Work first or education first? Implications for welfare policy

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Education plays varying roles in the effort to reform the U.S. welfare system. Reports on the characteristics of adults who receive welfare show that more than half do not have a high school diploma or a GED credential. While some states disregarded these low educational levels in a “work first” philosophy, others developed programs to provide basic skills education as a precursor for job training. Which first step is the most effective solution for long-term employment and career advancement - job placement or basic education? States face a dilemma in answering this question because education takes time and time limits for welfare benefits are a compelling reason to provide quick job placement. Yet without basic education, those who lack a high school diploma or its equivalent will have difficulty accessing many of the training programs provided by business and industry or the post-secondary training provided by educational institutions. The acquisition of a GED credential is not a road that leads out of poverty, rather it is a gateway to an array of education and training that does have this potential.

The state of Tennessee chose to take an “education first” approach for welfare recipients whose skills are below high school. Families First, Tennessee’s welfare reform initiative, provides cash grants, education, job training, child care, transportation, employment assistance, and transitional benefits to eligible adults in order to prepare them for work and a life without welfare. Approximately 10% of adults in Families First were enrolled in adult basic education classes. Adult basic education (ABE) is a key activity for these individuals.

With current time limits on welfare benefits, a reasonable question asked by policy makers is, “How long does it take a welfare client to acquire basic skills and a GED credential?” Relatively little research-based information is available on the length of time it takes for adults in basic education classes to move from level to level or to achieve a GED. At the request of the Tennessee Department of Human Services, the Center for Literacy Studies (CLS) at The University of Tennessee conducted a study to examine the length of time needed for adults in basic skills classes to achieve learning outcomes in an ABE class.

The purpose of this study was to investigate the length of time a group of welfare recipients took to raise their basic skills and acquire a GED and to determine whether this length of time was different from the time needed to achieve similar gains for a comparison group of adults in other basic education classes.
This study examined the data in individual records of 594 adults who in basic education classes: 212 welfare recipients and 382 learners in the comparison group. The data were analyzed using SPSS (Statistical Package for Social Sciences). Since data were not normally distributed (a certain percentage of adults took much longer than others to advance), the median was chosen as the appropriate way to report the results. Mann-Whitney U (non-parametric tests) and Chi Square tests were used to analyze the data.

The data analysis revealed the length of time traditional ABE (383 cases) and Families First participants (211 cases) need to advance a level and pass the GED examination. Levels are defined by the federal government and used by state and local adult education programs. Although we would have preferred to collect the number of instructional hours it took to make a learning gain, instructional hours were not available. Therefore, length of time is captured in calendar “days” rather than instructional “hours.” Calendar days are also typically used by policy makers to make decisions about welfare time limits. The main findings of the study are presented below:

- Participants in adult basic education need a median of 105 days to advance from Level 1 to Level 2. This time is longer for Families First participants (156 days) than for traditional ABE participants (84 days).
- Participants in adult basic education who entered at Level 1 need a median of 202 days to pass the GED examination. Families First participants need more time (285 days) than traditional ABE participants (84 days).
- There are no significant differences between Families First and traditional ABE participants in terms of the median length of time needed to advance from Level 2 to Level 3 (77 days); from Level 2 to GED (97 days); and from Level 3 to GED (52 days).
- More Families First participants enter adult basic education at Level 1 (49%) than traditional ABE participants (27%).
- More participants who entered adult basic education in 1996-1998 at Level 2 and 3 passed the GED examination in 1999 (than those who entered at Level 1 (39%).

These findings indicated that welfare clients who entered the program functioning above the 6th grade (based on achievement test scores) acquired their GED credential in 105 days. At this level, there is no significant difference in the length of time needed to acquire a GED between welfare clients and comparison group learners in the same programs. For welfare clients functioning below the 6th grade level, the median time to completing a GED is significantly longer than for the same level comparison group.
Knowing the length of time welfare clients actually took to acquire a GED credential provides states with information for making policy adjustments in the programs offered to welfare recipients. Using this study as a baseline, researchers and practitioners can experiment with different strategies to better determine what influences the length of time needed for learning and how this time can be reduced.