NEW WAYS OF CREATING OPPORTUNITIES FOR FAMILIES IN POVERTY:
Perspective on the Emerging Two-Generation Policy Discussion

by

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The Ascendance of the Two-Generation Approach

The rise of two-generation approaches to alleviating poverty has breathed new life into many conversations about how best to help struggling parents climb the economic ladder and create better lives for their children. The conversations are happening on multiple fronts. At the program level, organizations are beginning to think about how to do their work in ways that don’t segment families into adult needs and child needs but instead address the whole family. Communities are trying to find new ways to solve complex problems that cut across funding streams, issue areas, and organizational missions, and they are working to address racial inequity by bringing two-generation innovations to those most disconnected from economic opportunity. Finally, advocates and policymakers are now looking at two-generation approaches as a way to build comprehensive policy frameworks to take full advantage of new opportunities.

While there are many definitions of two-generation poverty policies, they typically involve efforts designed to bridge silos between a set of policies—in most cases, between antipoverty policies aimed at adults and policies primarily targeting children in low-income families. Adult antipoverty programs typically include workforce development, credentials, and other educational opportunities that would lead to a good job, stable housing, food and nutrition, healthcare, transportation, income, work supports, access to other public benefits, and financial skill-building and savings efforts to help families weather tough times. In the child policy arena, early childhood education, K–12 education, early literacy, and home visiting programs have traditionally been aimed at shifting outcomes for children. More recently, a number of efforts have focused on helping families in ways that fall outside of these traditional silos—from helping parents create social networks and support systems to helping them build parenting skills and learn to manage stress. Regardless of the approach, far too few of these programs are designed to jointly shift outcomes for both children and their parents.

Addressing Whole Families

Yet research shows that to truly break the cycle of poverty, we must comprehensively address the needs of whole families. Indeed, policy, program, and research experience over the past several decades has demonstrated that child outcomes and parent outcomes are inextricably linked. For example, the amount of parental income has a direct impact on how children grow up and on their later outcomes. Leading poverty researchers Greg Duncan and Katherine Magnuson have found that providing just $3,000 to $4,000 in annual income to low-income families increased children’s learning by the equivalent of approximately two months’ advantage in school. A similar boost in income increased the earnings of children in those families by 17 percent when they grew up.²

In addition, a growing body of research suggests that parents do better when their children are well cared for. Reliable, high-quality early childhood programs not only help young children, but can also be critical supports for their parents in helping to make ends meet. For example, low-income parents are more likely to cite child care problems as a reason they had to change jobs, quit a job, or not take a job.³ New research also suggests that consistent, quality child care can even help parents advance their own skills. In one study, human development experts Terri Sabol and P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale found that the parents of three-year-old children in Head Start experienced steeper advances in their own educational attainment three years later compared with parents of children in the control group. This was particularly true for African American parents.⁴

Based on these multifaceted outcomes, two-generation approaches are rapidly expanding as program directors, policy administrators, and advocates find promising new ways to advance their work. To
ensure that this approach becomes more integrated in the work to create opportunities for families, we must ensure that mistakes in past multigeneration policy efforts are not repeated. We must take advantage of what is new about the focus on two-generation approaches this time around—specifically, technology innovations and data advancements that can sustain progress. We also need to pay closer attention to the politics that both drive and threaten two-generation poverty efforts in order to ensure broad-based and bipartisan policy support.

With these lessons in mind, here are three policy areas that seem particularly ripe for two-generation policy advances: Head Start, in the child policy arena; Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T), which is most often identified as a benefit for adults; and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF), a multipurpose program that could also be reimagined as a uniquely two-generation policy innovation.

Our Two-Generation Past: Lessons Learned

Lessons from Historical Beginnings

Though the names have been different, there are many examples of past efforts to better align services for parents and children. In fact, this whole-family approach has historical roots in the beginning of the urban settlement movement, where settlement houses such as University Settlement and Educational Alliance in New York City combined a focus on educating young children, building communities, and helping their parents chart new educational pathways. Later, the community empowerment movement of the 1960s and 1970s and the family support and family resources efforts of the late 1970s and 1980s also helped draw attention to the need to create programs that combined supports for parents and children. Later models, many of which were developed through a family strengthening/family preservation lens, focused on reducing child abuse and neglect, and speeding family permanency efforts. More recently, the family support movement in the mid-1990s and the resource centers that it seeded tended to rely on poverty research and policy prescriptions that drew upon two-generational approaches to working with families. The discussions leading up to welfare reform also took these new models into account.

Despite a sound rationale, many of these efforts stalled and, ultimately, could not be scaled in any meaningful way. In the early 1990s, for example, some direct services programs began to weave together new resources created by the Family Support Act and, in particular, the funds available through the JOBS program to provide much-needed education and skills-training resources in communities. Yet much of the work faltered following welfare reform, which moved away from education and skill development and instead reinforced a work-first focus, much to the chagrin of two-generation–focused advocates. A thought leader at the time, the late Barbara Blum, then president of the Foundation for Child Development, warned, “If children’s basic needs are neglected in welfare-to-work programs, the investment in parents’ self-sufficiency will be squandered.”

This concern was warranted. Indeed, because of the focus on work requirements, participation rates, and other solely adult-focused outcomes, the momentum around two-generation approaches seemed largely to fade away for almost two decades.

Why Early Programs Failed to Take Root

One question raised by past efforts is why these program models and policies did not become part of mainstream antipoverty reforms. Despite the competing priorities within welfare reform, why did this collaborative, comprehensive approach to working with families fail to take root? In reviewing the
literature of much of this work, it seems that many early two-generation approaches struggled in three key ways. First, many of the early programs addressed highly limited adult services such as parenting skills or parent engagement, rather than family economic success and pathways to more sustainable employment. As we consider current efforts, this experience makes clear that unless we address families’ basic economic needs and how they influence parents’ decisions and behaviors, current antipoverty efforts will achieve only limited success.

A second key lesson of the past is that many initial programs took much longer than expected to demonstrate desired outcomes. The same is true in the current debate about how best to braid adult and child services. Program directors all agree that, because it seeks to address deeply entrenched and complex family issues, the work also takes longer than one to two years to address effectively. In exploring new solutions to two-generation poverty issues, more realistic expectations among policymakers, system administrators, and direct service programs will ensure that there is enough time to change and develop the right partnerships and mix of services.

A last observation about the impact of welfare reform on the two-generation debate is that many of the most difficult aspects of program implementation on the front lines come from the sometimes unintended restrictions of policy and funding. Without directly addressing policy constraints that prevent the braiding of funding or aligning of various policies and program requirements in ways that make sense for families, programs are left with the daunting task of making these various interventions work for families when most were designed with an individual focus or outcome. Collaboration, as we know, is difficult and expensive. Developing truly effective partnerships and learning how to do the work differently requires more than a solid blueprint. It also requires new and more innovative building tools. While much of the attention in the past has focused on creating new two-generation program models and bridging social service and funding divides, less attention was given to complementary policy shifts needed to make work come—and stay—together for families. In the end, policy and systems trump program innovations every time. If we have learned our lessons, new two-generation approaches must work to address policy barriers and constraints from the top down while simultaneously working from the bottom up to build new programs and partnerships on the ground.

Today, we have the chance to learn from these past efforts and examine again two-generation approaches. Various sectors show renewed interest: philanthropy, practitioners working to deliver programs in new ways to families, and policymakers anxious to find new ways to address the long-standing challenges of poverty. Ascend at the Aspen Institute is leading the way as a hub for connecting the array of stakeholders interested in delving again into two-generation approaches. But many others, such as early childhood fields, postsecondary education and workforce fields, housing, and health, are coming together and creating new interventions. As P. Lindsay Chase-Lansdale noted, these new efforts are helping to forge the way in creating “Two Generation 2.0” and the next round of lessons on our collective effort to help lift families out of poverty.  

**Opportunities to Advance Two-Generation Poverty Policy: What Is New and Different?**

**A New Era of Collaboration**

Building on the lessons from the past, we have hit another inflection point in the history for bridging gaps and busting silos within the human services field. From a variety of sectors, we are seeing renewed efforts to integrate multigenerational poverty approaches more effectively, even as the problems they
seek to address become increasingly complex. As the Stanford Social Innovation Review recently challenged funders, “Complex problems, such as improving the health of a particular group of people . . . are dynamic, nonlinear, and counter-intuitive. They are the result of the interplay between multiple independent factors that influence each other in ever-changing ways . . . The interplay of these factors creates a kaleidoscope of causes and effects that can shift the momentum of a system in one direction or another in unpredictable ways. Each intervention is unique, successful programs cannot reliably be repeated with the same results, and learning from past efforts does not necessarily contribute to better future results.”

The causes of poverty and the disorganized web of services currently available to low-income families are indeed a complex problem demanding new ways of thinking. Within and across government, philanthropy, and the human services/nonprofit field, however, we have an unprecedented opportunity to cut across program sectors and realign systems to create lasting change in the lives of families. The rise of collective impact initiatives in communities—such as the Harlem Children’s Zone and Strive Neighborhood—has created renewed energy around bringing services and supports together for families in one place. Indeed, the neighborhood context and emerging theories of the impact of place are critical pieces of the puzzle in two-generation approaches, since high-quality services must be available to families in the context of their local communities. But effective approaches must reach beyond local limits as well, encouraging leadership within these organizations to engage with others in ways that go beyond their own immediate needs and mission.

Policymakers are also beginning to think about the intersection of policies that cut across traditional policy silos and singularly focused program interventions or policy changes within housing, early childhood education, or workforce development that have failed to achieve the more far-reaching outcomes we hope to see for families. In an effort to combat the complex challenges of poverty, all of these leaders—each in their own way—are tapping new skills around collaborative leadership, adaptive organizational change, rapid prototyping, and an increased sophistication on measuring results.

The Impact of New Science on Innovation

Since the 1990s, an explosion of new scientific research findings has helped catalyze the two-generation push and create a new imperative for changing the way we work with families. Brain science on the links between poverty and child development has been particularly transformative in these discussions. Researchers such as Jack Shonkoff have been working with neuroscientists and behavioral scientists to better understand and improve child development for children in low-income families. His research is helping demonstrate the deep connections between cognitive, social, and emotional brain development in children, as well as the impact of toxic stress—extreme and prolonged stress—on the architecture of children’s brains. More recently, he and other researchers have been looking at how to enhance adult noncognitive skills—especially in the context of how parents of all income levels engage and parent their children. Shonkoff and others are particularly interested in exploring key adult capabilities to help shape children’s trajectories as well as the abilities of parents and other caring adults to improve their own resilience and problem-solving skills. Programs like Crittenton Women’s Union in Boston are using principles of brain development and science to improve their work partnering with families to achieve financial security by using technology to help parents sharpen their problem-solving skills, adapting the best research on behavioral change, coaching to more deeply engage with parents in achieving their goals, applying lessons from science to build an organizational culture that acknowledges the stress of living in low-income neighborhoods, and partnering with, rather than providing services to, families.
As Crittenton Women’s Union and other organizations are discovering, new evidence is building around the practice of coaching as a way to help families facing multiple challenges change behavior and accomplish their goals. New knowledge from diverse areas—like smoking cessation, trauma-informed care, corporate executive coaching, and the use of coaching and motivational interviewing by organizations serving low-income families—is increasing the awareness that old case management and social work models are often ineffective in supporting and sustaining behavioral changes critical in finding pathways out of poverty. The new techniques, many of which are consistent across these different realms of behavioral change, focus more on helping families set goals, create a plan with key, incremental steps, and anticipate setbacks and roadblocks along the way. Organizations such as Garrett County Community Action Committee in Garrett County, Maryland, are employing a multidimensional intervention called Crisis to Thriving to help families identify their strengths and needs, and then using a comprehensive coaching model to partner with parents and children in moving them to opportunity.

Data and Technology Advancements: The “Glue” of Two-Generation Efforts

Another unique advantage of the current conversation on two-generation policy and program innovations is the advancement of data and technology to help link programs and systems. In 1990, well before the advent of Google and at the cusp of state human services data system upgrades, most health and human services programs did not have the technology to connect data across systems, funding streams, or organizations. Existing technologies at the state and program level remained largely siloed and were designed solely to track inputs and outcomes on interventions supported by particular funding streams.

Current efforts to create data warehousing and comprehensive data systems, however, are helping to revamp systems to look at whole families and a variety of different outcome measures. At the state level, projects such as the Integrated Data Systems Project, the Early Childhood Data Collaborative, the national Data Quality Campaign, and the Workforce Development Quality Campaign are working to combine data systems to create a better picture of families’ needs and services being delivered by public programs. Nonprofits are also becoming increasingly savvy about creating data agreements to allow for shared data across organizations and the linking of data systems across the various programs and funding streams. While deficiencies in data tracking, multiagency data systems, and state data alignment continue to be significant barriers to creating holistic family policies and programs, these current efforts offer promising advances across multiple service levels.

Additionally, more recent technology advances are helping programs rethink the face-to-face nature of working with families. States have slowly begun to use the Internet to allow residents to apply for public benefits and services, with many of them developing single applications for a range of family benefits. Programs are also finding ways to use technology to provide better services and supports. For example, the Video Interaction Project uses videotapes of parents’ interactions with their children as a teaching tool to show parents child development milestones and to start conversations with parents about how to foster additional learning at home. Other programs working with low-income parents are using text messaging to help clients manage appointments and create reminders for important goals and deadlines. Still others are beginning to use technology to actually deliver content and skill-building, like the new Vroom effort started by the Bezos Family Foundation (of Jeff Bezos, founder of Amazon). This product provides a phone app as well as other corresponding outreach and education materials to help parents create early learning opportunities for their young children.
An Opening for Bipartisan Support?

Creating true bipartisan support for two-generation approaches and the theories behind them is another critical pillar of sustainable two-generation policy. Policy is a key lever in helping two-generation programs work better for families and improve the way in which human services and systems for adults and children deliver services more efficiently and effectively. Indeed, two-generation approaches to alleviating poverty can drive policy changes that make for more efficient government and a more prepared workforce in the future. As the Annie E. Casey Foundation’s vice president, Bob Giloth, notes, “Two-generation policy makes what is common sense, common practice.”

In fact, there appears to be broad support across the political spectrum for two-generation approaches. New polling data from Lake Research Partners show overwhelming support of two-generation approaches. For Democrats, 91 percent support programs that help both parents and children, with 90 percent supporting them even if taxes increase. Republicans are more tax sensitive, but support two-generation approaches by 74 percent, with 64 percent still supportive even if taxes are raised. Independents are also strongly supportive, by similar margins. These data show clearly that two-generation approaches to policy ideas, if framed carefully, can have strong appeal to both sides of the aisle. Policymakers are finding ways to articulate some of this work already. For example, Congresswoman Barbara Lee (D-CA) introduced federal legislation in 2013 to create the Federal Interagency Working Group on Reducing Poverty with a special focus on intergenerational poverty. Much of the interagency structure she proposes aligns with two-generation approaches and could be a vehicle for setting up a working group that addresses the alignment of adult and child programs and policies to help create opportunity for families.

At the same time, Republicans are beginning to find a new language and new areas of common ground in advancing the ideas and principles behind two-generation approaches. Republican thought leader Michael Gerson said on a two-generation panel discussion in 2012, “This is a powerful unifying theme...if you talk about mobility and opportunity, there’s a lot of common ground on these issues. It needs to go that one step further: to say we need opportunity and mobility, and we need to prepare people for opportunity. We’re going to find good ways to do this from left and right that will allow our people to succeed in a free economy with the tools and values and skills they need.” Republican policymakers recently worked closely with Democrats on the reauthorization of the Child Care and Development Block Grant, one of the few bipartisan bills passed in the last several years on a key issue supporting low-income families. Many of the reforms enacted in the legislation would bring more quality into the child-care subsidy system—so that child care is a support for both parents and children. While little additional funding was provided to expand access to this critical support, lawmakers were able to find common policy ground on a program that truly supports whole families.

Progress at State and Local Levels

There is also significant hope for advancing two-generation policy ideas at the state and local levels. While partisanship is still high in many states, the practical need to make systems work better for families means that more legislators from both parties are embracing more common-sense, family-focused models of government. For example, one of the first explicit two-generation pieces of legislation was passed in Connecticut earlier this year. The bill addressed two-generation approaches to alleviating poverty by instructing the Office of Early Learning to advance a two-generation focus across parent- and child-serving organizations to address barriers to both school readiness for children and workforce readiness for their parents. Similarly, Colorado passed a bill working to expand
its child-care system to help support the dual goals of allowing parents to work and children to learn in high-quality programs. In Utah, an intergenerational poverty commission, championed by Republican state senator Stuart Reid, is working to pilot two-generation programs across state agencies and systems. As Senator Reid notes, “Every child in our state should have the same opportunity as any other child. Not only will we save children if we pursue this aggressively, we’ll save hundreds of millions of dollars from the consequences of the lifestyle we’re subjecting these children to that could be reapplied to our education system.”

To be sure, advocates and policymakers must be careful to explain two-generation approaches in ways that bring everyone to the table. We must acknowledge that researchers and practice innovators are still building evidence that two-generation programs are a more effective way to serve families than more siloed approaches, and still coming to an understanding of how to prioritize and phase in such interventions. We need to understand better which families are most in need of—and will most benefit from—bundled adult and child services; we are still learning about the newest ideas for delivering such services more effectively. In particular, we need to ensure that these programs address the needs of families of color and immigrant families, many of whom face even greater challenges in accessing the services and supports they need. In the current policy climate, however, there is ample room to find common messages to support policies that align financial stability for families with programs that help children get the right start in life. With neither party “owning” two-generation approaches, now is the right time to be strategic in ensuring that both parties find the common ground needed to advance the concept across multiple policy areas.

**Three Ripe Ideas for Two-Generation Success**

It is both the challenge and the promise of a two-generation approach that most if not all human services delivery models would have to change to achieve success through this emerging policy lens. In addition to several broad policy agendas currently being proposed by the Annie E. Casey Foundation, Ascend at the Aspen Institute, the Working Poor Families Project, the National Center for Children in Poverty, the Brookings Institution, and others, three federal anti-poverty programs, in particular, have great potential as early adopters of two-generation policy approaches and are poised to lead the way as we refine and test the next iteration of new ideas.

**Head Start**

One of the most important programs that attempts a truly two-generation approach is Head Start. Beginning in 1965 as part of President Johnson’s War on Poverty, Head Start not only focused on children but also was a part of the country’s effort to address the cyclical nature of poverty by helping the parents of enrolled children achieve economic stability. Head Start has long offered parents training in early childhood programs, and some parents received direct help with job training. Many more are provided at least one-parent support service. Almost 50 years later, this program still has many of the structural components of a two-generation approach, though the focus in more recent years has been on children’s learning.

Head Start programs have attempted to increase their focus on family economic stability in the past. In the early 1990s, Head Start began to implement a demonstration employing Family Service Centers, which were to provide collaborative services with other community-based organizations, as well as more intensive case management that included a needs assessment and integrated services for families. More recently, Kansas and Missouri were the sites of two-generation interventions for parents.
in two Early Head Start settings. Evaluation of both of these efforts found mixed results. Parents in Family Service Centers were more likely to enroll in education or training programs, more likely to report they were working toward a diploma or degree, and more likely to have received substance abuse services. But researchers were able to follow parents for only 19 months after the intervention began, and they note, as others have in the past, the need to allow sufficient time for two-generation outcomes to emerge in the lives of families. Similar findings in the Early Head Start evaluation were largely attributed to the difficulty programs had integrating employment and education into their core Early Head Start services and interactions with families. However, early evidence shows some beneficial impacts to parents’ earnings among families who were expecting a child or had a very young infant when they first entered the study.

New evaluations are currently under way to help further our understanding of how Head Start can be used as a springboard for two-generation program delivery. A rigorous study of a two-generation intervention at CAP Tulsa, a leading Community Action Agency and Head Start provider, is under way. The Annie E. Casey Foundation is also evaluating four Head Start agencies across the country that are working to integrate a robust set of adult economic, education, and financial support services to the parents of Head Start children. More rigorous evaluations of various programs and models are sure to follow in the coming years that will contribute to policy and program design changes to help Head Start advance goals for both children and parents.

Although such findings will be illuminating, we need not wait to shift Head Start policy back to its roots of serving children and their families holistically. In talking with leading Head Start innovators and policy thinkers around the country, three key areas emerge that could be enhanced within Head Start.

First, policymakers could help advance a two-generation focus by updating policy to include a specific focus on Head Start parents. This would start with parents’ own literacy and educational needs but also work to address the economic stability of the family by automatically screening Head Start families for other benefits such as healthcare coverage for children and parents, food assistance, and housing assistance. By changing the law and program standards for Head Start programs, policymakers can help Head Start programs build the partnerships and coordinate services within the community to ensure that families’ basic needs are met. When services aren’t available, additional funding within the Head Start grant should be available to help programs fill gaps in services and get parents the help they need.

Second, policymakers can begin to explore new models of working with families that use the best thinking and new research on coaching—and moving away from a traditional case management approach. Funding demonstrations centered on parent/family coaching would provide the next generation of research on how family support workers within Head Start can improve their practice and partner with Head Start families for the time children are in the program.

Third, policymakers could allow for demonstrations that expand Head Start services to meet two-generation goals. Head Start could implement whole-family interventions to serve children for the full day. For a parent engaged in a partner training, education, or workforce development program, the Head Start site could provide a full day of care to his or her children. Today, more than half of center-based slots in Head Start operate fewer than five days a week or fewer than six hours a day—leaving program administrators with the job of blending and braiding other early childhood funds to cover the full day or full week, or parents without full-day/full-week care options. Aiming to create a streamlined, full day and full week of care—coupled with targeted services for parents—could provide an important base of support to two-generation interventions.
Additionally, policymakers could heed lessons from the past and allow some families to remain a part of Head Start’s comprehensive family services and case management for a longer period of time—for example, through the child’s third-grade year in elementary school. This would permit family support workers to work with families longer and also help track impacts on whole families over a longer period. Head Start agencies located within schools would be poised for this type of longer-term intervention; however, stand-alone agencies with strong partnerships with local schools could also be a part of the demonstration.

**SNAP Employment and Training**

On the adult services side, one promising policy area that could be used to test two-generation services more fully is Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Employment and Training (SNAP E&T). This program provides funding to states to provide job search, work experience, education, and training programs, support services, and job retention services (up to 90 days) for SNAP-eligible populations who are not on TANF. States propose annual plans to the federal government on how the program will be used. The federal government covers 100 percent of some costs and also provides matching funds for private or state dollars invested in the program to motivate states to support SNAP E&T participants with a broader array of services. States have great flexibility in the kinds of activities they include in their state plan and in what they can provide to SNAP recipients.

For example, state administrators could incorporate child care, transportation, housing support, and other key family services into their plans, thereby expanding the ability of programs to take a two-generation approach. Policymakers could create specific innovations for a range of parents not receiving TANF: disconnected youth who are parents (which is a striking 21 percent of the disconnected youth population), parents with young children, and parents with older children.

In fact, a recent innovation for disconnected youth called Performance Partnership Pilots offers a good model that could be replicated using SNAP E&T dollars as well as other supports for families trying to get the education and training they need to move to financial stability. These pilots allow states, regions, localities, or federally recognized tribes to “propose pooling a portion of discretionary funds they receive under multiple Federal streams while measuring and tracking specific cross-program outcomes. This model for pooling funds, combined with strengthened accountability for results, is designed to ease administrative burden and promote better education, employment, and other key outcomes for youth.” Following this model and targeting parents with young children, programs like SNAP E&T, child care, parent skill building, transportation, and other needed services could be combined to provide better, more lasting impacts on families. Developing programs and building evidence that help parents move more quickly into more family-sustaining jobs would provide an important picture of how our training and workforce programs must adapt to meet the challenges of today’s low-income workers.

**Temporary Assistance for Needy Families**

Finally, as two-generation approaches can help both Head Start and SNAP E&T programs develop partnerships and move toward more family-friendly innovations, TANF is a program that could, in and of itself, be redefined as a two-generation program serving both parents and children holistically. There is also some evidence to suggest that aligning TANF to the principles of helping parents and their children together is a better approach to helping families move to opportunity than providing only cash assistance and mandates to work.
An evaluation of Nebraska’s Building Nebraska Families (BNF) program holds potential promise for the kinds of additional assistance TANF families might use to find economic stability. BNF worked with rural welfare families between 2002 and 2005. In addition to TANF cash assistance, families received intensive home visiting services. There was a strong curriculum on personal improvement, which included goal-setting, problem-solving, and communication skills, as well as help on family life skills, including child development, parenting skills, and family management. Parents also gained practical skills in money and time management, health and nutrition, and the creation of a healthy home environment. In a randomized trial, the approach led to impacts for all the participating families, but for the very hard-to-employ sample within the demonstration, there were large, significant impacts on earnings that grew over time. In the last six months of the 30-month follow-up, hard-to-employ TANF parents earned 56 percent more than the control group. While this approach needs to be explored with a larger group of parents and those from more diverse backgrounds, the evaluation results hold promise for how families can use TANF to create the financial footing they need to build the skills they need to climb the ladder of opportunity while still ensuring that their children are getting the best start on their own lives.

Policymakers at the state level are already beginning to explore ways to rethink TANF’s goals to include a focus on adult education and employment as well as child well-being. For example, in Utah, the Next Generation Kids pilot will focus on the entire family by assisting parents with employment and intensive services that benefit the whole family. The pilot project will target families with children 12 years old and under who have received cash assistance during the last 12 months. As Voices for Utah Children notes, “Recognizing that a two-generation approach has been shown to be the most effective method, the pilot will involve a whole-family service provision. Individualized services will be offered to parents and children to eliminate barriers to work and healthcare and also address other facets of self-sufficiency.”

To that end, state and federal policymakers should consider accelerating these innovations in TANF that would more intentionally bring together education and employment services for parents, along with high-quality early childhood programs, parent capacity building (as seen in the Nebraska demonstration), and the wrap-around child-care, health, and transportation services families need to put all of these pieces together. A key change to the program would have to include adding outcomes not only for parent education and employment, but also for children’s well-being and educational success. By defining success for both parents and children, TANF could help bring critical comprehensive support to families rather than simply focusing on parents’ employment status.

**Conclusion**

Using a two-generation approach to move policy forward is not new, but we now have a unique opportunity to take the lens of two-generation approaches and more deeply embed it in our policies, systems, and programs. Conversations are taking place on multiple program, community, and policy levels. New ways to advance two-generation approaches are emerging, most notably learning from the past, adopting technology innovations and data advancements, and moving closer to broad-based bipartisan support. Three programs are currently ripe for two-generation policy advances: Head Start, Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program Education and Training, and Temporary Assistance for Needy Families.

The two-generation approach provides an important framework to help us as advocates, practitioners, policymakers, and funders maintain a laser-like focus on how to ensure that children’s and parents’
advancements are considered together. With more rigor applied to the monitoring, evaluating, and realigning of policy efforts, we can ensure that we are not only learning from the past but also embedding new lessons in real time.

At the same time, we must steward these efforts while fighting the prevailing currents to talk about this as a “model.” We must ensure that we do not slip into the trap of thinking there will be some magic bullet that will solve poverty. Again, “Complex problems are . . . dynamic, nonlinear, and counter-intuitive.” However, two-generation approaches offer a chance to begin to design policies, systems, and programs around families, rather than giving low-income families the runaround. They offer a chance to prioritize this work in communities of color—with efforts guided by what families in those communities say they need to move themselves and their communities forward. By learning from the past and tapping into this unique moment in time to truly embed two-generation thinking into our policies, systems, and programs, we can begin to tackle this complex problem of poverty and, in time, create better opportunities for both parents and children together.

Shelley Waters Boot brings almost 20 years of experience as a writer, researcher, and policy expert on issues affecting the lives of low-income children and families. She runs a philanthropic consulting business where she advises on investment strategy, research, policy, and communications across a broad range of issues.

Notes


16. Ibid.