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# Issue Brief



Social, Economic, and Workforce Programs Division  
Contact: Courtney Smith, 202/624-5340 or csmith@nga.org  
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## STATE EFFORTS IN MARRIAGE EDUCATION PROGRAMS

### Summary

States have begun to develop and implement marriage education programs to strengthen families and improve outcomes for children. These programs are intended to enhance communication, problem-solving, and conflict-resolution skills among partners to help them develop and sustain healthy marriages. Many marriage education programs encourage active participation and can be delivered through a variety of different means such as in classroom settings, lectures, or workshops. Such programs are in response to research indicating that on average, children raised in married, two-parent homes with low conflict levels have lower risk of both academic and behavioral issues and exhibit greater stability in their own relationships as adults. Yet an estimated one-fourth of all children will spend at least part of their childhood in a single-parent home.<sup>1</sup>

In addition to state efforts, several long-term federal initiatives are underway to promote marriage and assess the impact of marriage education programs, particularly for low-income couples and their children. States and localities can use a variety of both federal and state monies to fund marriage education, including block grants such as the Temporary Assistance for Needy Families (TANF) program. In addition, a growing body of literature is now available through the Internet that can provide states with examples and resources on state marriage education programs.

Although few long-term evaluations have been conducted on the effectiveness of marriage education programs, pilot programs and other state efforts show promising results and can help inform future efforts. Lessons learned from state and local programs include the following.

- Curricula should be tailored to meet the particular needs of the target population.
- Recruitment and retention strategies are important.
- Marriage education programs can be effectively linked to existing services and programs.
- Staff providing marriage education programs need to be properly trained and selected.

### Introduction

Over the past several decades, a growing body of research has focused on changes in family structure and how these changes affect children. As researchers continue to study this issue, a consensus has emerged—overall, children do best when raised by married parents who have a healthy relationship. Children raised by single parents, divorced parents, or parents in high-conflict relationships are at a higher risk of both

academic and psychological problems compared to children raised by married, biological parents. Studies also indicate that married adults tend to be healthier, more satisfied with their occupations, and wealthier, and have access to more social support than individuals who are single or divorced.<sup>2</sup>

Prompted by these findings, policymakers are exploring a variety of policy and program options to strengthen marriages. (For more information, see the NGA Center for Best Practices Issue Brief, [\*State Policy Options for Supporting Healthy Marriages\*](#).) One approach being used in a number of states is marriage education programs that help parents develop the communication skills necessary to sustain long-term, healthy relationships. Research has shown that couples can be taught how to overcome differences and the inevitable challenges that arise in long-term relationships.<sup>3</sup> Programs also can help inform couples of private and public resources that help support marriage, such as counseling, that are available in their communities.

Faith-based organizations and private agencies have long provided marriage education to couples that are planning on marrying or having difficulties in their marriages. Increasingly, however, policymakers have devoted public monies to ensure that marriage education is available to adolescents, low-income couples, unmarried couples experiencing the birth of their first child, and the general public. Although using public money to support marriage education has been controversial, states that have implemented marriage education programs are encouraged by public support for such investments. In several recent surveys on marriage and family formation, unmarried respondents—regardless of their income level—indicated that they aspired to marry. In addition, respondents generally supported publicly funded programs to support healthy marriages and said they would consider using such programs to help strengthen their own relationships.<sup>4</sup>

### **Marriage Education Programs**

Marriage education programs aim to improve the lives of children and families by preparing couples for healthy marriages and strengthening existing marriages. While instructional methods, program intensity, and provider type can vary, programs typically incorporate information on how to develop positive communication and healthy interactions between partners, knowledge and attitudes regarding marriage, and the values that underlie healthy unions. Most experts note that problems usually do not arise over whether a couple disagrees, but rather how the couple handles this disagreement or conflict.<sup>5</sup> In light of these findings, a central component to most marriage education classes is helping participants develop effective conflict resolution skills. In addition, some marriage education programs include faith-based elements such as teaching about religious philosophies on marriage, divorce, and moral behaviors.

States and localities have created marriage education programs that often target services to specific populations, such as couples who plan to marry; those at risk for out-of-wedlock births; couples that are unmarried at the time of the birth of a child; and married parents who may be experiencing difficulties in their relationship or who simply want to enhance their marriage. Several states, such as Florida and Utah, have incorporated marriage education and relationship skills as a part of high school curricula. The age, race, culture, and socioeconomic status of the target population are all critical factors to recognize when developing marriage education programs.

States typically offer marriage education programs in collaboration with a variety of private and public organizations, including faith-based, community-based, healthcare, or educational institutions.<sup>6</sup> For example, the Marriage and Communication Skills Program in [Arizona](#) is funded primarily through TANF monies and provides grants to community-based organizations for marriage education, domestic violence prevention, and communication skills training to couples. In [Michigan](#), Healthy Marriages Grand Rapids provides a multisector approach to marriage education, with a consortium of private, religious, and public leaders working together to offer a wide range of services to help reduce divorce and out-of-wedlock births. The initiative also seeks to increase the number of marriage education courses offered in the community through religious organizations. Integrating marriage education into existing programs such as parenting classes can reduce costs for states facing limited budgets.

A few states are providing incentives for marrying couples to take marriage education courses. For example, as part of the 1998 Florida Marriage Preparation and Preservation Act, couples can receive a discount on marriage licenses after completing a marriage education course through a certified provider. In addition, couples who do not take the four-hour class must wait three days to obtain a license. In Minnesota, there is a \$50-fee reduction for couples who complete a 12-hour course that includes communications skills and conflict management. Maryland, Oklahoma, and Tennessee also reduce or waive fees for those who take courses, and several other states have considered legislation to do so.<sup>7</sup>

States and localities are using a variety of federal and state resources to fund marriage education programs. States have relied on block grants, including the Social Security Block Grant, the Community Services Block Grant, and the TANF program. Importantly, marriage education programs funded through federal TANF dollars are not restricted to low-income families. In addition to block grants, over the past few years discretionary funds provided through the Office of Refugee Resettlement, the Children's Bureau, the Office of Child Support Enforcement, and the Maternal and Child Health Bureau have provided support for state marriage education programs. (For more information on federal funding sources, see the National Governors Association Issue Brief, *Federal Funding Sources for State Healthy Marriage Programs*.)

### **Targeting High-Risk Populations**

Many of the public efforts to strengthen marriages have targeted low-income, unwed parents, because children raised in single-parent homes face a much greater risk of poverty than those living in married, two-parent homes. Research has shown that poverty rates for unmarried, cohabitating parents are approximately double that of married parents.<sup>8</sup> States also target low-income populations because their rate of marital dissolution is much higher than that of other populations.<sup>9</sup> Examples of state healthy marriage initiatives for economically disadvantaged couples include:

- [The Oklahoma Marriage Initiative](#): Oklahoma has created several programs designed to sustain and develop healthy marriages for low-income couples. The state offers marriage education programs to TANF clients, youth offenders and their parents, unmarried low-resource couples who have just become parents, and women ex-offenders who have just returned to their families.
- [The Texas Fragile Families Initiative](#): Texas is emphasizing marriage education and support services for young, low-income fathers in an effort to strengthen marriages and support children. The state has

trained caseworkers and other staff regarding the importance of marriage and active parenting. In addition to marriage education, the state offers a variety of services to couples, with a particular emphasis on fathers, which include support groups, life skills training, counseling services, job skills training, and education.

- [Utah Marriage](#): The Utah Governor's Commission on Marriage provides a wide range of resources to promote healthy marriages, including marriage education classes, a Web site, a booklet distributed to fragile families, and a video for all couples who apply for marriage licenses.<sup>10</sup> The commission provides free marriage education courses using the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program curricula to residents.

States and localities are placing a particular emphasis on providing marriage education to unmarried, low-income couples who have recently become parents. The [Fragile Families and Child Wellbeing Study](#) found that at the time of the birth of their child, most of the surveyed parents were committed to each other and optimistic about their prospects of marrying. In addition, the majority of parents indicated that marriage was better for their children than remaining single.<sup>11</sup> These results and others suggest that there is a window of opportunity for many parents to marry upon the birth of their child, when couples hold positive feelings towards marriage. The time following a birth of a child may be ideal for providing interested couples with information about marriage and informing them about where they can obtain additional resources, such as marriage education classes. Marriage education programs may help unwed couples understand the benefits of marriage for their children and the need for both parents to engage in child-rearing activities, in addition to acquiring communication skills that can help make a marriage successful.

The Fragile Families study offers useful information for state policymakers and others who are developing marriage education curricula. [Alabama](#) used such information to design a pilot program to deliver marriage education services to low-income, unwed parents. Results from the program are promising, including significant increases in positive parenting behaviors, levels of trust and happiness between partners, and individual empowerment. Findings from the [Louisiana Fragile Families](#) study suggest that individual marriage education curricula should be developed to serve the unique needs of couples, single mothers, and single fathers. Results also show that the main predictors of interest in marriage are the father's capacity to sustain a long-term relationship, employment status, and attitudes about marriage.

In addition to marriage education programs aimed at fragile families, the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families (ACF) has targeted African Americans through the [African American Healthy Marriage Initiative](#) (AAHMI). Divorce and out-of-wedlock birth rates have been particularly high in the African American community, where the proportion of children living in two-parent, married households decreased from 75 percent in 1960 to 33 percent in 1995.<sup>12</sup> The AAHMI will develop culturally appropriate strategies that promote marriage and responsible fatherhood. The program's three main strategies are promoting education and communication in African American communities, identifying and accessing community resources that support marriage, and enhancing partnerships that will help stabilize African American families and communities. In a similar effort, ACF is also launching the Hispanic Healthy Marriage Initiative to help promote and strengthen marriages in Hispanic communities.

## **Lessons Learned from State and Local Programs**

Several states have developed and implemented marriage education programs designed for various audiences. As states create programs and contract with providers, they can consider some of the lessons that have been learned from these pilot projects, including the following.

*Curricula should be tailored to meet the particular needs of the targeted population.* Most existing marriage education curricula have been developed to serve middle-income, married couples. Programs that are intended to assist other types of individuals should be adapted to ensure that curricula are culturally sensitive and appropriate for the target audience. States also should take into account the literacy levels of the targeted audience. For example, based on feedback from focus groups, Louisiana determined that marriage education programs would be more successful when combined with workforce services and information on building relationship skills.<sup>13</sup>

*Recruitment and retention strategies matter.* Marriage education programs should be engaging, accessible, and applicable to real life. Efforts to recruit couples—not just women—are important to effective marriage education programs. Tools such as transportation and childcare services can be used to help foster higher participant completion rates for marriage education programs.<sup>14</sup>

*New programs do not have to be created; marriage education can be effectively linked to existing services and programs.* Several states have linked marriage education courses to Head Start programs, fatherhood initiatives, and parenting courses offered through a variety of institutions. For example, the Marriage Moments program in Utah links marriage education to childbirth classes at several hospitals. Expectant couples receive information on the potential changes that can occur in a marriage after the birth of a child and a guidebook with activities to help strengthen their marriages.

*Staff providing marriage education programs must be properly selected and trained.* After conducting a pilot project aimed at strengthening marriages among low-resource families, Alabama noted that using both male and female trainers could lead to more positive effects in future projects.<sup>15</sup>

## **Effectiveness of Marriage Education**

There is limited research on the effectiveness of programs to strengthen marriages. Evaluations of marriage education programs indicate some positive outcomes for relationship improvement, increased self-esteem, and customer satisfaction.<sup>16</sup> However, little is known about the long-term effects of marriage education programs on couples.

One of the best-known evaluations of private marriage education programs is the assessment of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program, designed to teach couples communication and conflict resolution skills. Evaluations indicate that after five years, program participants exhibited more positive relationships skills and had healthier marriages compared to the control group.<sup>17</sup> Another private-sector marriage education program that has been evaluated on a long-term basis is Becoming a Family, a program targeted for couples who have recently experience the birth of a child. The evaluation compared the

marital satisfaction rates of couples who participated in the program to those of a control group five years after they enrolled in the program. The results indicate that program participants had a lower rate of decline (approximately one-third) in marital satisfaction compared to the control group.<sup>18</sup>

A number of research efforts are underway to identify elements of effective programs to encourage marriage that states can use in program design. The Administration for Children and Families (ACF) is funding a long-term evaluation of programs to promote healthy marriages, particularly among low-income couples, known as the [Supporting Healthy Marriages](#) project. ACF is also funding the Community Healthy Marriage Initiative Evaluation to assess various community approaches for strengthening families, and the [Building Strong Families](#) project to encourage marriage among low-income couples who have recently experienced the birth of a child. Results from these studies and others will add to the small but growing body of knowledge about effective practices to promote healthy marriages.

### **Information and Technical Assistance for States**

There is a growing body of information about marriage education, much of which can be accessed via the Internet. Notably, the [Coalition for Marriage, Family and Couples Education](#) ([www.smartmarriages.com](http://www.smartmarriages.com)) and [ACF](#) have a wealth of information about marriage education and links to other resources. In addition, ACF has recently funded a resource center for healthy marriages that will serve as a clearinghouse on best practices and other pertinent information.<sup>19</sup> The center will evaluate and synthesize research on healthy marriage programs and develop products to help individuals and organizations create and implement marriage education initiatives. A Web site and program database will be created for policymakers, individuals, and practitioners to access information on marriage education.

In addition, state-sponsored Web sites provide examples and resources on state marriage education programs, including the following:

- California State Healthy Marriage Initiative: <http://www.Cshmi.org>.
- Florida Commission on Marriage and Family Support Initiatives, to strengthen families by detailing comprehensive statewide strategies for Florida to promote safe, violence-free, substance-abuse-free, respectful, nurturing and responsible parenting: <http://www.floridafamilies.org>.
- Oklahoma Marriage Initiative, a statewide public/private partnership dedicated to strengthening families and helping couples gain access to services and supports to help them build and sustain healthy marriages: <http://www.okmarriage.org>.
- Utah Marriage, the Web site of the Governor's Commission on Marriage: <http://www.utahmarriage.org>.

### **Conclusion**

State are developing and implementing marriage education programs to help couples develop and sustain healthy marriages. The benefits of increasing the number of healthy marriages are promising, as research concludes that children that are raised in married, two-parent households tend to have greater academic, economic, and emotional success than children that are raised in single-parent homes. As state

policymakers continue their efforts to encourage marriage, it will be important to assess the needs of their constituencies and devise marriage education programs that are tailored to meet these unique needs. Additional evaluations of marriage education programs should be conducted to improve our understanding of effective policies that support strong marriages and healthier families.

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## End Notes

- <sup>1</sup> Judi Bartfeld, “Child Support and the Post-Divorce Economic Well-Being of Mothers, Fathers, and Children,” *Demography* 37.2 (May 2000): 203.
- <sup>2</sup> Kristin Anderson Moore, et al. *What is “Healthy Marriage?” Defining the Concept*. Child Trends Research Brief, Publication #2004-16, 3.
- <sup>3</sup> Bill Coffin, “Healthy Marriage Education Programs,” webcast presentation for the National Governors Association, 8/31/04, <http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0408webcastCoffin.ppt>
- <sup>4</sup> M. Robin Dion, “Marriage and Family Formation in Four State Surveys,” webcast presentation for the National Governors Association, 7/22/04, <http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0407webcastDion.ppt>
- <sup>5</sup> Coffin, “Healthy Marriage Education Programs.”
- <sup>6</sup> Alan J. Hawkins, *A Comprehensive Framework for Marriage Education* (U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, Administration for Children and Families, 2004), [http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/comp\\_framework/comp\\_framework\\_title.html](http://www.acf.hhs.gov/programs/opre/comp_framework/comp_framework_title.html).
- <sup>7</sup> Karen Gardiner, et al, *State Policies to Promote Marriage* (The Lewin Group, 2002).
- <sup>8</sup> Danielle White and Jan Kaplan, “The State’s Role in Supporting Marriage and Family Formation,” *Welfare Information Network, Issue Notes* 7, no. 8 (2003): 6.
- <sup>9</sup> David Fein, “Married and Poor: Basic Characteristics of Economically Disadvantaged Married Couples in the U.S.” (working paper, MDRC. SHM-01), 4.
- <sup>10</sup> Theodora Ooms, *Beyond Marriage Licenses* (Center for Law and Social Policy, 2004), 57.
- <sup>11</sup> M. Robin Dion, “Strengthening Relationships and Supporting Healthy Marriage Among Unwed Parents” (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2003) 2.
- <sup>12</sup> Carlis Williams, “African American Healthy Marriage Initiative,” webcast presentation for the National Governors Association, 8/31/04, <http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0408webcastwilliams.ppt#9>.
- <sup>13</sup> Dana Reichert, “Marriage Education for Fragile Families,” webcast presentation for the National Governors Association, 8/31/04, <http://www.nga.org/cda/files/0408webcastReichert.ppt>.

- <sup>14</sup> M. Robin Dion, “Implementing Programs to Strengthen Unwed Parents’ Relationships: Lessons from Family Connections in Alabama” (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2004), 34.
- <sup>15</sup> Francesca Adler-Baeder, “Family Connections in Alabama: Lessons Learned from a Pilot Project Focused on Marriage Strengthening Among Low-Resource Families,” webcast presentation for the National Governors Association, 8/31/04, <http://www.nga.org/cda/files/1>.
- <sup>16</sup> One of the more well-known evaluations of marriage education has been the assessment of the Prevention and Relationship Enhancement Program (PREP), designed to teach couples communication and conflict resolution skills in order to reduce divorce. Evaluations after five years indicate that program participants exhibited more positive relationships skills and generally had healthier marriages compared to the control group. For more information see: M. Robin Dion, “Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions” (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2003).
- <sup>17</sup> M. Robin Dion, “Helping Unwed Parents Build Strong and Healthy Marriages: A Conceptual Framework for Interventions” (Mathematica Policy Research, Inc., 2003).
- <sup>18</sup> Ibid. 41.
- <sup>19</sup> See <http://www.ncfr.org/>