re-read participants' evaluations and reflected on the experience, it seemed to us that teachers began their *Families First* classes with uncertainty, and some amount of trepidation. While they seemed glad for the opportunity to talk and think together at the initial trainings, they were frustrated that all their questions hadn't been answered.

Families First goes forward

During those first few months, the political atmosphere in the state was charged, with much discussion in the media about *Families First*. Many human interest newspaper articles about *Families First* customers appeared throughout the state. Those stories were often fairly sympathetic and portrayed families as caught in a system that didn't offer real alternatives. There was also much backlash: after a sympathetic story, it was common to see letters to the editor depicting welfare recipients as lazy, irresponsible, or even criminal.

While the "outside" world debated the merits of the program, the "inside" world of agencies and staff charged with carrying out the program were attempting to make the changes mandated by the program. One of the major shifts was in the role of the DHS caseworker. The caseworkers would no longer simply determine eligibility but would be case managers who coordinated an array of services available to *Families First* participants. Most importantly, they would listen to the *Families First* participant and help her or him really think through a number of options, assisting participants to formulate a plan toward self-sufficiency.

However, it was quickly apparent that sheer numbers and old habits worked against this change, and the change seemed to many in the adult education community to be unevenly implemented. Center for Literacy Studies staff often heard adult educators say that smallness of scale seemed to generally work for the program. If the DHS case manager didn't have too high a caseload, she or he seemed better able to work as a true case manager with the students, teachers said.

There was a great deal of emphasis placed by state-level policy makers on getting *Families First* participants through preparation programs and ready to take the GED. Perhaps some inexperience on the part of policy makers and others led people to believe that this would happen quickly for most learners.

As the first year of implementation passed, it became clear that there were significant differences in the degree to which agencies collaborated and were successful in carrying out the program. The best coordination between Department of Human Services and ABE seemed to happen when DHS caseworkers would come and sit down with *Families First* participants in their classrooms, hear what was happening in class and in their lives, and answer questions that participants and teachers had.

In the first year of *Families First*, the Fresh Start program seemed to be key to developing positive attitudes and helping with retention. Fresh Start is a voluntary six-week program of classes that addresses affective issues such as learning to recognize and celebrate success in its many forms and real-life barriers to success such as lack of clear goals. This program is facilitated by Department of Human Services sub-contractors with experience in teaching adults. The *Families First* customers who completed Fresh Start almost invariably talked about how the program profoundly changed and enlarged their ways of thinking about themselves and their potential. ABE teachers frequently said it was clear without asking which of their class members had been through Fresh Start. Unfortunately, all ABE *Families First* participants do not have the opportunity to go to Fresh Start classes because the number of classes is limited, and some choose not to attend.

Data at the close of the first year

When the program began in September 1996, there were approximately 92,000 families on the welfare rolls. By October 1997, the rolls had been reduced by more than 34,000 families. According to the Department of Human Services, of the approximately 58,000 families who remained on assistance, around 30,000 were exempt from the work/education requirements due to reasons such as their own disability, the need to care for a disabled relative in the home, age or incapacity.

Of the families that remained on assistance and whose caretakers were not exempt from the work/education requirements, 12,000 individuals were working full or part time, 5,000 were enrolled in ABE, and 11,500 were in specialized job training.

In the first year of the program, 978 individuals received a GED, 624 participants went on to higher education and training, and 1,132 went to work after they finished with ABE. The number of people that enrolled and then dropped out was 3,321. Cook commented:

> *What we don't know is the reason they dropped out or how many of those have come back. In some cases, people have to sign up*

> *two or three times before they finally decide to stay. Some dropped out because they got a job, married or their husbands got a better job. There were a wide variety of reasons that people left the program.*

ABE Teachers' Perspectives

> *What I got [in my* Families First *class] were students who had terrible things happening in their lives, yet were able to survive. I'll never look at someone on welfare the same again*.
>
> —An ABE teacher in the *Families First* program

Teachers were charged with helping *Families First* participants improve their basic skills and get the educational credentials necessary for employment. As previously noted, during the first year of the program, Center for Literacy Studies was involved in the initial training of teachers. At the beginning of the *Families First* program, these teachers expressed fears and assumptions in public discussions and informal conversations at trainings and other events. These fears had to do with *Families First* participants and how programs, classrooms and instruction would be very different from what teachers had experienced in adult basic education before *Families First*.

The fears and assumptions heard most often before the program started included:

- *Families First* participants will be angry and maybe even violent in the classroom.
- Mandated learners won't learn.
- Personal habits and lifestyles of learners will make learning nearly impossible; classes and programs will have to be planned around control of clients, and ABE as we know it (a family atmosphere, relaxed and supportive interactions) will cease to exist
- Working in "the system"—dealing with the rules and the paperwork of *Families First*—will be intolerable for teachers.

During the second year (1997/98), CLS provided the initial teacher training, continued telephone assistance, produced a newsletter aimed at teachers, and facilitated a day of reflection for *Families First* teachers at the end of the year. This section of our report was mainly drawn from the written comments of about one hundred of those teachers participating in the reflection workshops who answered the question, "From your perspective, what have been the challenges and opportunities of the *Families First* program?" The reality of their experience is

very different from what most had expected in the beginning, according to teachers who wrote about it in May, 1998.

Assumptions about *Families First* participants

One of the most powerful fears at the beginning of *Families First* classes was that *Families First* learners would be angry and maybe even violent in the classroom. "I had heard about the [housing] projects and I was afraid of the violence and the people when I walked in to my *Families First* class," one teacher wrote. This was a sentiment we heard expressed repeatedly. The same teacher continued "but I have met some really wonderful people who have succeeded beyond my wildest imagination." That is perhaps the most common experience we found among teachers - a significant shift in perspective. Over time, teachers seemed to reject the myth and cultural stereotypes about welfare recipients and instead began responding to their own experiences with adults in their classrooms. The adults they saw as they walked into the classroom each day were people whose humanity conferred worth and potential, not worthlessness and limits. "*Families First* has brought talented, creative and bright people into ABE who may never have thought of education as an option."

As teachers and *Families First* students worked and "lived" together for 20 hours each week, the teachers' fears seemed to slip away. Conversations at training events and other teacher gatherings were no longer dominated by gloomy predictions of chaotic classrooms and violent learners. Instead, most teachers were moved to talk and write about the struggles and perseverance of their adult students.

> *The thing which amazes me most about the students is their resiliency and resistance in the face of great odds. I see students who have been on drugs and are now off, struggling day to day to stay clean, while also tackling great challenges in the classroom.*

There are many stories of growth and transformation of both students and teachers:

> *Martha—rough exterior, soft interior. She frightened me because I saw the exterior, the roughness, the temper. In my class, out of my class. Umpteen tracking (absenteeism) forms! She knew I meant business. Slowly, very slowly, her attendance improved. Then one day in December she appears outside my hallway—shaking and in tears. I listen to her story, her personal tragedy and I respond as a human being. I hug her and I listen. I provide*

> *phone numbers for her to call. I listen. Gradually, she begins to see the GED as her way out. In January she passes her GED—as she said "I did it for me!" She is allowed to continue in my class because her case manager knows that given a little more time, Martha will succeed. Gradually, Martha is becoming a self-confident, capable woman. I'm still frightened sometimes, but I see beyond the rough exterior now.*

In the almost two years of the program, many *Families First* teachers adopted a more holistic view of the learners: people are NOT the academic skills they possess or lack:

> *They are not dumb. They are intelligent. They all have gifts, things they can do. Most have a real desire to learn. Many have a very low self-concept. They need a lot of attention, understanding and love.*

Teachers describe the growth of trust and confidence in students:

> *I have been surprised (being very naive) at the lack of trust so many of the students feel—they have a wall around them. As I have learned more of their life experiences and come to understand more about what brought them to this point in their lives, I have been able to accept them as they are and to quietly work to lessen their resistance. It is a real thrill to experience their trust and confidence.*

Some teachers reported personal growth as a result of teaching *Families First* students. This teacher's consciousness was raised by reflection on his motivation for dismissing a student from class:

> *I had to expel a student from class. This has caused me to go back and examine what my motives were. Was it for the benefit of the class, so they could learn without his interruptions? Or was it because it deflated my ego for the student to put me down?*

Other teachers reported a kind of "politicizing" experience as they taught *Families First* students:

> *Before teaching in Families First, I thought that most people in*

> *America have equal opportunity. Can you imagine this? Students tell me, "I had to grab my baby from his crib and lie across him on the floor because the guns were going off everywhere." I am now beginning to be able to "imagine." Now I have a lot more empathy with my students who live in the projects.*

This teacher indicated that she was transformed in the process. Like the teacher whose quote begins this section, this teacher "will never look at someone on welfare the same way again."

However, although very common, the shift to a positive perspective of *Families First* students was not universal. A typical negative response to students was summed up by a teacher who said, "They don't want to work."

Assumptions about mandated learning

An assumption often made early in the *Families First* program was that mandated participants wouldn't learn - an idea that made sense to many. The thinking went like this: If an adult must come to school or lose his or her income, usually the only source of support for the family, then real choice in the matter has been removed, right? Learning takes effort, or usually at least some attention. If a participant were in class only because he or she had to be, why would we expect that person to put out the effort to learn?

Families First teachers' experience seems only to partially support that assumption.

> *Of the students who come because they have to come, two groups emerge. One group is sullen and resentful. The other group discovers that learning is fun. They, of course, make my day. It is even possible to—after months of "proving myself"—reach some of the first group. Not often, but it is possible.*

The group "who discovers learning is fun" may be a sizable number. *Families First* lore is rich with many anecdotes about personal transformations of both teachers and students. Like this one, many of the best stories star a hostile, unrepentant adult who doesn't want to come to class:

> *A student came to my* Families First *literacy class with the attitude that he had to be there, but didn't have to learn. He refused to participate and kept turmoil stirring in the class. A new student,*

> *who had an unbelievable desire to learn, entered the* Families First *class several weeks later. This became a true motivation for the first student. He began to do the activities and challenge the new student. They became friends and worked together to learn. As a result, both students motivated other class members. They made progress and had learned to read on a 1.0 level by spring break.*

Assumptions about the difference between *Families First* and traditional ABE

What have teachers learned about teaching *Families First* participants? Has adult basic education as we know it "ceased to exist" in Tennessee's *Families First* classrooms? The answer seems to be that, although teachers report a couple of important differences between *Families First* and other ABE classes, the supportive, mutually respectful tradition of adult basic education continues.

Over the past year and a half, we've heard many positive stories about *Families First* classrooms, and most teachers are excited about sharing their instructional activities. Carol Kiener, a *Families First* teacher in Johnson City Schools, wrote about the unique applied science project her class has developed, which also managed to combine aspects of community development and youth mentoring. Her reflection on the work also shows that creative teachers and learners can effectively weave a variety of basic skills into almost any learning experience.

> *Science has been very difficult for the students and seems to be—at first—of little use to them. I ran into a friend from UT Extension and we discussed this with others. We decided to start a hands-on gardening project. Three people from the extension office joined me in teaching about soil and gardening. We have now had 10 lessons and have grown seeds. My adults are more excited about this learning than my fourth graders! They have taken copious notes. How interesting that they have taught themselves the skill of finding the main idea and seen how details back it up. They have also learned about parts of a plant and decided gardening might be fun. The city is going to fence in our area for the "community garden" there in the projects. Our* Families First *students will mentor the teens in the area on gardening. They will all see the "fruits of their labor" and have seen a use for science.*

The most frequent comments from teachers regarding classrooms had to do with

the need to create learning environments in which students were empowered to make decisions about what they studied or how they studied it, or decisions about the program itself. Teachers wrote:

> *We work more like partners, adult to adult, in the class. There is less distance between teachers and students than before.*
>
> *Include students in class planning to create ownership of activities.*

Teachers continually emphasized relationships:

> *Find opportunities to show support for students and advocate for them. This develops a bond with the student that makes them want to work with us.*

One teacher reported that "we hold Town Meetings in which students discuss what they'd like to see happen in school." The same program also offered a Learning Skills class, a unique and apparently very successful enhanced-orientation class:

> *We have a Learning Skills orientation class for incoming students. They spend 4 weeks in this learning preparation class to get ready to learn. They do motivational exercises, inspirational quotes, goal setting, peer support and oral sharing, writing, thinking. TABE testing is done while in class, as is writing on a career goal.*

Another teacher talked about why the Learning Skills class has been so successful:

> *A climate of peer support is developed. This is an important element in their success. They feel they are not alone; others are in similar circumstances. They feel surrounded with a friendly, supportive community.*

This teacher described a very compelling example of the power of a supportive community.

> *One day, as we worked on a "Thought for the Day," or critical thinking skills, the subject of violence led to the subject of rape. Half the women in the group, it turns out, have been raped, mostly at an early age. There was a tremendous emotional flood that washed through the group. Yet, it was positive because everyone, including instructors, gave support and understanding to each other. Even the lone male in the group came slowly to a*

supportive stance.

Most teachers report that in many ways, their *Families First* classroom is not necessarily much different from any other ABE class they've taught. Learners support and care about each other; over time, trust is developed between the teacher and the class; and initial worries about a need for tight control have mostly been unfounded. Now much of the conversation overheard when *Families First* teachers gather reflects the same issues other adult basic education teachers discuss: concerns about testing and assessment, efforts to meet the needs of all students in a multi-level classroom, experiences with various teaching approaches and materials.

But teachers do consistently report two differences between their *Families First* class and other ABE classes. The first of these much-discussed differences is that learning difficulties among students are noticed by teachers more and more. The most able learners have moved through the system while a seemingly high number appear to be progressing very slowly at increasing their literacy level. Teachers feel distressed and want to be able to offer more help to these learners. They talk about feeling helpless in the face of the great difficulty these students are experiencing. "How we can help students who may never pass the GED?" they ask in training sessions. Teachers talk about what has worked for them, and they eagerly grasp each suggestion as it is offered by others. They wrote:

> *Encourage them to set a goal for today and to accomplish that goal today. It's most important that students set their own goals and that they be very short term. Be sure the student writes down the goal and reviews it and judges whether she has met it. Goals like writing her name and address or reading electricity meter - things she really needs.*

> *I have seen progress in some students who will be promoted to GED level and will eventually get the GED, but many others who will not. How can these students achieve success? A challenge is to help students with learning disabilities and learning problems, and their caseworkers, set realistic goals.*

The second difference between *Families First* classes and other ABE classes reported by teachers concerns the incredible difficulties that are part of many *Families First* participants' life histories, and the effect of these difficulties on what happens in class. What is and has happened in their lives affects the climate in class and the ability of students to learn. The chaos that poverty creates—health problems, family crises, addiction and domestic violence—plagues a number of

Families First participants, and all these difficulties contribute to sporadic attendance, elevated anxiety and depression, and difficulties in concentration and learning.

Several teachers commented that despite difficulties and obstacles, it was vitally important that they continue to believe in their students' potential for success. Teachers acknowledge that their encouragement and support for students is essential:

> *An important challenge, and one we have to do, is to remain excited and hopeful for our students.*

Assumptions about working in the system

In a traditional ABE class, the teacher is accountable primarily to the participants, and secondarily to a supervisor, who generally permits much classroom freedom. Teachers are free to follow their own course in determining what is best for the adult learners they teach, in evaluating the environmental factors in a person's life, and in making decisions about when to be supportive and when to be confrontive.

Implementing the *Families First* program caused an upheaval in the ABE delivery system, partly because the teacher was no longer the only source for decisions on matters of attendance, class content, and speed of learning. Teachers were expected to make the transition quickly from teaching academic skills and supporting their students' personal development to facilitating their students to become self-sufficient, productive workers. Suddenly, teachers were confronted with a body of regulations that seemed not only to usurp their authority but to be cumbersome to enforce.

Another phenomenon contributed to the frustration experienced by teachers. Since each case manager appeared to have decision-making authority with regard to the particular cases they managed, it was possible for two case managers in the same office to provide different interpretations to a teacher about a given situation. For example, caseworkers may have different interpretations of what constitutes an "excused" absence from class, or may place differing amounts of emphasis on a participant getting a GED versus going to the first available job.

Perhaps not surprisingly, managing the regulations, paperwork, and communications involved in this new, large and complex program has been difficult for both case managers at the DHS and for supervisors and teachers in adult basic education programs. Some have found that working "in the system" is

constraining and difficult.

One of the tenets of the *Families First* program is that each community should tailor the program to meet local needs. In some places, adult basic education staff are very involved in making decisions about the *Families First* clients whom they serve. In others, they are not involved. In some places, communication appears good. In other places, it does not. It is often hard to tell where communication breaks down: is it within the Department of Human Services; between Human Services and the adult basic education program supervisor; or between the supervisor and teachers?

In any case, even though the *Families First* program "belongs" to DHS, the participants who are in school twenty hours a week have much more contact with adult basic education staff than with their caseworker or other DHS staff. Although official decision-making and flow of information is different in each local area, often teachers are the most available source of information for students about regulations and policy. For instance, depending on the local system, it may be in class discussions that learners find out that they can get financial help to arrange child care or to get their car fixed through the *Families First* program. In some cases, teachers might be asked to pass judgment on whether an absence is "excused" or not, or to relay other information about participants' needs to DHS.

Teachers appear to have a wide range of reaction to this level of involvement. Some want to concentrate on teaching designated skills and do not want to be distracted by the discussion and emotions swirling around program regulations. They resent class time being taken up by such things. "I am constantly explaining DHS regs to my students," one frustrated teacher wrote. Another felt it put her in an uncomfortable position as a go-between:

> *My students become extremely perturbed when I tell them information about* Families First. *This information usually comes from our immediate supervisor. They look at it as a reprimand or, in their language, being treated like children.*

On the other hand, some teachers want to know what is required of their students, and they feel they can incorporate questions and discussion of *Families First* policies and procedures into class, making use of it as a topic for which there is much built-in interest.

Some teachers didn't want to be thought of as "the bad guy," a situation which most often occurs around reporting student absences. Excessive absenteeism also generates paperwork and eventual expulsion of the individual from the program. The "revolving door" allows students to re-enter after a short time, causing some

teachers to wonder what the point of the policy is. They point out that when employed, adults are expected to have regular attendance. Others are happy that students get another chance to be successful in the program:

> *I hate it when I have to report too many absences for someone who had reason, like problems at home. Then I have to wait for the tracking form to be picked up, tell the student to wait for the case manager to call them and then start the process all over again the next day, week or month.*

A common criticism of *Families First* by teachers is that the program rules are inconsistently enforced, and there is confusion even within DHS about what the rules mean. Services provided and sanctions enforced seem to differ greatly even within a county. Some teachers report difficulty in obtaining the information they need to help their students understand what is expected of them.

One of the biggest worries expressed by teachers is that the program, though meant to encourage education, may in fact present educational barriers. Teachers report that non-educators expect adults to progress through programs evenly and quickly. That's not the real world, teachers say. Some students will learn more slowly than others. Some will never receive the credentials that our society, and their caseworker, expects:

> *Students are told by caseworkers that they should take their GEDs before they are ready. Realistically, it's going to take a long, long time for many students to get their GED. For some it will never happen.*

Teachers see some adults who move through the system, following rules because they have to, doing what is necessary, but never developing a sense of their own agency. Until and unless they do develop a sense of agency, teachers report, change has not really occurred:

> *The students who worry me the most are the young mothers—so many don't see the opportunity to change their lives and the lives of their children; they are simply doing what DHS told them to do.*

Even though Tennessee's welfare program emphasizes and pays for education, one of the barriers to student educational success mentioned by teachers is the emphasis on employment at any cost. The program may be too willing to sacrifice education, some teachers believe. Particularly frustrating to teachers is the policy

that students must put in 40 hours a week (meaning that at least 20 will be employment) when they get to a ninth-grade reading level. The complexity of juggling work and education becomes too difficult for many, and programs experience a greater dropout rate when students come up against the 40-hour-per-week commitment rule.

Several teachers mentioned the difficulties that some of their students had, even once they got a job. Teachers see a need for continued support for new workers:

> *I would like to see* Families First *develop a transition program both for GED graduates and non-graduates who are entering the workforce.*

Isolation is another problem reported by teachers. Particularly in a rural county, an individual may be the only *Families First* teacher in the county. In a program that is supposed to be collaborative, she may feel very much alone. Despite the difficulties, teachers have found ways to collaborate and share information. "Invite DHS to special activities, such as pot luck meals and GED graduations," one teacher suggested. Another offered these tips on how to build relationships with DHS in order to improve the program and strengthen collaboration:

> *Have a DHS supervisor come in once a month to interact with students. Make opportunities to praise students to DHS, such as writing positive comments on reports. Have quarterly luncheons with DHS caseworkers and supervisors—also childcare providers, private industry, and employment security.*

Although stories of problems within the system abound, there are also many talented and committed staff who relate to their clients as individuals, such as the caseworker who permitted her more time in the program so she could be truly successful.

As *Families First* moved through its second year, there was increasing pressure to get people to work. By the end of the second year, after the initial wave of recipients moved off the welfare rolls, DHS noticed that the number of welfare recipients had "flatlined," or stopped declining. DHS identified barriers to leaving welfare, including mental health issues, domestic violence, substance abuse, and low basic skills due to learning difficulties.

Families First Enters Its Third Year

As *Families First* entered its third year, DHS staff turned to ABE for focused help in preparing *Families First* participants for work, not only in basic skills areas, but

also in the "soft skills" requested most by Tennessee employers, such as dependability, following instructions, and getting along with others (Davis, 1998). They also requested that instructors focus on teaching basic skills in the context of work. This "contextualized learning" approach for *Families First* participants would help them apply their skills and be more successful in the workplace, DHS officials felt.

Together, DHS and ABE developed an action plan to address teaching basic skills in the context of work, including teaching "soft skills" for the workplace, as well as addressing the concern about the number of participants not progressing in their educational programs. Instructors were also asked to document their attention to work skills through the use of a plan book provided to them or through another method developed locally. Contextualized learning and "soft skills" were the focus of the annual 3-day *Families First* training, again provided by Center for Literacy Studies. The training took place in seven sites across the state. Although aimed primarily at instructors, the training also included many ABE supervisors and some DHS caseworkers.

Plans for this year also include more support for teachers through monthly teacher video conferences, a teacher discussion group online, curriculum assistance, and increased peer interaction and support among teachers. The first video conference will address questions of learner attendance, which has developed into an increasingly serious concern as the program has continued. The online discussion group, established by Center for Literacy Studies staff, is providing a forum for teachers to problem solve and share ideas. CLS, through support from the state ABE office, is offering an honorarium to teachers for the development of work-focused lesson plans and activities that can be shared on the CLS homepage and in book form to all Tennessee teachers. CLS, again with the support of the state ABE office, is offering incentives for teachers' participation in various action research projects around job shadowing and other approaches that combine basic skills with work activity. CLS continues to produce a teacher newsletter and to provide telephone, e-mail and library support for teachers who contact us.

As *Families First* continues, DHS staff increasingly emphasize that attaining the GED should not be the terminal point in a *Families First* participant's education. Instead, the GED class ought to be a transition to other training or education. DHS officials note that the average wage earned by *Families First* participants as they leave the program is not sufficient to lift a family out of poverty. DHS believes that ABE instructors are best prepared to help participants gain further education and training that will help them earn significantly more at their jobs.

This year (1998), the addition of Welfare to Work resources is also seen as an

opportunity for a number of *Families First* participants who have been unable to reach goals of self-sufficiency. Tennessee was among the states that drew down the maximum allowable resources to fund the program. (States must contribute a match, so some decided not to participate fully in the program.) Most of the resources are earmarked for the individuals who have the most serious barriers to overcome, such as a poor work history or substance abuse. *Families First* teachers received information on the program and how to make referrals for the use of resources by their students.

As the program matures, teachers continue to discuss their professional needs, including the need for a good salary and benefits. In 1998, the state-supported salary for part-time adult education instructors teaching twenty hours or more was raised from $11.00 to $15.00 per hour. *Families First* teachers are paid for 24 hours a week: 20 hours in the classroom and 4 hours of planning time. Occasionally local systems supplement the salary. A few systems put together different part-time jobs to form a full-time job for some teachers. But most systems don't supplement salaries, and most don't have full-time teachers. A number of *Families First* teachers seem (justifiably) unhappy about opportunities to get a full-time job with benefits, or to earn a living wage:

> *I've just spent a lot of money getting my master's degree but I earn a low salary anyway.*

The recent raise in hourly wages was a solid step forward, but until full-time jobs are available, the system will likely experience a great deal of turnover among teachers:

> *I'm using this time to prepare myself in case something opens that is a career opportunity—full time and benefits. I'm just doing my best with the opportunities that this job allows.*

Observations by Students in Families First Classes

The primary focus of this paper is to reflect the perspective of the administrators, policy makers and teachers with whom we have had conversations. At this time, we are not able to adequately represent the perspective of a vital constituency of the program: the adult learners themselves. We hope that the voices of participants will be added to this discussion in a clear and forceful way. But even in this paper, which is of limited scope, it was helpful to the authors to reflect on what we do know from conversations with learners.

Although we have not conducted formal interviews with students in *Families First* adult education classes, we have had informal conversations with students from

several programs. What we have heard in these conversations varies from class to class as well as from individual to individual.

Students may have come with their own set of fears and assumptions about the *Families First* program, but they are often positive about their experiences in *Families First*. Some students feel that they are gaining from the program: "new friends," "a chance to get out of the house," and "expanding my mind" were phrases we heard. There is a sense that progress is being made toward getting a GED and meeting educational goals. Students mentioned ways that the educational experience had helped them to be stronger, better parents and prepare for better jobs. They also commented that adult basic education improved the quality of their present lives; for many, school is something they enjoy, an activity that enriches their lives.

At the same time, people are not necessarily committed to staying in adult education programs if they are not mandated. The mandated nature of the program (as well as the flexibility with which local programs administer *Families First* classes) probably has something to do with this. The requirements that the programs use to help build work skills—being on time, not missing class when a child is sick, not bringing children to class—are interpreted by students as unwelcoming and rigid.

We found a lack of clarity among students about the provisions of *Families First*: confusion about what services are available and what the guidelines are. People were not sure why they are in class instead of in a job; all were unsure about time limits.

The dissatisfaction of some participants with *Families First* stems from a preference to be at home with children. This was felt particularly strongly by mothers with younger children. *Families First* allows mothers to stay home with infants until they are four months old, but then they must attend classes. While childcare is paid, it is not readily available in many locations, and most parents often prefer leaving their children with relatives. But if there are several children, this can mean "having them scattered out all over." Access to quality childcare is an issue faced by working parents as well. The issue of finding childcare can be approached in two ways: one, (as *Families First* rhetoric and teachers tend to) as one of the life skills that people need to develop; or two, as a larger issue that needs to be addressed structurally in terms of what is best for children instead as an individual hurdle to be overcome.

Observations, Reflections and Questions

What is success?

Has *Families First* succeeded? Success may mean different things to different people—politicians, policy makers, citizens, teachers, adult learners. It is difficult to say whether *Families First* has succeeded until we know whether success means getting a GED, getting a job, or reaching other learner-determined goals.

With its emphasis on education, Tennessee's welfare reform program is an exception to the national trend which emphasizes short-term solutions to the complex and multi-layered issue of moving adults toward self-sufficiency. Even in a politicized national climate that encourages blaming recipients, *Families First* has refused to be simply a punitive approach. The program has acknowledged the importance of basic skills education by making it a vital part of welfare reform efforts. And, while retaining the work requirement common to other welfare reform programs, time limits on benefits do not start until a *Families First* participant has achieved basic skills at the ninth-grade level. *Families First* has provided additional services, such as child care and transportation, that have made participation in adult basic education possible for many adults.

Families First has encouraged a more collaborative and coherent approach to assistance for adults in need. Watching the implementation of *Families First* has reminded us of a basic human truth: relationships matter. When the case manager from Department of Human Services knows and maintains a good relationship with the ABE teacher, better things generally happen for students.

Relationships matter at all levels—among policy makers, between program staff, and between teacher and learner. As they got to know their *Families First* participants, teachers' stereotypical fears regarding changes to programs and classrooms faded.

In Tennessee, the *Families First* program has strengthened the infrastructure of adult basic education by increasing funding and by providing a reliable, fairly consistent "market" for our services. Yet we continue to send a conflicting message to ABE practitioners by acknowledging that all adults—including current public assistance recipients—need full-time jobs with benefits while at the same time not making full-time jobs with benefits available to *Families First* teachers.
The program has not been implemented without difficulty. Teachers continue to see their role more as facilitating individual empowerment and improving basic skills than addressing workforce development. Staff development efforts have been made more difficult by our own ambivalence about what seem to us the difficulties

of adjusting the traditional role of ABE in building skills and facilitating personal development to an even broader role which includes helping learners get ready for the world of work.

Mandated learners can and mostly do learn; removing the choice about education does not necessarily mean that learning will not occur. However, that doesn't mean we should abandon the debate about the ethics of mandating adult education, or the debate about many other questions we face. How can welfare reform efforts avoid blaming recipients while supporting families as they move off public assistance? Will expansion of educational activities help improve the quality of life for welfare recipients who are leaving the welfare system? What changes do adult education programs need to make to support employment as an objective? Is there a role for an educational process with undereducated adults that is not work-focused? Despite the positive developments that have happened in Tennessee welfare reform, we cannot lose sight of basic questions that need to be continually debated by adult educators and others who see their role as active and involved citizens.

While the program continues to need improvements, Bradley commented, "We have been remarkably lucky that the economy has stayed strong while we have been implementing the program. In strong economies, employers are more willing to invest in training and education. In bad economic times, Congress may have to provide relief."

Those involved in designing the *Families First* plan are still convinced that basic skills play an important role in giving an individual an opportunity to achieve self-sufficiency. "It is frightening to change such a massive program that is so complicated and has so many essential factors," said Bradley. "It is especially frightening in the face of such a strong political imperative to act." He added, "Yet, as I look back on it, I don't know of anything I would do differently now. We are really experimenting, experimenting with people. But what other choice did we have?"

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