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# Testimony of Lois M. Quinn and John Pawasarat to the U.S. Senate Finance Committee Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy

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# Employment & Training Institute

Testimony of

Lois M. Quinn and John Pawasarat  
of the Employment and Training Institute  
University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee

to the

Senate Committee on Finance  
Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy

June 18, 1990

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Mr. Chairman and members and staff of the Finance Subcommittee on Social Security and Family Policy, I am Lois Quinn, a Scientist with the Employment and Training Institute of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee. I am accompanied by John Pawasarat, Director of the Institute. We are testifying in response to your request to provide information on our evaluation of the Wisconsin Learnfare policy, report on our progress to date, and answer your questions and concerns.

In July of 1989 the Employment and Training Institute of the University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee entered into contract to evaluate the Learnfare portion of the "Wisconsin Welfare Reform Package Section 1115(a) Waiver Application," approved October, 1987, for the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services and the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services. A research design for the evaluation was approved in December, 1989, with the final evaluation report due June 30, 1993.<sup>1</sup> The Institute also is evaluating Wisconsin's Work Experience and Job Training (WEJT) Program and the Community Work Experience Program (CWEP) for the State of Wisconsin. The work on this evaluation will complement that of Learnfare and allow for analysis of teens who are exempted from the Learnfare schooling requirement or who graduate or "age" into the workfare programs.

Like the Family Support Act of 1988, Wisconsin's Learnfare policy has as its goal assuring that AFDC family members obtain the skills needed to help them avoid long-term welfare dependence. The intent of the Learnfare policy was articulated in the Wisconsin waiver request to the federal government.

For adults, cooperation with employment and training programs is expected. For teens, school attendance is the appropriate equivalent of adult work and should be treated as seriously as work. The school requirement for all teen members of AFDC households between 13 and 18 years old will permit the state to give the teens a clearly understandable and monetarily tangible reason to pursue their education. Obviously, in and of itself, it may not be sufficient to motivate a teen to continue schooling. However, used in conjunction with a wide range of school and social service programs, it should increase the overall effectiveness of the state's efforts to educate these children. This should reduce the likelihood of their future welfare dependence.<sup>2</sup>

Learnfare targets not only teen parents receiving Aid to Families with Dependent Children (AFDC), but also teenage dependents who reside with a natural or adoptive parent.

The critical outcome for older teens affected by the Learnfare experiment is economic self-sufficiency, which will be measured by data on each individual's subsequent welfare history and labor force experience. The Wisconsin Employee Wage Reporting System will be used for both evaluations. This data base which is already matched against AFDC client populations for welfare fraud purposes provides quarterly earnings of all AFDC participants. The data will be available for all persons living in the state whether they remain on welfare or not. Other expected outcomes include high school completion, improved school performance as measured by credit attainment and grades earned, improved attendance, and reduced incidents of female teen AFDC recipients' childbearing. The school data will be obtained through examination of student records in the Milwaukee Public Schools and five representative school districts in other parts of the state. This data will be supplemented by state records on GED certificates and high school equivalency diplomas issued. Birth records are available

statewide through the Department of Health and Social Services (DHSS) to measure subsequent births to participants. The most reliable measures of Learnfare success -- transition to employment, post-program AFDC status of teen parents, high school completion, and school credit attainment -- will only be meaningful when compared to a similar population for the two-year period before the Learnfare experiment.

What we can present to the Committee today is only preliminary information on certain social service characteristics of teens and families sanctioned under the Learnfare policy in Milwaukee County, the state's largest urban area. The Learnfare evaluation contract required an examination of the characteristics of families sanctioned under Learnfare. Furthermore, the state-appointed Learnfare Advisory Committee in its first meeting asked us to examine the social problems and identified social service needs of chronically sanctioned families in Milwaukee County. With the cooperation of the Milwaukee County Department of Health and Social Services and the Milwaukee County Board of Supervisors, the Employment and Training Institute examined over four million computerized records from data bases in Milwaukee County including the Children's Court system records since 1979, social service records since at least 1987, all checks written for Milwaukee County social services since 1985, and all records on individuals in the income maintenance system including all Learnfare participants from September, 1988 through December, 1989.

Since Learnfare sanctions impact on the entire family unit, in the critical area of child abuse and neglect we examined these problems for the family unit rather than just the specific teenager whose

failure to attend school triggered the family's AFDC benefit reduction. The attached report on The Impact of Learnfare on Milwaukee County Social Service Clients summarizes the results of the research utilizing Milwaukee County social service data. Briefly stated, the findings include:

- From September, 1988 through December, 1989 the families of 6,612 Milwaukee County teens were sanctioned for failure to meet Learnfare school attendance requirements.
- As state officials anticipated, many teens sanctioned under Learnfare were in families with problems of abuse or neglect. 1,327 Milwaukee County teens sanctioned under Learnfare were in families identified by Milwaukee County social service workers or the Children's Court system as having suspected or documented problems with abuse or neglect. These youth comprised twenty percent of all sanctioned teens in the county.
- When teens who had been in the Children's Court system (either as Children in Need of Protective Services or for delinquent acts) were added to teens living in families coded for possible abuse or neglect, they comprised 2,722 (or forty-one percent) of the 6,612 Milwaukee County teens sanctioned.

- Teens in families coded for possible abuse or neglect or in the Children's Court system received a total of 10,195 monthly sanctions and accounted for \$1,529,250 of the AFDC savings attributed to Learnfare for the September, 1988 through December, 1989 period.
  
- Another consequence of Learnfare is the sanctioning of AFDC parents who take in foster children and AFDC families contracting with Milwaukee County to provide family day care. While foster children are exempt from Learnfare, the AFDC families who take in foster children are subject to Learnfare requirements for their own teenagers. An analysis of a portion of Milwaukee County families providing foster care found 144 foster children living with AFDC caseheads whose own teens were under the Learnfare policy. Fifty-three of these foster children (36.8 percent of the total) were in families sanctioned under Learnfare. Likewise, AFDC families with teens under the Learnfare requirement were identified who also provide family day care for Milwaukee County. Of the seventy-five children in family day care and placed with AFDC families under the Learnfare requirement, forty-three (57.3 percent) were cared for by families who were sanctioned under Learnfare.

The June 4, 1990 Waiver Authority and Special Conditions requires an examination of the availability of services and the timeliness of

providing services to thirteen to nineteen year old sanctioned teens. The new federal waiver should allow for improved recordkeeping to determine the specific services provided to each of these clients, as well as services provided to an additional 3,300 in-school teens in Milwaukee County sanctioned for poor attendance and 2,356 teens sanctioned in other parts of the state.<sup>3</sup> Presently, we know that day care for children of teen mothers and transportation monies to and from day care have been provided throughout the state and contracts had been written for alternative education programs in Milwaukee County.

This analysis is critical since the Learnfare policy as presently constituted is dependent for its cost savings upon exemptions from the JOBS legislation which requires identification of supportive service needs and family circumstances prior to sanctioning and a conciliation procedure to resolve disputes related to clients' participation in JOBS programs. It is the position of Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services administrators that social service needs of Learnfare families can be adequately addressed by existing school and county social service staff. The Job Service staff responsible for serving teens sanctioned as dropouts do not presently receive school records or county information on the identified social service needs of sanctioned teens, and the alternative education programs have access to social service records only upon request by the client. While the names of over 3,300 teens sanctioned in Milwaukee County as school dropouts or for failure to report their school status have been given to three case managers employed by Wisconsin Job Service, only alternative school placements are provided and financed. Families of in-school youth



requesting social services assistance, other than for day care or transportation to day care, are encouraged by the Milwaukee County Learnfare Hotline and income maintenance unit workers to contact public school social workers.<sup>4</sup> Tracking services to Learnfare sanctioned families is problematic. School social workers are now expected by state Social Services administrators to provide social services to families of in-school youth sanctioned under Learnfare but do not have access to county and state social service records identifying these families' documented problems. The newly required recordkeeping of the state and federally funded services and referrals will also enable us to track services provided to the 1,327 teens already identified as members of Milwaukee County families with suspected or documented problems of abuse and neglect.

Secondly, a word on numbers. The Learnfare policy, while very easy to understand, is quite complex to administer and requires the cooperation of 429 locally autonomous school districts, 72 county income maintenance departments, and the state Department of Health and Social Services. While the State of Wisconsin has one of the most sophisticated computerized systems for administration of AFDC, food stamps and medical assistance programs in the nation, implementation of the policy is dependent not only on computer matches but decisions of thousands of income maintenance workers and teachers across the state and accurate reporting of this data to the various computerized systems involved in the implementation.

The Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services maintains a computerized file of all AFDC recipients in the state, which is

school under the Learnfare requirement although the reasons for most exemptions are not available in the state's data system. According to caseworkers a large number of teen parents are exempted from school by obtaining a waiver from their high school stating that they cannot graduate by age twenty. In December, 415 teen parents who had not completed high school were exempted from high school attendance and then subsequently exempted from workfare because they had children under age two, 144 teen parents were exempted from high school attendance and then subsequently exempted from workfare because they were pregnant, and 116 non-graduates exempted from high school attendance had been placed in mandatory work programs, including 17 teens sanctioned that month under workfare. Another 106 teen parents were temporarily out of school with infants under three months of age. By contrast, relatively few dependent teens are exempt from school, in part because eighteen-year-old dependents are eligible for AFDC in Wisconsin only if they are in-school and expected to graduate or earn a GED credential by age nineteen.

The state's administrative records of the school status of Milwaukee County teens sanctioned under Learnfare between September, 1988 and December, 1989 were reported for two months after each teen's last sanction. State data showed that twenty-eight percent of the teens had returned to school and were reported regularly attending two months after their last sanction. This group included 317 teen parents (twenty percent of all sanctioned teen parents) and 1,530 dependent teens (thirty percent of all sanctioned teen dependents in the county).

REPORTED SCHOOL STATUS OF TEEN PARENTS TWO MONTHS  
AFTER THEIR LAST SANCTION (as of December, 1989)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
In-school	317	20.3
Still sanctioned <sup>8</sup>	366	23.4
Unverified or not found	92	5.9
Exempt from school <sup>9</sup>	549	35.2
No longer on AFDC	238	15.2
TOTAL	1,562	100.0

REPORTED SCHOOL STATUS OF TEEN DEPENDENTS TWO MONTHS  
AFTER THEIR LAST SANCTION (as of December, 1989)

	<u>Number</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
In-school	1,530	30.3
Still sanctioned <sup>10</sup>	1,428	28.3
Unverified or not found	256	5.1
Exempt from school <sup>11</sup>	116	2.2
Moved to AFDC case headed by a non-parent	29	0.6
No longer on AFDC	1,691	33.5
TOTAL	5,050	100.0

These numbers have generated a great deal of controversy in Wisconsin, in large part because they conflict with earlier state reports that, "The vast majority of teens are sanctioned for only a few months before returning to school and attending regularly."<sup>12</sup>

It has become an unfortunate new Wisconsin pastime to search for a single number that captures the experience of AFDC teens under the Learnfare policy. Some Learnfare critics have cited the twenty-eight percent figure as evidence of Learnfare's failure. State officials recently calculated a new percentage of sanctioned teens returning to school based on these numbers, 39.4 percent, which excludes those teens

who leave AFDC after sanctioning. An even more promising percentage, forty-six percent, could be generated if all sanctioned teens subsequently exempted from any school attendance could also be removed from the Learnfare experimental group.

We believe that reliance upon one or two percentages to judge the complex experiences under Learnfare is ill-advised. First, we have yet to generate the baseline data on the historical school experience (completion rates, credits earned, attendance patterns) of AFDC teens prior to the Learnfare experiment. Secondly, AFDC school status codes have serious limitations with practices reportedly varying even within counties for collecting and coding school enrollment and attendance. Finally, just as the experiences of adults on AFDC have ranged from long-term dependence of five or more years to short-term participation during bouts of unemployment, the subpopulations used for hypothesis testing in the Learnfare evaluation will require careful attention and analysis.

To date a larger number of sanctioned teens in Milwaukee County have left AFDC than have remained on aid while returning to school. Recent patterns of movement on and off welfare will be compared in the pre-Learnfare period, controlling for changes in the labor market, with the experimental period to determine if the Learnfare experiment has effected the movement of families or individual youth off welfare. In the case of teen parents, social service records will also be used where available to determine the numbers, if any, of these teens' infants who remained on aid or moved into foster care with another casehead or in another household. The strength of our research design

is its use of non-welfare data for labor market participation, school completion, and birth rates insuring that the experience of all teens in the experimental group during implementation of the Learnfare policy will be evaluated.

The Wisconsin Learnfare experiment addresses the national goal of breaking the cycle of poverty and dependency through education and along with the Wisconsin Work Experience and Job Training Program and Community Work Experience Program through employment training. These outcomes cannot be measured quickly, but are essential for understanding the impact and value of the Learnfare policy experiment. As we proceed, we welcome the recommendations and insights of this Committee and the state and federal departments in our evaluation work.

1. University of Wisconsin-Milwaukee Employment and Training Institute, "Evaluation Research Design for Wisconsin's Learnfare Program," submitted to the Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, October 15, 1989.
2. Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, "Wisconsin Welfare Reform Package Section 1115(a) Waiver Application," submitted to the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, May 1, 1987, p. 10.
3. These numbers are for the period from September, 1988 through December, 1989.
4. Interview with Jill Meade, Milwaukee County Learnfare Coordinator, September 28, 1989. See also, DHSS "Important Notice: This Notice May Affect Your AFDC Grant," December 26, 1987; Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, "Important Notice to Teens Currently Being Sanctioned for Learnfare: This Notice May Affect Your Grant," May, 1989.
5. Thirteen percent of the 29,269 teen parents and dependents under the Learnfare requirement in the state computer system in July, 1989 had missing or inconsistent entries for Learnfare status or highest grade completed.
6. The Family Support Administration's June 4, 1990 Waiver Authority and Special Conditions provides for renegotiation of the evaluation contract to collect school attendance data on AFDC teens by September 1, 1991. We have agreed to establish an accelerated time-line for collection of attendance data and information on credit attainment. A survey of the 429 Wisconsin school districts and follow-up interviews will be used to determine the extent to which methods of collecting and reporting school attendance data were altered both in response to Learnfare and to the Wisconsin Compulsory Attendance and Truancy Prevention Act of 1987.
7. This group includes 274 teens with Learnfare school codes of "not found," 824 teens whose attendance was not verified for that month, 1,106 thirteen year olds whose attendance has not yet been reviewed, and 236 fourteen to nineteen year olds miscoded as "children under age 13."
8. This total includes 54 teen parents sanctioned only in December, 145 parents sanctioned for two to four months, 116 parents sanctioned for five to nine months, and 51 teen parents sanctioned for ten to fifteen months. Eighteen year old teens who are sanctioned as dropouts are not included since they are only eligible as AFDC dependents if they are in school.
9. Sixty-seven of the sanctioned teen parents were exempted from school attendance to care for their infants under three months of age. Those teens who secure a waiver from their high school stating that they cannot graduate by age twenty are given workfare codes. 132 of the Learnfare sanctioned teen parents who had not completed high school were subsequently placed in mandatory workfare programs, 261 teen

parents who were exempted from school attendance under Learnfare were subsequently exempted from workfare because they had a child under two years of age, and 42 teen parents exempted from school were subsequently exempted from workfare because they were pregnant.

10. This total includes 171 teens only sanctioned in December, 639 teens sanctioned for two to four month, 422 teens sanctioned for five to nine months, and 196 teens who have been sanctioned for ten to fifteen months.

11. This group includes only thirteen to seventeen year old dependents since eighteen year old dependents are eligible for AFDC only if they are attending school.

12. "Analysis of Learnfare Statistics, September 1988 - June 1989," Silvia Jackson, Administrator, Division of Economic Support, Wisconsin Department of Health and Social Services, August 10, 1989, p. 1.