



## Education paves way out of poverty

**Advocates for the poor and some lawmakers want to change welfare regulations to allow more parents to take classes while on public assistance, as Dawn Nardi, of Providence, did.**

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**BY JENNIFER D. JORDAN**  
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Dawn Nardi barely graduated from Durfee High School in Fall River. She hated the low-wage factory jobs she was stuck in afterward.

By age 20, she was pregnant, single and on welfare.

Two years passed before her case manager informed her that she could take training and education courses as part of her welfare benefits, a delay that still rankles Nardi.

She quickly enrolled at Bristol Community College and, in 1997, earned an associate's degree in liberal arts -- all the while working part-time. Success in college whetted her appetite. Soon the young woman who hadn't liked school was pursuing a bachelor's degree in sociology, while continuing to work. Nardi graduated from the University of Massachusetts at Dartmouth, in 2001.

"It was that educational attainment that allowed me to get to where I am today," said Nardi, now 32, as she sat in the living room of the home she bought last year in Providence's Mount Pleasant neighborhood. Her daughter, Brittany, is now 11. Nardi works full-time as a coordinator for an antipoverty coalition, One Rhode Island, and earns more than \$30,000 a year.

An education has made the difference for Nardi and her daughter.

"When I was on welfare, I got paid \$5,000 to \$6,000 a year [in cash assistance]," Nardi said. "Last year, I paid that in taxes on my house. Education just gives you that opportunity to succeed in life."

Today, however, it is even more difficult for young mothers to transform their lives as Nardi did, because of stricter welfare regulations and political leadership opposed to expanding such programs.

LUCKILY FOR NARDI, she began community college in January 1996, so she was allowed to take classes while on public assistance for more than two years. After 1996, President Bill Clinton's welfare program kicked in, restricting such educational opportunities to the first 24 months that families receive welfare. Called the Family Independence Program, the changes also limited to five years the length of time families can receive public assistance.

Parents in the program must work 30 hours a week, but during the first two years, they can take job training or college classes for 10 hours and work 20 hours a week. Parents are often eligible for grants and scholarships to help them pay for the classes.

Today, if parents on welfare are not informed about the training and education option, or don't take advantage of it during the first two years they are in the Family Independence Program, they miss out.

Advocates for the poor and some lawmakers want to change the system so that more people in the program can take classes while on public assistance.

A recent study by the national group Kids Count explores the link between parents who have trouble getting decent jobs and the rise in childhood poverty.

"The best way to improve the future for America's most disadvantaged kids is to improve the financial security of their parents today," said Douglas W. Nelson, president of the Annie E. Casey Foundation, which produced the study.

In Rhode Island, 31 percent of the state's 243,000 children live in low-income families -- a single parent with two children earning less than \$32,184 a year qualifies as low income. That compares with 24 percent in Connecticut and 26 percent in Massachusetts. Many of these parents had difficulty getting and keeping jobs in 2003 (the year the study analyzes) for a variety of reasons, including low education levels, a lack of English skills, and mental and physical disabilities they or their children have.

A key way to strengthen these families is by investing in job training and education for parents, the study found.

"We must identify policy and systems changes that can help families facing the significant barriers to employment that are outlined in this report," Elizabeth Burke Bryant, executive director of Rhode Island Kids Count, said in a statement.

Kids Count compares states in 10 areas of children's well-being; Rhode Island ranked 22nd nationally.

Rhode Island lost ground in five areas between 2000 and 2002: the number of low-birth-weight babies; the infant mortality rate; the teen birth rate; the number of teens not in school and not working; and the number of children in poverty. All five areas went up.

The rate stayed the same in one area: teen deaths ages 15-19. And the state improved in four other areas: The number of child deaths, the number of teens dropping out of high school, and the number of children in single-parent households dropped. The number of children living with parents who were fully employed increased.

Advocates for children and the poor say one of the most effective ways to address these complex problems is simple: remove barriers to education, professional training and decent jobs for low-income parents.

RECENT ATTEMPTS to expand the Family Independence Program's education option beyond the first two years have failed to pass the General Assembly, and Governor Carcieri has fought the proposal.

More than 13,000 Rhode Island families participate in the program and about half must fulfill the work requirement, according to the state Department of Human Services. (Illness, pregnancy and having a child younger than 1 year old are exemptions.) Half of the parents in the program have less than a 12th-grade education.

"We want a policy change to allow better access to adult education and training programs," said Heidi

Collins, director of Parents for Progress, a welfare-rights organization. "We find there are many families that are trying to obtain employment but, because of barriers to gaining more skills, are unable to find jobs that will support their families."

The current Family Independence Program "is not flexible," Collins said. "We feel improving and expanding access to adult ed would be an investment for the state."

Advocates for the poor also point out that parents who receive job training or education while on welfare earn more than parents who do not.

A 2003 study by the Poverty Institute at Rhode Island College showed that parents who receive training earn an average of \$11.37 an hour once they get off welfare, compared with \$8.66 an hour for those who do not receive training.

Many parents in the program get jobs as health-care and teachers' aides, office workers, customer service representatives, computer support technicians and manufacturers, and earn an average hourly rate of \$9.28, according to the state's Human Services Department.

"Governor Carcieri is talking about making investments in adult education and work force development -- everyone in the state is talking about these things," said Kate Brewster, director of the Poverty Institute.

"But who better to help than welfare recipients who are trying to do the right thing?"

Earlier this month, the governor announced he was reviving the position of director of adult education by appointing Johan Uvin to the post and elevating the job to that of a top manager, to underscore its importance to the economic growth of the state. At the same time, the governor announced \$4 million in grants for adult education.

DESPITE HIS EDUCATION push, Carcieri has taken a different view about expanding job training and educational opportunities for welfare recipients.

"I think that the governor believes that the ultimate goal of the welfare-to-work program is to get people off welfare and into jobs," said Jeff Neal, the governor's spokesman.

"This program is not ultimately designed to fund long-term education goals."

Although the number of Rhode Island families in the Family Independence Program has declined by 30 percent since welfare reform and about 1,000 families leave the program each year, Neal said Rhode Island has "lagged behind other states in reducing case loads."

Actual program benefits have dropped in recent years, from \$81.5 million in 2003 to \$73.3 million this year, but the costs of other welfare programs have risen, such as health-care benefits for children -- from \$371.7 million two years ago to \$451.6 million this year, according to the Rhode Island Department of Human Services.

"Rhode Island has a very generous social welfare benefit program," Neal said. "In addition, the state has been facing significant budget shortfalls every year."

Money, as well as philosophy, played a role in Carcieri's rejection of the proposal, Neal said.

One Rhode Island, a lobbying group affiliated with the Poverty Institute, initially said expanding the education option would cost the state about \$500,000 -- \$135,000 to cover the lost work hours and the rest for a one-time \$150 clothing allowance, so parents could buy some professional outfits.

The state's Human Services Department disagreed, saying the proposal would cost considerably more, and that it was more important to preserve existing programs than to expand the education option, said Ronald A. Lebel, acting director of the department.

"Given Rhode Island's overall fiscal picture, we are trying to maintain, rather than add, at this point in time," Lebel said. "And as a matter of principle, before we expand, we need to further study the drains on our resources."

SOME LAWMAKERS disagree and say it is important to allow parents on welfare to get additional job training and education throughout the five years of the Family Independence Program.

Such support will help more struggling families stay off welfare in the long term, they argue.

"My theory is these parents on welfare, primarily women, don't always know what they want to do or learn right away, and they should be allowed to work for a while and then get some schooling," said state Sen. June N. Gibbs, a Republican from Middletown who has sponsored bills to expand education and training for the past three years.

Welfare reform is nine years old, and policymakers better understand how welfare-to-work functions, said state Rep. Elizabeth M. Dennigan, a Democrat from East Providence who has also sponsored similar bills.

"We have found out that this population tends to be younger and female and that this structure does not fit their needs," Dennigan said. "I met two young women last year who had been working as certified nursing assistants, and they wanted to get more education and found that they couldn't. Here are two ambitious, motivated young women who wanted to better themselves and go to nursing school. These young people never got a break, never had anyone help them with education. We need to be more flexible."

But state officials warn tougher rules and less flexibility could be coming from the federal government.

Among the changes proposed by the Bush administration and being hashed out by Congress are: increasing the number of welfare recipients that must work and increasing the number of required hours from 30 to 40.

DAWN NARDI BELIEVES her college degree changed everything for her and her daughter, Brittany.

"I am proof positive that small investments in people work," she said.

Nardi has traveled a tough road.

Getting a bachelor's degree while receiving welfare is not encouraged by the system, and Nardi ended up losing her childcare and transportation subsidies while studying at UMass-Dartmouth.

And money is still tight, as she struggles to pay the mortgage each month on her brick Cape-style house. This year, her property taxes will go down, to about \$2,700, but as heating and electricity bills are

predicted to rise this winter, Nardi doubts she will see much savings.

Still, Nardi says it was worth it. Getting an education, first at community college and later at a four-year university, opened an entirely new world.

"It was the support I received at the community college when I applied, and then I fell in love with my first class, which was about the welfare system," Nardi said. "I thought, 'Oh my God, this is my life.' I loved the position papers. I never thought I could write, but since then, I never stopped."

She is passing her love of school on to her daughter.

"I love dinosaurs, and I want to be a dental paleontologist," Brittany said. "Or a vet."

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