

Working parents making impact on children, study shows [US] ^[1]

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EXCERPTS

Paychecks for their parents helped the quality of life of Minnesota children improve through the 1990s, according to an annual reckoning of child well-being in the state.

That assessment in the 2003 Minnesota Kids Count nudges the state's political debate beyond whether "welfare to work" is a good plan to how much support a government should provide disadvantaged families as parents start to work.

Of immediate concern to the report's authors is budget-balancing legislation in the House that would cut \$80 million in child care subsidies and \$11 million in after-school programs.

"We know that helping families work and increase their income is the best thing we can do for kids," said Diane Benjamin, director of the annual reports compiled by the Children's Defense Fund of Minnesota. "It drives every other indicator for them. So why wouldn't support for that be the first thing we do, the last thing we cut?"

The drop in child poverty by nearly 25 percent -- now one in 10 Minnesota children lives below the poverty line -- was one of five improved statistics covered in the report, which covered the years from 1992 to 2001.

Child care benefits

A decade of early-childhood research has documented the importance of high-quality care for young children. At the same time, criminal justice research shows the value of after-school programs in reducing rates of teen crime, sexual activity and substance abuse that otherwise peak between the hours of 3 and 6 p.m. on school days.

Also, a report last year by the National Center for Children in Poverty found that an increase in poor families' income by as little as \$370 a month brought youngsters' health and education indicators up to the level of children whose families were not poor, Benjamin said. She said research shows that even modest government support that helps families work their way out of poverty does change children's futures.

At the Center of the American Experiment, a Minnesota think tank, president Mitchell Pearlstein said the experience of the 1990s suggests that an earlier ideological division is shrinking.

"The great advance with welfare reform has been people on the left acknowledging that requiring work, requiring able-bodied welfare recipients to work is not indentured servitude," he said. "And on the right, it's been people having to recognize for more welfare recipients to work, they do indeed need child-care help and medical assistance during their transition."

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