

Getting Credit for Learning

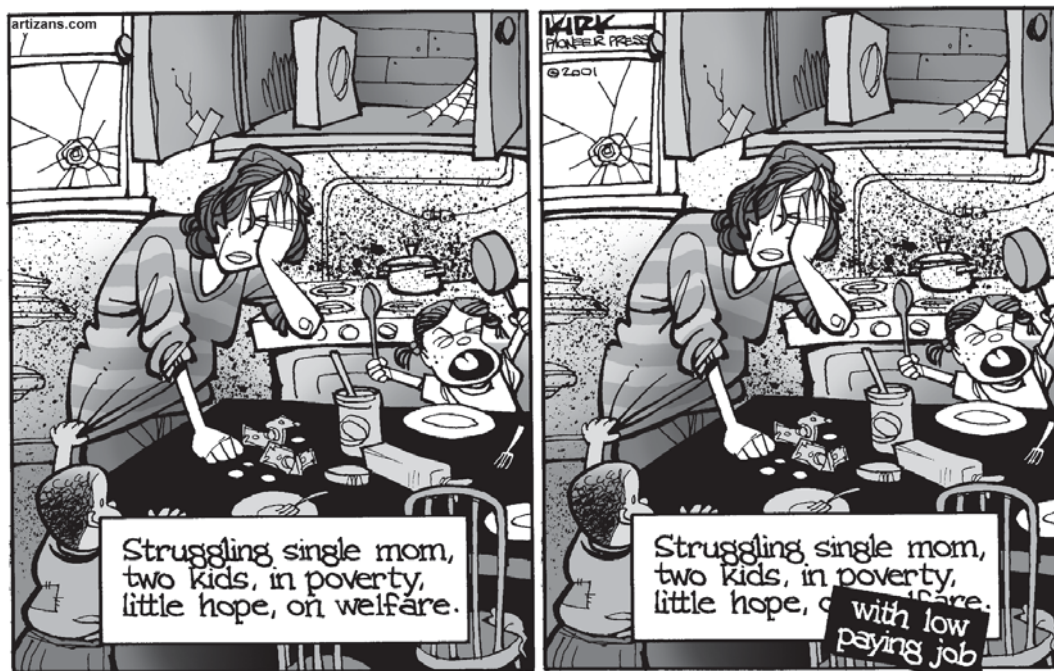
by Cara Anaam

Research has shown that TANF recipients who do not have the education and training to be successful in the job market have great difficulty getting and holding onto jobs that enable them to be self-sufficient. Statistics show that adults receiving public assistance are less likely to have graduated from high school. In New York City, for example, only 50% of adult TANF recipients have a high school diploma while 72% of the general public has this credential.

Given these facts, it would seem logical that taking part in education and training programs should count toward fulfilling the requirement that people must work in order to get TANF benefits. In some states such as Maine, Tennessee, and California, this is the case. In others such as Massachusetts, this is not. And in still others such as Ohio and New York, it depends on where you live in the state.

The lack of consistent policy from state to state on this issue can be partially explained by a difference in philosophy. On one side, the argument is that putting people to work first is more effective than putting people in school. People who think this way reason that many welfare recipients dropped out in the first place because they didn't like or feel they had the aptitude for school. Those who take this side of the question, such as Lawrence Mead, a professor of politics at New York University, also argue that it is not fair that TANF recipients are supported by taxpayer money while they go to school but those who are working aren't.

Those who take the opposing view, such as Judy Williams, the director of Maine's Bureau of Family Independence, say it's important to give recipients choices as to how they go about gaining economic independence. Maine has a Parents



WELFARE REFORM'S SUCCESS

as Scholars program that provides the same cash benefits and services as TANF to qualified residents who are pursuing two- and four-year college degrees. Participants go through a screening process that may include assessment and remedial classes. Once in the program, they are expected to complete their studies in a timely fashion. To help them succeed, they are not expected to work during the first two years. Williams reports that 95% of participants in this program graduate.

Researchers who prepared the national evaluation of welfare-to-work strategies entitled *How Effective Are Different Welfare-to-Work Approaches?* seem to agree with Mead's point of view. They declare that there appears to be no "one size fits all" path to help TANF recipients transition from welfare to long-term employment.

Out of the eleven programs they studied over a five-year period, the most successful was one in Portland, OR. The reasons for this success are reported to be that people were screened to determine who already had the skills they needed to be successful in a chosen job field. These people were helped to find a position, then they received continued support so they could succeed at it. For others, job skills training was integrated with ABE and/or GED programs. Again, ongoing support was available to help participants define and reach employment goals. The evaluation also showed that just having attained a job or a GED and a job did not guarantee financial independence in the short term. It often took 3-5 years for the benefits of education and training to translate into higher earnings. This may be because people, while in the training process, continue to work at lower-wage jobs, if at all. Earning power is also affected by the demand from area employers.

Find out how your state compares when it comes to its policy of counting education as work for TANF recipients, at <http://nccp.org/wizard/>.

For more information on welfare policy you can visit www.welfarelaw.org.

Cara Anaam is the co-editor of The Change Agent.

Questions for Discussion

- 1) Do you agree with Mead or Williams regarding whether education should be counted toward TANF work requirements? Set up a mock debate in the classroom and invite another class to decide which side has the most compelling arguments.
- 2) If you agree more with Mead than Williams, how would your opinion change if the government were to provide enough money to support everyone who wants to go to college and needs help to do so?
- 3) Describe the job you would like to have in the next two years. Do you have the skills and training to do that job right now? If not, what do you need to learn? Make a plan to reach your goal.