

TANF Education and Training

Maine's Parents as Scholars Program



JULY 2010 | Josh Bone

Maine's Parents as Scholars (PaS) program provides a range of services to Maine TANF participants who are pursuing two-year or four-year postsecondary degrees. All parents in Maine who are eligible for TANF can participate in PaS, assuming that they: have enrolled in a two- or four-year degree program; have neither a bachelor's degree in a field with available jobs nor the ability to make at least 85 percent of Maine's median income for their family size; will be pursuing degrees that open up new employment opportunities that have the potential to better the financial futures of their families; and have the requisite educational backgrounds to pursue their chosen degrees successfully. Case managers determine whether individual PaS applicants meet these requirements. If a student needs to take remedial courses before beginning a degree program and wants to participate in PaS while completing this coursework, the student must be accepted into a two- or four-year postsecondary program on the condition that the student first successfully completes remedial studies.

Students who participate in PaS receive a range of support services, including transportation,¹ child care, required books and supplies that are not covered by financial aid grants, and school uniforms and essential clothing (up to \$300 per year). As a rule, PaS does not pay tuition, though individual colleges frequently provide students with financial aid application assistance. However, when students are unable to receive any financial aid, they can get up to \$3,500 per academic year from PaS. Students also receive cash benefits equal to TANF cash benefits.

In general, PaS students must remain full-time students, must maintain at least a 2.0 grade point average, and must be on track to complete their degree programs in the usual two or four years. During their first two years of PaS participation, students must spend at least 20 hours per week in the program, a requirement that full-time students easily complete through a combination of class attendance and study time. The Maine Department of Health and Human Services (DHHS) provides credit for 1.5 hours of study time for each hour of class time. After the first two years, students must either combine their existing hours with 15 additional hours a week of work experience, or must spend a total of at least 40 hours a week on a combination of classes, study and work experience.

Exceptions to some of these rules are granted if students have "good cause," meaning that a life event has significantly disrupted their education. The DHHS PaS program rules define good cause as "circumstances in which the required participation would cause the enrollee to seriously compromise academic performance. Good cause includes, but is not limited to, a verifiable need to take care of a family member with special needs, a physical or mental health problem, illness, accident, death or a serious personal or family problem that necessitates reduced participation or time off from education, training or work."² Caseworkers determine whether individual students should be granted good cause. If granted good cause, a student can receive up to two extra years to complete a four-year degree or up to one extra year to complete a two-year degree. The student's weekly participation requirement is also generally lessened.

¹ PaS will reimburse students for most gas and public transportation expenses and will pay for some car repairs and the cost of basic automotive liability insurance

² ASPIRE-TANF Program Rules," Chapter 607, Section 16, *Maine Department of Health and Human Services, Office of Integrated Access and Support*, last amended November 22, 2005. <http://www.maine.gov/sos/cec/rules/10/144/144c607.doc>.

By The Numbers

- **Year Started:** 1997
- **Approximate number of active participants:** 700. Total PaS enrollment is statutorily capped at 2,000, but the program has never approached that level of participation.
- **Performance Measures:** As of 2001, members of a cohort of former PaS students who were in the program in 1999 made two dollars more per hour than other former Maine TANF recipients.³

PaS and TANF Work Requirements

Work Participation Rate Fulfillment. Maine has always financed the PaS program with state money counted toward the TANF maintenance of effort (MOE) requirement. Thus, until the passage of the Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA), Maine did not need to include PaS students in its work participation rate calculation. However, since the passage of the DRA, PaS students have been included in this calculation.⁴ Students are counted as participating in vocational education for their first 12 months in PaS. After students exceed their 12 months of allowable participation in vocational education, only those students who participate in other countable work activities for a sufficient number of hours are counted toward the federal rate. Few students combine participation in PaS with sufficient participation in other countable activities. As a result, Maine's work participation rate has declined, contributing to difficulties meeting the state's federal work participation rate target.

Documentation. Maine has struggled to implement a system for documenting and verifying hours of work

TANF Work Participation Rates

States face financial penalties unless they engage 50 percent of adults in families receiving TANF-funded assistance in a limited number of countable work activities for a specified number of hours per week. Education and training activities only count toward these hours to a certain extent. No more than 30 percent of individuals counting toward a state's work participation rate can be counted in vocational education or high school attendance (for minor parents), and no individual can be counted as participating in vocational education for more than 12 months. After those first 12 months, hours spent in education and training programs can count as job skills training or education related to employment, but only when combined with at least 20 hours of participation a week in employment or another core TANF work activity.

The Deficit Reduction Act of 2005 (DRA) for the first time imposed the work requirements on recipients of assistance funded with state-only money that is claimed toward the TANF maintenance of effort requirement, and it made other changes that effectively increased the work participation rate targets that states must meet. Additionally, the regulations implementing the DRA require that all hours of participation be verified and documented, which poses significant challenges to institutions educating TANF participants. For more information on the TANF work participation requirements and the changes made by the DRA, please see *Implementing the TANF Changes in the Deficit Reduction Act: "Win-Win" Solutions for Families and States*, available at www.clasp.org/WinWin.

As a result of these restrictions, and a general "work-first" approach, many states allow only very limited access to education and training for TANF recipients. However, some states have found ways to work within the federal requirements and provide valuable educational opportunities to parents receiving TANF. This brief is one in a series that profiles promising approaches to supporting education and training programs under TANF in spite of the limits imposed by the federal rules.

³ Based on a longitudinal study conducted by professors at the University of Maine and the University of Southern Maine. See Sandra S. Butler and Luisa S. Deprez, "The Parents as Scholars Program: A Maine Success Story," *Maine Policy Review*, Summer 2008. http://mcspolicycenter.umaine.edu/files/pdf_mpr/butler_V17N1.pdf

⁴ See "TANF Work Participation Rates" box above.

participation that has the support of DHHS, college administrators and students. At present, PaS lacks a uniform system for documenting and verifying hours of participation, and some areas fail to document and verify hours satisfactorily. DHHS intends to propose a rule soon that will begin to address some of these shortcomings.

Crucial Innovations

PaS supports students pursuing both two and four-year degrees. In many education and training programs for TANF recipients, the highest supported degree is an associate degree. From the beginning PaS has fully supported students who are pursuing bachelor's degrees, requiring only that these students increase their hours of participation after their second year in PaS. This requirement does not seem to be a major disincentive for students interested in pursuing four-year degrees through PaS. Indeed, a longitudinal study of the PaS program shows that as of 2006, 44 percent of students who had received a degree had received a bachelor's.⁵ According to 2008 Current Population Survey data, the median income for people with a bachelor's degree was 32 percent higher than the median income for people with an associate degree, who in turn had a 30 percent higher median income than people with only a high school diploma or GED.⁶

Advocates formed and effective coalition that managed to create and maintain public and political support for PaS. In the years preceding welfare reform in 1996, a coalition calling itself the Women's Economic Security Project (WESP) formed in Maine, made up of most groups in the state that were interested in low-income policy, women's issues and social services. WESP sought to fight back against the negative characterizations of welfare recipients that had characterized the national political rhetoric. WESP worked to help people in Maine understand that single mothers on welfare experience extreme financial hardship and face limited opportunity for advancement without support from the state. In essence, WESP sought to make welfare reform center on pulling people out of poverty rather than pushing people off welfare rolls. To this end, WESP took a number of steps, including meeting with editorial boards of major newspapers, introducing state legislators to single mothers on welfare, and engaging community groups in conversations about welfare and welfare reform. Largely as a result of these coordinated efforts, the state implemented a series of policies designed to ensure that Maine's TANF program would improve the lives and livelihoods of Maine's TANF population. PaS was one part of this broader effort.⁷ Due to the continued support of advocates, state administrators, state legislators and U.S. Senator Olympia Snowe, the program has survived and thrived.

Flexible time limits allow PaS students to continue pursuing degrees even when unexpected life events intervene. One of the biggest barriers to educational achievement for TANF recipients is the emergence of unexpected challenges in their personal lives. No one anticipates suffering an injury, and few people anticipate having to take in an elderly parent or facing eviction, but these problems are especially acute for low-income people who often lack the ability to add yet more responsibility and worry to their daily lives. By offering the "good cause" exceptions outlined above, PaS helps students manage unexpected setbacks without abandoning their academic pursuits. PaS is able to offer students with "good cause" six years to complete bachelor's degrees because PaS is funded with

⁵ As reported by Butler and Deprez based on data from their 2006 survey.

⁶ "PINC-03: Educational Attainment – People 25 Years Old and Over, by Total Money Earnings in 2008, Work Experience in 2008, Age, Race, Hispanic Origin, and Sex," *Current Population Survey: Annual Social and Economic Supplement*, 2008.
http://www.census.gov/hhes/www/cpstables/032009/perinc/new03_001.htm

⁷ For more on WESP and the creation of PaS, see Butler and Deprez.

MOE money rather than with money from the state's TANF block grant; cash benefits paid out of MOE money are not subject to the federal five-year lifetime limit.

Challenges

Since passage of the DRA, PaS has struggled to find ways to count its participants in work activities. Advocates have encouraged the state to stop counting assistance provided to PaS recipients toward the MOE requirement, which would take PaS students out of the work participation rate calculation. However, DHHS has thus far declined to go this route. As a result, PaS has contributed to Maine's struggles with meeting its federal work participation rate requirement. Difficulties documenting and verifying hours have compounded this problem.

PaS has never been able to reach its maximum allowable enrollment. Although by statute up to 2,000 students can be enrolled in PaS at any one time, program enrollment has never gotten much above 900.⁸ Though the reasons for the program's low enrollment have never been verified with certainty, possible contributing factors include concern among caseworkers that many PaS students do not count towards the state work participation rate, continuing difficulty spreading the word about the program, recipients' interest in more immediate employment, and the challenge of combining schoolwork with other commitments.

PaS does not support students who seek credentials other than two- and four-year degrees. While students who are academically prepared to seek two- and four-year degrees are well served by PaS, many TANF recipients lack the requisite academic preparation to enter such programs. Additionally, some TANF recipients might want to receive a marketable credential, but might not want to expend the time and effort necessary to receive a degree.

Unfortunately, such students currently lack access to a program that could support them. Maine residents who do not receive TANF cash assistance but whose family incomes are less than 200 percent of the federal poverty line are eligible for a program called the Competitive Skills Scholarship Program (CSSP), assuming that they lack marketable postsecondary credentials but have the educational background and skills necessary to complete their chosen credential or degree programs successfully. Created in 2007, CSSP supports students seeking a range of different degrees and credentials, including two- and four-year post-secondary credentials and degrees and shorter-term credentials, as long as they prepare students for high-wage jobs that are in high demand. However, because of the availability of PaS for TANF recipients, the Maine Department of Labor, which administers CSSP, has chosen to limit this program to non-TANF recipients.

This decision has left TANF cash assistance recipients who seek shorter term credentials with limited support. If TANF cash assistance recipients decide to pursue shorter term credentials, the state will count them as participating in vocational education for the first 12 months. After that, caseworkers may require students to participate in 20 hours per week of a core work activity such as unsubsidized employment so that they can be counted toward the federal work participation rate.

⁸ According to the United States Department of Health and Human Services Administration for Children and Families, Maine's average monthly cash assistance caseload in FY 2009 was 13,516 families. http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/ofa/data-reports/caseload/2009/2009_family_tanssp.htm

For More Information

Visit

Maine Equal Justice Partners guide to PaS
http://www.mejp.org/pas_guide.htm

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