

#### 4. Negotiate your Contract

Contract negotiation is when you and your EF worker sit down and decide what will be in your contract to help you reach self-sufficiency. During this process, your EF worker will be focused on the following things:

- What do you want to do?
- Can it be done within the 60-month time limit?
- Will it lead to a job that will pay you enough to take your family off ADC?

##### Creating a Plan

It is helpful to put a plan in writing and have your EF worker put a copy of your plan in your file. Your EF worker will help you develop your plan, but you should be prepared to collect most of this information on your own. Here are things to include in your plan:

- Your long-term goal.
- What skills the education program will give you that you do not currently have
- Information about jobs available in your area that require these skills and how much those jobs pay.
- How starting or completing your education program will allow you to get a job that makes you economically self-sufficient.
- How you can be self-sufficient within the months left in your 60-month time limit.

You will also want to make sure your contract includes supportive services. Supportive services are things you will need to complete the activities in your contract, such as child care or transportation.

#### 5. Approval

Once your contract is approved, you will be required to start doing the activities in it. This means enrolling in and going to classes. Your EF worker will want a copy of your class schedule to verify you are taking classes full-time. You will also be required to verify your participation in some way. You should ask your EF worker how hours will be verified. At the end of each academic term, your EF worker will ask for a copy of your grade report.

In order for you to continue participating in your educational program, you must be passing your classes and making progress toward your degree or other educational goal.

### TROUBLESHOOTING

#### **What if My Educational Program Lasts Longer than the Months I Have Left in My Time Limit?**

It may be more difficult to get approval for an educational program that cannot be completed within your 60-month time limit. To get your EF worker to approve a program that exceeds your time limit, you will need to create a plan showing how starting a program or finishing part of one will help you get a better job than you can get right now.

#### **What Can I Do if My EF Worker Will Not Approve My Educational Program?**

If your EF worker will not approve your educational program, you have several options:

- Mediation
- Appeal
- Change your plan
- Add a work activity
- Waive (give up) your ADC grant

##### **When Should I Choose Mediation or Appeal?**

Mediation is a meeting between you, your EF worker, and a trained mediator. It is a good option when it is possible to settle a disagreement between you and your EF worker.

An appeal is a process where a hearing officer listens to both sides of the disagreement and decides who is right. An appeal is a good option when you have done what is required under the rules, but your EF worker will not accept it, or when you and your EF worker cannot come to an agreement on your desired activity.

For more information about these options, see Nebraska Appleseed's Appeals and Mediation brochure.

##### **When Should I Change My Plan?**

Before you give up on a plan, it is important to think about why your caseworker would not accept your plan and if it could be changed to take care of the problem. If there is no way to modify your plan to work within the EF guidelines, then you will have to change plans.

##### **When Should I Consider Adding A Work Activity?**

If there is no way to change your plan to fit EF guidelines and no other educational plan interests you, you could consider adding another work activity to your contract. For example, if your educational program is offered in the evenings, you could do another "core" work activity during the day to meet the EF work requirement and attend classes in the evening. *Keep in mind that supportive services can only be provided for activities included in your contract.*

##### **When Should I Consider Waiving or Giving Up My ADC Grant?**

Receiving an ADC grant is a choice. You always have the option of choosing not to receive a grant while still keeping your Medicaid.

If you have enough financial aid to cover your expenses, you may want to waive your ADC grant. Also, if you get enough child support to cover your expenses, you may want to waive your ADC grant. However, if you are going to rely on child support to cover expenses, it is important to think about how stable and reliable those payments have been and are likely to be in the future.

If you waive your ADC grant, you can decide at any point to start receiving ADC benefits again.

*Since 1996, Nebraska Appleseed has worked to protect, defend, and further the right to choose education as an activity under Employment First. We want to help more people pursue higher education while their family receives welfare assistance. This brochure was created so ADC recipients, community organizations, and higher education institutions can become fully aware of the higher education option, helping low-income families get on this path to true self-sufficiency.*

Funding for "Choosing Education" generously provided by the **Cooper Foundation**, Lincoln, NE.

For in-depth step-by-step information about including higher education in an Employment First Self-Sufficiency Contract and to view a sample plan for self-sufficiency, please see Nebraska Appleseed's Guide to Choosing Education for Employment First Participants

- **Do not assume your EF worker understands everything about Employment First**
- **Ask questions**
- **Do not sign anything without knowing what you are signing**
- **Keep copies of what you sign and what you are sent in the mail**

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## Basic Questions & Answers About Choosing Education in Employment First



To contact the  
Nebraska Appleseed  
Intake Line, call:

438-8853 ext. 105  
(in Lincoln)

or 1-800-845-3746 ext. 105  
(outside Lincoln)

The surest path to economic independence is education. Higher education leads to more stable employment and higher earnings. The more education a person has, the higher her earning potential. Fortunately, Nebraska’s lawmakers have included in state law the right of recipients of “Aid to Dependent Children” (ADC) cash assistance to pursue higher education as an important part of their journey to economic self-sufficiency.

## EMPLOYMENT FIRST BASICS

### **What is the Employment First Program?**

The Employment First (EF) program is Nebraska’s welfare to work program and part of Nebraska’s ADC cash assistance program. Adults in the EF program are asked to set goals and create a plan for how they can get a job that will pay them enough that they no longer need cash assistance. Participating in work requirements can help lead to getting a job like this.

### **What is the EF Work Requirement?**

With some exceptions, EF requires able-bodied adults to complete a “work activity” for at least 30 hours a week in order to receive a grant. Some hours (20) can come from “core” work activities and some (10) can come from “non-core” work activities. Only certain kinds of activities can count as work activities.

Core activities may include high school attendance, education directly related to employment, job readiness and job search, community service, unpaid work experience, providing child care services to other EF participants, and employment. Many core activities (listed on the right) allow EF participants the opportunity to pursue education.

Non-core activities like job skills training may also involve education to help participants improve their ability to find a job that will allow them to be self-sufficient.

### **Core Activities with a Focus on Education**

On-the-Job Training (OJT): Full-time paid work that prepares a participant for permanent employment with a job site. This may involve classroom instruction in literacy, English as a Second Language (ESL), or job-related skills.

Post-Secondary Education: An educational program at a college or university leading to a bachelor’s degree.

Vocational Training: Educational programs that prepare participants for jobs requiring training, other than a bachelors or advanced degree. Programs include academic and occupational coursework and may lead to a certificate, diploma, or associate degree.

Education Directly Related to Employment: This may include college certificate programs and study time, Adult Basic Education, English as a Second Language (ESL) and other courses designed to provide knowledge and skills for specific jobs. It can also include GED programs when required by employers or a specific occupation.

Satisfactory high school attendance

### **Non-Core Activities with a Focus on Education**

Job Skills Training: This includes associates degree programs and related study time, literacy or language instruction, and other barrier removal activities focused on skills needed for employment or combined with job training.

## FREQUENTLY ASKED QUESTIONS

### **Do I Have a Right to Do Education as a Work Activity?**

Under Nebraska law, you have a right to participate in any education program that fits within the definition of core and non-core activities and leads to economic self-sufficiency within the months you have left in your 60-month time limit. The only exception is that you cannot pursue post-graduate education (masters degree and beyond) as a work activity.

### **I Have Already Signed a Self-Sufficiency Contract. Can I Change it to Include Education?**

Yes. You can change your contract at any time. To change your contract, you will need to set up a meeting with your EF worker to discuss why your current plan is not working and how education would better help you achieve self-sufficiency.

### **Will HHS Pay for My Education?**

The EF program will not pay your tuition unless there are special circumstances. It is your responsibility to get financial aid to pay for the costs of your education. Financial aid includes things like loans, grants, and scholarships.

### **How Can I Get Financial Aid?**

Most schools have a financial aid office that can help you figure out what kind of help is available. You can also get help from EducationQuest by visiting [www.educationquest.org](http://www.educationquest.org) or calling 1-800-303-3745. Any financial aid you receive will not be counted as income under the ADC program.

### **How Do I Know What Education Program I Can Choose?**

The chart below lists education programs that may be available to you and how those programs meet the EF work requirement. For more detailed information, see Nebraska Appleseed’s guidebook to Choosing Education as Your Work Activity.

<b>EF Educational Activity</b>	<b>Who Can Choose It?</b>	<b>How Does It Work?</b>
<b>Secondary Education</b> (such as high school)	A participant under age 20 who is either married or a single head of household	Satisfactory high school attendance meets the full work requirement
<b>General Education Development (GED) Program</b>	A participant without a high school diploma who needs a GED in order to achieve self-sufficiency	<i>For participants under age 20</i> , satisfactory GED program attendance meets the full requirement. <i>For participants age 20 and up</i> , participation for 20 hours per week meets the full work requirement. <b>Note:</b> Effective August 8 2013, changes in state law made GED a core work activity for participants of any age.
<b>Education Directly Related to Employment</b>	A participant who needs greater skills in basic education and/or English as a Second Language (ESL) in order to achieve self-sufficiency	Participation for an average of at least 20 hours per week meets the full work requirement. <b>Note:</b> Effective August 8 2013, changes in state law made Education Directly Related to Employment a core work activity for participants of any age.
<b>Vocational Education</b>	A participant who needs an associate degree, diploma, or certification in order to achieve self-sufficiency	Class time and unsupervised study time (one hour of study time for each hour spent in class) can count toward your core and/or non-core hours for up to 36 months. After 36 months, these activities only count toward your non-core hours
<b>Post-Secondary Education</b> (such as college or university)	A participant who needs a bachelor’s degree in order to achieve self-sufficiency	Class time and unsupervised study time (one hour of study time for each hour spent in class) can count toward your core and/or non-core hours for up to 60 months.

## **5 Steps to Choosing Education**

### **1. Apply for Benefits**

The best time to start thinking about including education in your self-sufficiency contract or plan is before you apply for ADC. You will not be able to get your cash checks until you have decided on your work activity and signed a self-sufficiency contract. You will be in a better position to make the most out of your time on ADC if you start thinking about your plan before you apply.

Visit <http://accessnebraska.ne.gov> to complete an application for ADC online. If you need assistance with the application process, you can contact Nebraska Appleseed for referrals to organizations in your community that can help you. If you would prefer to complete a written application, visit your local DHHS office or call 1-800-383-4278 to request one.

### **2. Choose an Educational Program**

The EF program allows participants to select from a wide range of educational programs. When you are considering what kind of program to choose, here are some questions to ask yourself:

- What are my career goals?
- Am I capable of doing that job?
- Will that job pay enough money to take me off public assistance?
- Are there jobs available in that field right now?
- What kind of education or training will I need to do that job?
- What places offer the education or training I need and are they in my area?
- How long will it take for me to get the education or training?
- Do I already have any certifications or college credits I can use to reach my goals?
- Will I be able to get financial aid to cover the costs of my education?
- What kind of help will I need to participate in the educational program?

### **3. Complete an Assessment**

After you are found eligible for ADC benefits, your EF worker will assess your skills, abilities, resources, and past and present situations. The results of the assessment are used to develop a self-sufficiency contract or plan. Part of the plan will set long-term and short-term goals.

This will be the first opportunity to let your EF worker know that you would like to include an educational program in your contract. It is important to bring education up at this point with your EF worker so you can work on getting education in your contract right away.