

W-2 Child Support Demonstration Evaluation

Technical Report 2

Implementation of the Demonstration

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This report describes the implementation of the Child Support Demonstration Evaluation (CSDE) experiment, focusing on the role of county child support and W-2 agencies in the implementation of the CSDE and the knowledge and attitudes of W-2 staff concerning the CSDE. The findings in this report derive from surveys of W-2 agency Financial and Employment Planners (FEPs), who function as case managers in the W-2 system, from a survey of staff in child support agencies, from interviews with FEPs and other W-2 agency managers and staff and with child support staff and managers, and from observations of sessions in which W-2 staff received training on the CSDE.

The report attempts to address at least three interrelated concerns:

1. *Implementation details can affect the validity of an experiment.* For a variety of reasons, an experiment may not operate in the way its designers had expected, and these differences may influence the measured impact of an experiment. The translation of policy into practice rarely occurs without unanticipated challenges or modifications, and new programs seldom remain stable over extended periods. If the changes become large enough, the experiment may not be a valid test of the program that policymakers thought they were testing.
2. *Implementation challenges are useful to describe for the benefit of others interested in trying the reform in different jurisdictions.* Managers interested in replicating a new program elsewhere profit from an account of both the problems that arose and the resources that were available to address them. Other sites with more resources may be able to address the problems more easily, but those with fewer resources may especially profit from an early warning.
3. *Learning that occurs during the implementation study can be given as feedback to program managers, who can then make modifications as the program is implemented.* This report describes instances in which that process occurred.

The Economic and Political Context of the Experiment

Both the national and the Wisconsin economies were strong during the entire period of the CSDE. Unemployment rates were low throughout the period, lower in Wisconsin than in the nation. Unemployment rates were, however, higher in Milwaukee County (where over 80 percent of W-2 participants reside) and in the City of Milwaukee than in the rest of Wisconsin during the period of the CSDE, as Table TR2.1 indicates.

The CSDE generally operated outside of public view and attracted little political attention. We subscribed to a statewide newspaper clipping service from the time we signed a contract to evaluate the program through the time of this writing. So far as we can determine, no newspaper has mentioned the existence of a CSDE evaluation or the fact that W-2 participants have been treated differentially with respect to the child support pass-through. The only coverage of any aspect of the pass-through of which we are aware appeared in a report on a Milwaukee TV station early in the CSDE. The report described difficulties that those in the reduced pass-through group had in immediately receiving all their child support when they moved out of a W-2 tier that makes a cash payment. For about the first year of the program, the linkages between the state public assistance data system (CARES) and its child support data system (KIDS) did not make the appropriate adjustments automatically.

Table TR2.1
Annual Unemployment Rates (%) in Milwaukee, in Wisconsin, and in the United States, 1996–1999

Year	City of Milwaukee	Milwaukee County	Milwaukee MSA	Wisconsin	U.S.
1996	5.3	4.1	3.4	3.5	5.4
1997	5.7	4.3	3.6	3.7	4.9
1998	5.3	4.0	3.3	3.4	4.5
1999	5.0	3.8	3.1	3.0	4.2

Sources: The unemployment rates for the city of Milwaukee, Milwaukee County, the Milwaukee MSA, and Wisconsin are estimates from Local Area Unemployment Statistics of the Wisconsin Department of Workforce Development, at <www.dwd.state.wi.us/dwelmi/LAUS_Avg_90-97.htm>. The U.S. unemployment rates are from the Bureau of Labor Statistics, U.S. Department of Labor, at <[ftp.bls.gov/pub/special requests/lf/](http://ftp.bls.gov/pub/special.requests/lf/)>.

Note: The Milwaukee MSA (Metropolitan Statistical Area) includes all of Milwaukee, Ozaukee, Waukesha, and Washington counties.

The Administrative Context: The Implementation of W-2

The Connection between the CSDE and W-2

The contextual element affecting the CSDE most significantly was the experiment's connection to Wisconsin's new TANF program, W-2. The CSDE was one of many features of the new W-2 program, which was first put into operation over a seven-month period (September 1997–March 1998) during which new applicants were placed into W-2 and existing AFDC recipients were asked to convert to W-2. The implementation of W-2 was a major undertaking presenting severe challenges. Among many other tasks, the automated case management system had to be reworked to include case-management-only cases which provided no cash payment and to track participants through the tiers of W-2, new contracts with W-2 agencies had to be written, and W-2 agency staff had to be trained on new state policies. Perhaps most significantly, five new private agencies had to be established or adapted to operate W-2 in Milwaukee County, the source of over 80 percent of the state's W-2 caseload. The five agencies, each handling cases residing in particular geographic districts of the county, had to hire entirely new staff and train them on W-2, community resources, agency policies, and use of the state's complex public assistance data system, CARES.

W-2 agency staff also had to be trained on the CSDE, including how to find in CARES whether a participant was a full or partial pass-through case, the implications of pass-through status, and how to assure that participants understood their pass-through status and its implications. There is ample evidence (described below) that, in the midst of the broad implementation challenges, W-2 agency staff in Milwaukee did not understand the CSDE in the early months of the experiment. There is also evidence (described below as well) that the CSDE never became a central part of routine discussions between Milwaukee case managers (FEPs) and program participants. The state did devote intensive effort to training W-2 staff on the CSDE, and the Department of Workforce Development (DWD) also developed a form for the W-2 application process that briefly described the experiment and required participants to acknowledge an understanding of their receipt of the full or partial pass-through. As the use of this form became institutionalized in the application process, we believe that many participants at least roughly understood that some W-2 participants received all their child support and that other W-2 participants might receive less than all their child support, and that participants who believed the distinction to be

relevant to their own situation may also have understood at least initially which group they were in. But little subsequent discussion occurred that might have reinforced these points.

The Role of County Child Support Agencies in the Administration of the CSDE

Because the CSDE influences the amount of child support that resident parents receive, we had expected that child support agencies might play a major role in the implementation of the CSDE, perhaps helping to explain pass-through status and its implications to most resident and some nonresident parents. That did not turn out to be the case. When we asked child support workers in a survey fielded in March–April 1999 if they ever discussed pass-through policies with resident parents receiving W-2 payments, 76 percent said they never had such discussions. When we asked child support workers and W-2 managers who in their county told most W-2 recipients whether they would receive the full or partial pass-through, 63 percent of child support workers said that someone in the W-2 agency did that and another 30 percent said they did not know. W-2 case managers generally agreed. Only 14 percent (27 percent in Milwaukee) said that a child support worker would provide such information, and 80 percent said a W-2 case manager would do that.

With the exception of Milwaukee County child support specialists stationed at W-2 agencies (there is one at each Milwaukee W-2 agency), most child support workers we interviewed viewed the demonstration neither as a part of their work nor as something they should discuss with resident parents. A child support specialist in an urban county other than Milwaukee, responding to an interview question asking whether she mentioned the demonstration or the pass-through to groups of resident parents, said, “No, ’cause that has nothing to do with us. That’s all Human Services. We don’t have control of that at all.” The following partial transcript of an interview with a paralegal was representative of the attitudes of several other child support staff (except those stationed in Milwaukee W-2 agencies) with whom we talked:

Interviewer: Do you mention anything about the child support waiver or their pass-through group?

Respondent: No.

Interviewer: So you don’t discuss what they’re going to get at all?

Respondent: Absolutely not. No. (pause) To be honest with you it would be dangerous for me to do that because I don’t know enough about it.

Interviewer: Have you gotten any training at all?

Respondent: We’ve gotten some basic training as to, what different things on our screen might mean to us in our everyday jobs or whatever.

Interviewer: Can you tell whether someone is in one group or the other?

Respondent: Yeah you can, you can look it up in, you know, you can still go into CARES and get a whole background and who the participants are, you know, and all those sorts of things, but it’s never been our job to discuss those, you know, those issues. I, I feel as though, if I did that I might be more prone to a mistake and that should be the [W-2] worker’s job to do that, because I don’t feel capable of dealing with, I tell them to call their workers, go right to their worker.

Although the lack of discussion of the pass-through demonstration by child support workers may indicate a lost opportunity to increase understanding of the experiment, most child support workers have little direct contact with resident parents after an order is established.

Family court staff were, for the most part, similarly uninvolved in the CSDE. In every county in which we held interviews except Milwaukee, family court commissioners and judges did not know whether a resident parent was receiving the full or partial pass-through. In Milwaukee County, pass-through status was known. In the early months of the demonstration, full pass-through assignment reduced the willingness of commissioners to establish orders or initiate civil enforcement procedures when the resident parent was not present at a hearing, apparently owing to a belief that family court had less standing in full pass-through cases and that the court should not extend itself if the resident parent did not first demonstrate responsibility. Some difference in the treatment of full and partial pass-through recipients apparently continues, according to an attorney in the Milwaukee child support office, although the patterns have changed. Family court commissioners now generally set an order if the resident parent does not appear at the hearing, regardless of pass-through status. However, if a resident parent with a full pass-through assignment appears at the hearing and requests that no order be set, Milwaukee family court commissioners are likely to honor that request, whereas they would be more likely to set an order if a partial pass-through recipient made the same request. The Milwaukee child support agency generally appeals to family court when a commissioner rejects its recommendation to set an order. In these cases, judges have usually ruled in favor of setting an order.

The lack of broad involvement by child support agencies in the CSDE, although understandable, has had important ramifications for the implementation of the experiment. The operational unit within the DWD assigned primary responsibility for training local staff on the CSDE was the Bureau of Child Support (BCS), which has frequent and routine communications with county child support agencies, but relatively little routine communication with W-2 agencies. Yet the W-2 agencies had much greater responsibility for informing resident parents of their pass-through status and its implications, both at initial sessions in which new W-2 participants received information and in continuing discussions with FEPs in which child support issues and pass-through status might have been emphasized. The occasional training sessions (see below) which BCS was able to organize for W-2 staff were, so far as we could judge from what we observed, of high quality but probably needed to be repeated more frequently if discussion on the CSDE was to become a prominent part of routine W-2 case management. Given its overall relationship with W-2 agencies, it was difficult for BCS to organize more training than it did.

In summary, except during paternity and order establishment, child support staff have little opportunity to initiate discussion of pass-through policies with resident parents, and do not usually attempt to do so even when they have the opportunity. W-2 staff have more opportunity to explain the pass-through and its implications for individual W-2 families, and the desirability of doing so has been emphasized through high-quality (but perhaps too infrequent) state-organized training.

Informing Resident and Nonresident Parents of Their Pass-Through Status

The most basic implementation activity—necessary for an actual experiment to have occurred—is assignment of resident parents to treatment and control groups and the provision of information to resident and nonresident parents concerning that assignment. The CARES computer system randomly generated these assignments. Starting in August 1997, 20 percent of AFDC cases that were open in that month were assigned to the control group and received only a partial pass-through. Another 20 percent (and the remaining unassigned 60 percent) were placed in the experimental group and received the full pass-through. From March 17 to May 8, 1998, 30 percent of new applicants were assigned to each group, and beginning May 11, 50 percent of new applicants were assigned to the experimental and 50 percent to the control groups. The increases in percentages assigned to treatment and control groups occurred because the numbers entering W-2 were lower than had been anticipated.

Resident parents were to be informed of their experimental-group assignment, the meaning of that assignment, and the fact that the experiment existed, when they applied for W-2. The state prepared a brochure for each group explaining and providing an example of how child support would be handled, according to their assignment. In addition, cases transitioning from AFDC were sent a letter notifying them of the change and explaining how child support would be handled, according to their assignment. All nonresident parents paying child support initially received a general notice informing them of the change in policy with W-2. However, this notice did not provide any information about specific group assignments.

We developed a new notice that was sent to nonresident parents in our sample who were associated with a resident parent assigned to the experimental group. Beginning in June 1998, this notice informed nonresident parents that their family now received all of the child support that they paid. Nonresident parents associated with resident parents in the control group did not receive a notice; because the control group pass-through varies with the W-2 tier of the resident parent, it was deemed impractical to explain the details of the pass-through to these nonresident parents.¹

Throughout this period, the state required W-2 agencies to present to participants a standard “Notice of Assignment of Child Support” form. However, the first draft of the form which the state distributed to W-2 agencies made no distinction between the full and partial pass-through. Although by the start of W-2 in September 1997, the state had developed a revised form which asked participants to identify their pass-through assignment and indicate with their signature whether their assignment had been explained to them, some Milwaukee agencies apparently continued to use the old draft forms for many months, and staff in one Milwaukee agency did not appear to know that the form in either version existed even in January 1999.

The suspension of the process of experimental- and control-group assignment and its resumption in January 1999 afforded an opportunity for the state to reemphasize training on the pass-through demonstration. We believe that by March 1999 all agencies were using the correct form and that program participants were receiving at least a rudimentary explanation of the pass-through at first application for W-2.

For W-2 participants already in the program, the CSDE was apparently a less central part of routine discussions between FEPs and program participants in Milwaukee than in the rest of the state. In a survey fielded in March and April 1999, 41 percent of Milwaukee FEPs said they never discussed child support pass-through policies with resident parents receiving W-2 payments, compared with 15 percent of FEPs in the rest of the state. Responding to a slightly different question on the same topic in May 2000, 76 percent of Milwaukee FEPs said that they had not discussed the full or partial pass-through assignment with W-2 participants in the past month.

In summary, then, the child support pass-through was probably explained to new applicants in most Wisconsin counties except Milwaukee from the start of the experiment. In Milwaukee County, new applicants appear to have received a rudimentary explanation starting no later than early 1999. However, the CSDE was never a central part of ongoing discussions between FEPs and W-2 participants in Milwaukee.

¹Notices were not sent to the small number of nonresident parents associated with one resident parent in the experimental group and another in the control group.

Reactions of Those Limited to the Partial Pass-Through

In interviews carried out as the CSDE was being implemented, staff working for both child support agencies and W-2 agencies generally indicated that they were surprised at the relatively muted reaction among those limited to the partial pass-through. They had expected considerable anger, but the initial reactions seemed more modest. Child support workers in larger counties all said that they had received complaints from resident parents receiving the partial pass-through—although not as many as they had anticipated—and that they had a hard time explaining why these parents did not receive the full amount. Some just told the resident parent to call the state BCS in Madison. Perhaps because even those limited to the partial pass-through could receive a more generous pass-through than had been provided under AFDC, the complaints were often not so much about the amount of child support as about the timing. Those receiving the full pass-through got it almost immediately, since there was no need for the child support agency to wait until the end of the month to determine the total and the correct apportionment for that month. In contrast, those receiving the partial pass-through had to wait for the end-of-month reconciliation so that the correct pass-through amount could be calculated.

The reactions may have become more severe over time, or at least W-2 staff subsequently recalled more problems than we had noticed at the time. In state training sessions on the CSDE for Milwaukee W-2 agencies at the end of 1998, there was considerable discussion about the difficulty of explaining to those receiving a partial pass-through why they were in that status. One FEP said, “It’s really a hard feeling when they call in and say, ‘the father paid for this amount,’ and I said ‘Well, you’re in that group.’ ‘Why did I get picked, you know?’” Several other trainees nodded their heads and said “Yes!” to this story. Another trainee said, however, that “the thing to tell them is, ‘Well, if you get a job then you get a full pass-through.’” Many other trainees seemed to agree with that strategy. In an interview conducted in the summer of 2000, one Milwaukee W-2 agency manager recalled occasions of “big uproar” when some participants believed they were being treated unfairly in comparison to those receiving the full pass-through.

In summary, the reaction of those assigned to the partial pass-through may have grown over time, perhaps as they better understood the implications of their status. The reactions were strong enough to generate some discomfort in W-2 agencies, although we do not believe this was ever considered a major management problem.

Knowledge and Attitude of W-2 Staff concerning the CSDE

Throughout much of the experiment, staff in most of the W-2 agencies outside of Milwaukee exhibited greater understanding of the CSDE than did those in Milwaukee. Some of the evidence for this derives from interviews with W-2 case managers. From the beginning of the experiment, staff in those W-2 agencies that had previously administered AFDC exhibited an understanding of the pass-through demonstration. Almost all of the experienced FEPs we talked to in these agencies could describe the program accurately, and all said they mentioned it to resident parents starting on W-2, although most also said that, in their judgment, the demonstration had little actual relevance, since few of their W-2 participants could expect to receive enough child support to be affected by experimental or control status.

The level of staff understanding was quite different in the Milwaukee W-2 agencies. For these agencies, everything—including the CARES system—was new, and the child support demonstration was not immediately understood, nor were explanations of it made a part of routine agency operations. The state did provide one training session on the demonstration to each Milwaukee agency before the demonstration began; these sessions all occurred before the Institute for Research on Poverty (IRP) evaluation contract

was signed, and we did not observe the training. Perhaps inevitably, given the context of so much simultaneous change, the Milwaukee training sessions did not seem to be effective. The following partial transcript of a research interview held in February 1998 with a Milwaukee FEP is reasonably representative of the status of FEP training in Milwaukee on this topic at that time:

FEP: (The CARES computer system) might tell us this person has been selected for the control group. But I never tell them that they have been selected because I really don't know. We don't have a screen that we can just look in there and it will show, that's what I'm saying.

Interviewer: So you don't have a screen that tells you that?

FEP: I mean there might be a screen in there, but we're not familiar with it. But I just tell them to go forward (with obtaining as much child support as possible), you know. Every little bit helps.

Interviewer: Do you talk about it at all with them, that some people are in this group and some are in this? Or do you just leave that to the Child Support staff?

FEP: I tell them that, you know, because sometimes they asked "Are they going to get the full amount," or "Could they?" Because they, a lot of times clients hear from other people and everything, and I tell them "Yeah, but I don't know what group you will fall up under." You know, I tell them, the only thing I could tell them is just, you know, "You'll be notified as to if you will get the whole amount opposed to part of it anyways." You know, because I can't tell them who will, because, I don't know. But they, you know, I don't talk to them about it.

Interviewer: How will they get notified? Do you know?

FEP: I have no idea.

In a major new initiative like W-2, the child support experiment must have seemed relatively minor to FEPs. The purpose of citing this interview is not to belittle the knowledge of the FEP (there is, in fact, a CARES screen that would tell the FEP whether the participant was in the full or partial pass-through group), but to demonstrate the challenge that Milwaukee FEPs faced. The child support pass-through program was a only small part of a large set of changes in policy and practice.

We believe that understanding of the pass-through policy grew incrementally through the spring of 1998. The DWD organized two statewide training broadcasts for all W-2 agencies over the state Educational Training Network in May. In June of that year, in detailed interviews with two different FEPs in the same Milwaukee agency for which the FEP quoted above worked, it was apparent that one FEP was quite knowledgeable of the policy details of the pass-through, knew how to determine an applicant's assignment, and discussed the assignment with participants, and that the other FEP was aware of the program but could not describe the policies and told participants only that an experiment was occurring.

During the suspension of the treatment and control group assignment process in late 1998, the state reemphasized training on the pass-through demonstration. Overall, the state's training efforts on the demonstration in preparation for the resumption of automatic assignment were impressive. We observed two Milwaukee training sessions, which seemed to be effective in describing the policies for the full and partial pass-throughs and the relevant CARES screens, using a series of very clear examples. The training sessions also seemed to convey effectively that the demonstration was a high priority of DWD and that W-2 agencies should make the explanation of the pass-through to participants a high priority of their own. Comments and questions from staff receiving the training focused on what the data were showing about the impact of the pass-through so far (the trainers did not know), who in the W-2 agency (Resource Specialists

or FEPs) was responsible for getting the notice of assignment forms filled out, and concern that the full pass-through would reduce Food Stamp payments for some W-2 participants.

In W-2 agencies outside of Milwaukee, we detected continuing understanding of the pass-through policies. In general, FEPs outside Milwaukee believed that any resident parent who received enough child support to make a difference in full or partial pass-through status would probably not need W-2. There was also some frustration with the demonstration, in part because of the difficulty of explaining why partial recipients were in that status and in part because it added to the complexity of an already complex program. An FEP in a large urban county expressed this somewhat common sentiment: “My thing is, it should be one way or the other, either they all get it or they all don’t.”

Surveys of FEPs confirmed the greater understanding of the CSDE outside of Milwaukee, even after the intensive retraining that occurred in January 1999. In a survey to which FEPs responded in March and early April 1999, questions were asked about knowledge of the CSDE. Responses are summarized in Table TR2.2.

Table TR2.2
Percentages of FEPs Who Correctly Answered Questions concerning Knowledge of the CSDE
March–April 1999

Survey Question	Milwaukee County	Other Urban Counties	Rural Counties	All Respondents
Knew at least one CARES screen to check pass-through status	53.5	84.7	81.6	72.8
Knew the CARES code indicating partial pass-through status	51.5	77.7	86.4	71.8
Knew that those assigned to partial pass-through would have same assignment if they applied for W-2 again at a later time	73.1	82.1	85.0	80.1

Source: IRP survey of W-2 staff, 1999.

Notes: “Other urban counties” are Brown, Calumet, Chippewa, Dane, Douglas, Eau Claire, Kenosha, La Crosse, Marathon, Outagamie, Ozaukee, Pierce, Racine, Rock, St. Croix, Sheboygan, Washington, Waukesha, and Winnebago. “Rural counties” are all counties in Wisconsin except for Milwaukee County and the “other urban counties.” Response rates for the county groupings were 52.9 percent (of 187 FEPs) in Milwaukee County; 56.7 percent (of 150 FEPs) in other urban counties; and 79.2 percent (of 130 FEPs) in rural counties. The overall response rate was 61.5 percent (of 467 FEPs).

In a second survey of only FEPs in Milwaukee fielded in June–July 2000, we repeated one question about knowledge of W-2 from the 1999 survey: could respondents correctly identify one CARES screen that would tell them the pass-through status of their cases. Whereas 53.5 percent of the respondents correctly answered that question in March–April 1999, only 33.0 percent correctly listed at least one CARES screen in the 2000 survey. The answers are not directly comparable, since the first survey was a mail-in instrument that did not prevent respondents from looking the answer up or talking to a colleague, whereas the second survey was administered by IRP staff to groups of FEPs at each W-2 agency. Still, the answers on the second survey do not indicate that Milwaukee FEPs were in the habit of frequently checking the pass-through status of their W-2 cases.

Milwaukee FEPs also seemed to have held somewhat less optimistic attitudes toward the full pass-through than FEPs in the rest of the state, perhaps owing to a belief that child support was not a significant potential source of income for their cases. In the 1999 survey, Milwaukee FEPs were about as likely as those elsewhere to believe that the full pass-through would be moderately or extremely effective at increasing the willingness of nonresident parents to make court-ordered child support payments. However, just 65 percent of Milwaukee FEPs, compared with 86.3 percent of other FEPs, thought the full pass-through would increase the funds that resident parents would have available to care for their children.

Because interviews with Milwaukee FEPs seemed to point out other concerns about the full pass-through, we asked a few more questions in the second survey about attitudes toward the full pass-through. The questions were worded as statements about the pass-through, and respondents were supposed to check whether they thought the statement was “completely true,” “somewhat true,” “somewhat untrue,” or “completely untrue.” The responses are summarized in Table TR2.3.

Table TR2.3
Perceptions of the Impact of the Full Pass-Through among FEPs in Milwaukee W-2 Agencies, Summer 2000

Statement	Percentage Responding:			
	Completely True	Somewhat True	Somewhat Untrue	Completely Untrue
Receiving child support payments of more than \$50 per month helps Community Service Job participants to prepare to find and keep a job	8.0	36.4	34.1	21.5
Receiving child support payments of more than \$50 per month reduces the motivation of Community Service Job participants to prepare for finding and keeping a job	4.5	35.8	32.6	28.1
Receiving child support payments of more than \$50 per month makes sanctions for nonparticipation less effective at promoting attendance	4.4	42.2	27.8	25.6

Source: IRP survey of FEPs in Milwaukee W-2 agencies.

Notes: A total of 89 FEPs responded to these questions, out of an estimated total number of 125 Milwaukee FEPs, for an estimated response rate of 71.2 percent. The responses summarized here are unweighted. Responses weighted by agency nonresponse (so that the responses of FEPs in agencies with a low response rate are weighted more heavily than the responses of FEPs in agencies with a high response rate) do not change the broad picture. For example, the weighted responses in the column “Percentage Completely True” are, from top to bottom, 8.4, 3.9, and 3.9 (compared to 8.0, 4.5, and 4.4).

Because the first two statements in Table TR2.3 partially conflict with each other yet received similar responses, it is possible that the responses are sensitive to questionnaire wording. To test this, we calculated the correlation of individual responses to the two questions. If responses had not been sensitive to question wording, we would have expected a highly negative correlation. The actual coefficient of correlation, however, was close to zero (.06). Still, taken as a whole, the responses suggest that many Milwaukee FEPs had at least some concerns that the full pass-through could reduce the motivation of Community Service Job participants to find and keep a job or reduce the effectiveness of W-2 sanctions.

The Implications of CSDE Implementation for Judging Net Impact

Abundant evidence indicates that the CSDE was implemented less than perfectly, particularly in Milwaukee County, where over 80 percent of W-2 participants reside. In the general confusion of establishing entirely new W-2 agencies to operate a major new welfare reform, the CSDE was lost in the shuffle. Although the Milwaukee County child support office assigned one staff specialist to each W-2 agency, child support agency staff did not take responsibility for the CSDE, believing it to be largely under the purview of the W-2 agencies. The W-2 agency staff agreed that the program was primarily their responsibility, but Milwaukee FEPs did not have a good understanding of the CSDE and could not have explained it very well if a participant had asked about it. Even in the summer of 2000, a survey revealed that most Milwaukee FEPs could not name a CARES screen that would tell them the pass-through status of someone on their caseload. Moreover, just 41 percent of responding Milwaukee FEPs knew that participants who first enrolled for W-2 after random assignment was shut off in June 1999 were receiving the full pass-through. A sizable minority appeared to believe that the full pass-through might alter the motivations of program participants and thus contradict other goals of W-2.

Nevertheless, even in Milwaukee, a procedure was in place by early 1999 to inform all new W-2 applicants of their pass-through status. Although it might have been desirable for FEPs to include the CSDE (and other child support topics) in their case management approaches more than they did, knowledge on the part of FEPs was not really crucial to the initial sessions with new applicants, since a different category of worker, Resource Specialists, handled these sessions in Milwaukee. Our interviews with Resource Specialists indicated that they knew about the CSDE and could explain its implications to program participants (although they did not always know that they were supposed to have participants sign a Notice of Assignment form).

Our general judgment is that, if the experiment had been implemented in a more stable policy environment (that is, without the other new features introduced by W-2), case managers in Milwaukee would have better understood the policy. Placement of training responsibilities for the CSDE in the Bureau of Welfare Initiatives, which had routine relationships with W-2 agencies, rather than the Bureau of Child Support, might also have increased understanding of the policy in W-2 agencies and led to larger effects. The actual difference in program impact owing to these factors is impossible to specify, however, in part because parents could learn about the CSDE from direct experience (as they saw a change in the amount of child support they received), as well as from interactions with W-2 agency staff.