

# The Third National Even Start Evaluation and Latinos: Do the Data Distort Reality?

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## Overview

In May of 2003, Abt Associates, on behalf of the U.S. Department of Education, completed the third national evaluation of the effectiveness of Even Start, a federal family literacy program serving severely educationally and economically disadvantaged children and families. This study has been widely cited by education policy-makers and federal legislations as evidence that the Even Start program is ineffective. The main finding, that Even Start children and parents did not gain more on outcome measures than a control group, has fueled reductions in federal funding and put the whole program at risk of complete elimination. This critique asks the question: How do these findings apply to the burgeoning Hispanic/Latino population?

## Problems with the Evaluation

1. **Assessment in the Experimental Design Study (EDS):** Abt Associates relied almost exclusively on English-language instruments to assess literacy growth, even though the participants in the study were mainly Spanish speakers. A fair and comprehensive evaluation of the growth of Hispanic children's early language and literacy development needs to include assessment of their Spanish-language development as well as their rate of English acquisition. Recent research has revealed the importance of first-language maintenance and development to long-term English-language fluency and academic success. The evaluation does not provide any information about the level of Spanish fluency for the parents or the children or the impact of the program on the family's use of home language or cultural practices that promote literacy skills. The Head Start National Reporting System (NRS) has recognized these principles and is now assessing young Hispanic children who are not fluent in English in both Spanish and English. *Without this information in the Even Start evaluation, it is impossible to know the impact of the program on the overall linguistic abilities of Hispanic English language learners.*
2. **Outcome Measures:** The primary child outcome measures included in this evaluation, the Peabody Picture Vocabulary Test (PPVT) and the Woodcock-Johnson-Revised, have been widely criticized by bilingual scholars as being invalid for dual language learners. In particular, the vocabulary assessed on these measures does not capture the linguistic strengths and communicative abilities of children who are acquiring English during the preschool years. These measures alone are not sensitive to changes that result from educational program opportunities and will almost certainly underestimate the true language ability and growth of the urban Hispanic population included in the Even Start evaluation.  
  
The parent report measures also have questionable validity for Hispanic populations. We do not know how recent immigrant or English language learner families understand and respond to the survey standards. In the Abt evaluation, it states that:  
  
*"We...instructed all data collection staff to attempt to assess all adults and children in English. If this was distressing to a parent or child, the Spanish version of the measure was administered."*  
  
In this climate, it is very likely that parents and children who were highly fluent in Spanish but minimally fluent in English tried to comply with the assessor's bias toward English and were unable to display their true linguistic and conceptual competence. *When the measures are flawed and invalid for the population assessed, then it is impossible to know the impact of a program using such an instrument.*
3. **Sample of the EDS:** The majority of the participants in the EDS were Hispanic (75%) and from urban communities (83%). This sample does not generalize to the total Even Start program participants. *Thus, it is impossible to know the extent of Even Start's impact with other populations, including non-Spanish-speaking ELLs, migrant and Native American populations, and families in rural communities using this study.*

## Conclusion

The Abt report recognizes the limitations of this evaluation for English language learners of all ages in the executive summary:

*“Future evaluations will need to carefully consider the best ways of assessing parents and children who have limited skills in reading, speaking, and writing in English.”*

When such a large percentage of the Even Start participants fits this description and is in need of intensive early educational intervention, it would be a national disgrace to discontinue services based on such a faulty evaluation.

**Dr. Linda M. Espinosa** is currently a Professor of Early Childhood Education at the University of Missouri-Columbia and from 2002 to 2003 served as the Co-director of the National Institute for Early Education Research at Rutgers University. Dr. Espinosa is currently on the Board of Examiners for the National Council for Accreditation of Teacher Education (NCATE) and a Commissioner for the National Association for the Education of Young Children (NAEYC) Accreditation Standards and Criteria Commission. She has served as a consulting editor for *Early Childhood Research Quarterly*, *Early Childhood Research & Practice*, *Information Technology in Childhood Education*, and *Prevention Researcher*, and serves on multiple national commissions and advisory boards. She currently serves as the Co-Chair of the First Five, Los Angeles Universal Preschool Research Advisory Committee and is a member of the National Task Force on Early Childhood Education for Hispanics Technical Advisory Group. Dr. Espinosa also was a member of the National Academy of Sciences, National Research Board Committee on Early Childhood Pedagogy project, and a contributing author to *Eager to Learn: Educating Our Preschoolers*, published by the National Academies of Science. Dr. Espinosa completed her B.A. at the University of Washington, her Ed.M. at Harvard University, and her Ph.D. in educational psychology at the University of Chicago.