SECTION II:

C-FITE
Low Income Student Parent Survey
Survey Research Design

To investigate the low participation in education programs among low-income parents in the Work First program, the Center for Civil Justice, in conjunction with the Committee For Independence Through Education, distributed a survey to student parents who attend Michigan colleges or universities and receive assistance from the Family Independence Agency (FIA). FIA administers both the Family Independence Program (FIP) cash assistance program and a variety of non-cash programs, such as Food Stamps, Medicaid, and Child Day Care, for which eligibility is based on financial need.

Survey Goals

The survey was designed with three goals:

1. Elicit information about these student parents’ experiences with FIA and Work First agencies;
2. Describe any barriers to participation in post-secondary education among low-income parents;
3. Identify positive features as well as recommended improvements to existing programs that might result in greater participation in post-secondary education programs by low income parents.

Survey Design and Distribution

The survey used several types of questions, including those that elicited answers to “Yes/No” and “Check all that apply” questions, as well as questions calling for narrative descriptions of respondents’ experiences. In the following pages, the quantified results are followed by excerpts from the respondents’ comments, in their own words. From December 2000 through February 2001, the survey was distributed on campuses throughout Michigan, through financial aid offices, faculty advisors, campus child care centers, women’s centers, and other appropriate locations.

Survey Sample

The survey sample reflects the impact of more restrictive welfare policies on students in post-secondary education. Considerable evidence points to a precipitous decline in numbers of students receiving cash assistance at the time the survey was conducted as
compared to the early 1990s. A 1997 survey of financial aid officers at seven Michigan institutions and the Michigan House Standing Committee on Colleges and Universities in 1998 both concluded that welfare changes from the mid-1990s adversely affected enrollment of low income single parents, while both Lansing and Mott Community Colleges documented 50-60% declines in numbers of students on public assistance at specific intervals in the period 1997-1999. These downward enrollment trends mirrored national developments. The survey sample, therefore, includes relatively few students receiving cash assistance (with relatively more receiving non cash benefits) as only the most persistent and resilient low income parents who have remained in post-secondary education despite mounting policy and agency practice barriers.

Survey Response

Ninety-eight (98) student parents attending 14 different Michigan colleges and universities responded to the survey. All of the adults in the survey received needs-based assistance from Family Independence Agency (FIA)-administered programs. Most of the respondents (85%) received Medicaid health coverage for themselves or their children. Two thirds of those responding (66%) received Food Stamps. Only about 1/3 (34%) received Family Independence Program (FIP) cash assistance.

More than 2/3 of those responding (68%) were working while attending college. About half (51%) were working at least half time (20 hours per week or more). Ten percent were working full time or close to fulltime (35-40 hours per week).
C-FITE Survey Results: The experience of low income student parents in Michigan

1. Parents are discouraged from educational options and receive negative messages from State agencies about education as a means to achieve self-sufficiency

"Education is not considered a priority. The system is more concerned with maintaining the status quo. It is difficult to be self-sufficient when you can’t do the things such as getting a degree that are essential to self sufficiency and getting off public assistance."

Survey responses revealed that many Work First and FIA case workers and case managers discourage low-income student parents from pursuing education, rather than promote education as a means to achieve self-sufficiency. The narrative responses also clearly suggest that low income parents who are pursuing education in spite of negative messages are doing so because they have a deeply ingrained appreciation of the value of education and its contribution to long term self-sufficiency.

Quantitative Analysis

§ 45% of those responding commented that they received the message from FIA or Work First that education is not important, is not a priority, or is not encouraged or supported by FIA and Work First.

§ Only 7% reported receiving an encouraging message from FIA and Work First.

§ 15% of those responding observed that it would help their education program if FIA and Work First provided information about, and encouragement for, education.
13% of those responding mentioned that they felt pushed into low wage jobs with little opportunity for advancement, even though they knew that they could obtain better jobs if they were able to pursue their educational goals.

**In Their Own Words**

While some parents reported positive messages and support from FIA or Work First, many more reported negative experiences. Typical responses included:

- “…They want to have you work anywhere just so people can get off assistance. But these minimum wage jobs come and go and eventually they will be right back on FIA. Why not let people attend school so they can get something that will last a lifetime and not ever have to get back on assistance.”

- “The way the current system is set up doesn’t promote self-sufficiency. I was once given a choice by a caseworker of continuing to work at a minimum wage job in order to receive benefits as opposed to obtaining a degree that would enable me to get a higher paying job [but with my benefits cut off].”

- “I feel like I am being penalized for going to school. No matter how I try to better my situation all they care about is the number of hours I work…”

- “There is no help or reward for those of us who are trying to get a college education so we can get better jobs and get off and stay off welfare.”

- “They are more concerned about you just going out and getting any old McDonalds job rather than go[ing] to college to better educate yourself to accomplish a good future and career.”

Messages that were received from FIA and Work First about education included:

- “It was more important to work at a $6 an hour job for the rest of my life than to get an education that was going to get me off welfare forever.”

- Education “…is secondary to work even if the work will never provide a living income in terms of pay or benefits.”

- “It’s not as important as getting a job…would rather have you work at McDonald’s the rest of your life than get an education and stay off the system.”

- “It is better to achieve a short term goal of working at any dead end job than to achieve a long term goal of getting a degree which will provide you with the skills and knowledge to obtain not only a job, but a future with endless possibilities, which in the long run is a better alternative for you and your children.”
Even some parents who reported that they had been encouraged to pursue education by their FIA or Work First caseworker commented that they were aware their positive experiences were not shared by other parents. In addition, several parents noted that they were encouraged by one agency but discouraged or treated poorly by the other agency. 

“…my caseworker was very encouraging. Unfortunately I have heard a lot of negative things about a lot of other caseworkers.”

“My experience due to my caring caseworker has been very good. She has encouraged me to continue my education yet work to fulfill the requirements for the program. I feel blessed to have had such a good opportunity to improve myself, but I am saddened for the fact that many families have not had the same treatment.”

“I have had a good experience but I have many friends with children who have had a rough time with these programs.”

“Work First is much more helpful for people trying to go to school. FIA has rude staff that are too busy to return calls or give any information more … than what they need to get you out of their hair.”

“Work First and orientation was all about getting a job despite what the pay and long term benefits were. My FIA worker, however, was very supportive…[v]ery helpful and encouraging…”

2. Negative impact on academic performance and parenting when parents strive to comply with work requirements and attend post-secondary education

"Going to school, being a single parent, and working while trying to manage adequate study time is impossible. They (FIA) want to send you through Hell just to stay afloat."

Student parents report considerable difficulties in trying to attain post-secondary education while raising a family and trying to meet FIA work requirements.

Quantitative Analysis

28% of the respondents had been forced to drop out of college at some point because they could not meet work requirements and go to school at the same time.
In Their Own Words
Low-income student parents reported tremendous difficulties balancing the demands of work, family, and school.

§ “I have an extremely difficult time meeting the work requirements. I am majoring in a somewhat difficult major which requires me to study a lot. Since I have to work so many hours, all of the time that I spend with my children I am studying. My grades are lacking and so is the quality time I am spending with my children.”

§ “I feel the biggest obstacles I have faced are to work and try to receive an education. It has been very difficult for me to remain in school. My grade point average suffers from me having to spend hours working that I could be using to study. I feel as if I have to sacrifice my successful academic progress in order to work.”

§ “It is very difficult. [Being a] single parent, full time student and working full time has put a lot of pressure on my family and … has also caused me to drop classes and not meet my expectations. The quality of my work has been affected. Nothing has helped me.”

§ “So far it’s taken me 3 years to complete courses that could’ve taken only 1 year if I would’ve been able to focus only on school. Now it will take me 7 years to get a bachelors degree.”

§ “I am in the nursing program. It is a very difficult program. I used to work and attend school. It was very difficult trying to work 20 hours per week, have 17 hours of clinical, plus 4 hours of lecture… also 10-15 hours of study time a week. There never seemed to be enough hours in a day. … God has helped me, FIA sure didn’t. So I thank God for bringing me through and I can proudly say I graduate in April 2001.”

§ “I have to work while going to school, I don’t have enough time to do my homework.”

§ “The biggest [obstacle] is trying to work and be a full time student and a full time mom… I have three jobs to juggle. I have to make sure that I put my child aside a while to work or to study…[if] I just had to study it would be a lot easier and faster [to finish school].”
3. Parents found a lack of assistance with child care expenses for hours spent in education programs

At the time that the survey was conducted, families that received FIP could only receive child day care assistance for education approved by the Michigan Works Agency (MWA)—i.e. for a maximum of 12 months during the last year of an undergraduate degree program if the student also was employed 10 hours per week, and for time spent in clinicals, practicums, or internships. Families that received Food Stamps but not FIP could receive child day care for education approved by FIA as supporting the parent’s career-specific goal, without meeting an hourly work requirement and without a 12 month limit. No child day care assistance is available for hours that a parent must spend studying outside of class.

The survey results indicate that as a result of these policies, many low-income parents who attend post-secondary education programs do not receive child care assistance for the hours that they are in class. At the same time, parents who were able to qualify for child day care assistance from FIA indicated that it helped significantly in their efforts to pursue self-sufficiency through education.

Quantitative Analysis

Two thirds of the respondents (66%) reported that they were not able to get FIA child care payments for hours spent in class.

One out of seven respondents (14%) reported having to drop out of college at some point because they were not able to find adequate and reliable child care.

11% reported having to drop out because FIA denied or took too long in processing child care payments.
§ One out of every six respondents of those who described what FIA and Work First could do to help with the student’s educational program (16%) mentioned increased child care help.

§ 15% of those who described the obstacles they faced as student parents mentioned the lack of child care assistance or inadequate child care assistance.

In Their Own Words
Student parents who had not received child day care subsidies identified the limited availability and the expense of safe, dependable and appropriate child care as significant obstacles they faced as student parents.

§ “My biggest obstacle going to school was daycare … [e]ven though I was in school full time and doing Work-Study 20 hours a week.”

§ The policies and procedures … I’ve been told about don’t seem to make sense if the goal is assisting individuals out of poverty… If 10 hours of class time counts toward work requirement … should[n’t] that time automatically be covered by the child care subsidy?”

§ “Child care was denied for school and seeking work…”

§ “The biggest problem I faced was trying to get child care assistance initially. My worker denied my application the second week of school because the father was in between intern jobs. We had to get a loan to pay for it or miss classes and … work altogether.’

§ “FIA was helping with Child Care until my caseworker was switched. Then they cut me off with no notification. I had to call them to get the vague answer, ‘It was a mistake and you should never have received any kind of payment for child care while attending college.’”

§ “I could [not] get help w[ith] child care to go to school[,] just to go to work.”

§ “…It was hard because I didn’t have anyone dependable to watch my child and if I didn’t work the amount of hours expected they would sanction my check. ..”

§ “I had to use my financial aid to pay for child care. I was denied child care because I was not working 25 hours a week.”

On the other hand, parents who had received assistance in paying for child care expenses identified the assistance as particularly helpful:

§ “…The money I got to help with child care while attending classes has helped immensely…”

§ “Child care subsidy was a great help.”
“...Even when my temporary job ended [and] I didn’t work for 2 weeks, my caseworker explained my options and didn’t cancel my day care aid right away, giving me time to find a job.”

4. Parents receive misinformation, or no information, about education opportunities from State agencies

"I didn’t know FIA and Education went together. I didn’t know any of that counted."

Since October 1999, the Michigan legislature has required FIA and DCD to have “clear joint guidelines on the eligibility of work first participants for postemployment training support and on how education/training hours can be applied toward federal work participation requirements.” The agencies (FIA and DCD) also are required to make the joint guidelines “available” to work first participants. In spite of these requirements, the survey responses indicate that accurate and consistent information about education options is not provided to low income parents who are considering or pursuing education.

FIA clients have difficulty obtaining reliable information about education opportunities through FIA and Work First contractors. Moreover, FIA offices and Work First offices often provide different information about the same rules or programs. Apparently even well-meaning agency staff have difficulty identifying policy direction on the options available to student parents, suggesting that additional policy clarification and staff training are needed in this area.

Quantitative Analysis
Most parents reported a general lack of information.

§ 89% reported that their FIA caseworker did not provide any information about counting education hours toward meeting work requirements.

§ 83% reported that their Work First case manager did not provide this information.

§ 58% reported that the person presenting the Work First Orientation provided no information about using education and training to meet work requirements.
A substantial number of parents reported receiving misinformation.

- 18% reported that the person who presented the Work First Orientation to them said that education could not be used to meet work requirements.
- 17% of the single parents with children under age 6 reported being told that they had to work more than the 20 hours per week that are required under state and federal law.
- 15% reported that they had to drop out of school in the past because they were told they would not be eligible to receive benefits from FIA if they attended college.

Only a few parents reported receiving information about specific education options.

- Only 1% reported that the FIA caseworker described the “10/10/10” option for counting some hours of education and study time toward work requirements.
- Only 8% reported that Work First case managers described the 10/10/10 option.
- Only 3% reported that their FIA caseworker told them that a full-time internship could satisfy the work requirements.
- Only 9% reported that their Work First case manager told them about internships.

Two key policies that support parents’ efforts to obtain post-secondary education are not communicated by state agencies. Orientation scheduling and Work-Study eligibility are misrepresented to many student parents.

- 94% of the parents who were in school when they had to attend Work First Orientation were not told that they could schedule orientation to accommodate their educational responsibilities. Under FIA policies, however, these parents are entitled to an individual Orientation that is scheduled to prevent conflicts with education.
- One in five (20%) of the student parents who had Work-Study jobs had problems counting the hours spent at those jobs toward work requirements, in spite of the fact that FIA’s written policies clearly recognize Work-Study as employment that should count toward hourly work requirements.

In Their Own Words

- “…None of the information about education was volunteered. When I asked I was told I could count 10 hours of class time but was not given further information about combining study time, etc. In fact when I asked about study time after I saw a form that listed it, my previous caseworker said they no longer counted study time and the form was an old and outdated one.”
- “The only information I received from orientation is from questions I asked.”
“Another problem is getting a different story from every person that I talk to. Too many people, workers, work first, etc. don’t know or follow the policies.”

“…Most of the info I learned was from others who had received assistance…”

“My two workers have been nothing but supportive while I pursue an education. The first caseworker was unsure at first of how to get day care aid while at school. She was, in fact, unsure about what to do with someone in postsecondary school, ‘though she did get it all figured out.”

“[Agencies should explain there is a way to continue your education with children. Explain that you can include study time…”

"Orientation is mandatory, but I was currently in school at the time when they were supposed to meet. My worker informed me that my benefits would stop [if I did not attend at the scheduled time]."

**Student parents’ recommendations for improving the Work First program: Survey Results**

Respondents’ top 5 recommendations for what FIA or Work First could do to help them go to or stay in post-secondary education were as follows:

- Count time spent in education toward work requirements.
- Reduce work requirements for students.
- Provide child care assistance in connection with education.
- Provide additional information about, and encouragement for, education.
- Provide increased subsistence assistance in the form of cash, food, medical assistance, or supportive services such as car purchase assistance.
In Their Own Words

§ “Support education. Take into consideration that the best way to get out of the welfare system is education.”

§ “I believe that students should be able to get assistance as long as they are in school and doing a good job. The whole purpose of post-secondary education is to find a good job and not be on assistance.”

§ “Offer more help with child care while I attend classes. I have twins and day care is expensive for two children.”

§ “I feel the most important thing is to first respect people and try to understand where they are, then encourage and motivate them to want to do better. Education is the only way that families can grow into productive units. Education is the seed that needs to be planted in every home.”

§ “Encourage clients who wish to go to school and provide them with information on all programs available to assist them in their efforts including outside resources.”

§ “I think that the FIA could require me to work at my job less hours. I have met many parents in the same position as myself struggling with food and child care expenses because there is no way that they can attend classes full time and work. I am doing it but my sanity and grades, and relationship with my children have paid greatly.”