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Assessing the Impact of Parent Involvement Programs

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At Families in Schools, a private non-profit based in Los Angeles, we implement several programs to engage parents in education. One of them is "Read with Me, Lea Conmigo." It is a backpack program with books inside a backpack that schools send to parents to read to their kids at home. Every backpack has six books in Spanish and three in English. In some communities in Los Angeles, we send books in Korean and Chinese as well. We received a million and a half dollars of public funds to launch this initiative, and then we were able to raise money from private funds. By the end of 2004 75,000 families in L.A. County will have participated in our program.

Through Read with Me, Lea Conmigo we train teachers about family and school partnerships, and how to manage the backpack program. The teachers learn to lead workshops for parents to orient them about the program itself and how to read with their children at home. Knowing that not all parents are going to come to school, we also develop some strategies to help teachers communicate with their parents. One of them is a book log where parents can list what they are reading with their children and use a rubric to assess their child's progress. When my daughter was 12 and I was doing this work at home, she said, mom, you need a rubric. So she created a happy face, medium face, sad face rubric. The teachers liked it, and so did the parents, and so we used it. A book log also helps the teachers see what is going on between the children and the parents at home. One activity asks the child to draw a picture, and the parent to write a little story for the picture. We also ask teachers to conduct additional activities with the parents jointly with the parents and children. For example, parents come to school 15 minutes early, stay in the classroom and read with their kids. The teacher provides the books and sometimes, even refreshments. The teachers also use books on tape where teachers tape their own voices reading the books that are in the backpacks. We found that the kids like to hear their teacher reading at home. It's a wonderful program because once you train the teachers, the teacher has the material and can continue to work with different families every year, so we don't have to continue to reinvest except for replacement of materials.

During the four years that "Read with Me has been operating, we have had three evaluations. The first year we hired a private consultant in Los Angeles to do the evaluation. We were very naive and went after a huge evaluation that involved 1948 parents in both experimental and control groups. We conducted a quantitative evaluation involving parent surveys and student assessments; we also conducted focus groups to collect qualitative data. The surveys took a lot of staff time because our job as the non-profit was to collect the information; if the evaluators collected the data, the evaluation would not have been affordable. We collected the data and handed them over to the evaluators for analysis.

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The second year evaluation was similar, except that we cut out the focus groups. We couldn't afford them anymore. But we still had a very large evaluation. We increased the size of the kindergarten group and we increased the size of the control group. It was quite difficult to get control sites because schools questioned its value. "Why should I be a control site? I want to be a program school."

In the third year we hired someone that would do some of the work internally and conducted a scaled down evaluation. We collected data from three sites and reduced the number of items on the parent and teacher survey. In all the years of the evaluation we convened teachers at the end of a year. We organized group interviews with the teachers, where they sat with colleagues and talked about the program, shared ideas about what worked and what did not work, and how they could solve their problems. And then they talked to us, the program people, to tell us what they thought about the program, the program impact, and how we could improve the program. That's what's been really wonderful, when districts have released teachers at the end of the year to meet with us.

How have we used all of this information? There were some differences between the first-year and the second-year evaluation, where the second-year evaluation showed the program to be not as effective for the kindergarten students and families as the preschool. When some of our stakeholders saw this finding, their immediate knee-jerk reaction was to cut the kindergarten program and invest all our money in preschools, rather than to think about investigating the reasons for the finding or whether the results are even valid. I've learned quite a bit about the politics of evaluation and how when misunderstood by well-intended people, this can be can hurt the program rather than help it. We are now examining closely what might account for some of those differences between the kindergarten and preschool groups. We are looking into contexts. There were new programs introduced in kindergarten that year in Los Angeles. There was a lot of confusion about implementation. Our evaluator served as a skeptical advocate in really pushing us to think about why we were getting those results. She said, "don't be defensive about what we're telling you, just think about why." As program people it is very easy to get defensive and to say our program is perfect. But the evaluator helped us to think through what we were doing-- although my staff doesn't feel quite as fondly about our evaluator when she comes, and they all hide when she calls.

We're also a Parent Information and Resource Center, and we did have some training as part of our PIRC initiation on logic models. Now we're creating logic models for all of our programs. For "Read with Me," we have a wonderful logic model with a task map, so that we know what some of the steps are that we need to take. And our evaluator has participated in this effort.

We've revised the teacher training process and materials as a result of evaluation. The evaluations also have been enormously helpful in fundraising. We can say we've done two evaluations that were done externally and these are the findings. The program is not perfect by any means, but the fact that we are willing to be reflective and to improve the program really says something to the funders. The budget for the program has been about a million a year, and most of that is hard-earned money that we've had.

Finally we have incorporated evaluation into school agreements and memoranda of understanding. The new memoranda specify the requirements for the evaluation right up front. Every school that comes into the program has to sign an agreement that it will collect data and hand it over at the appropriate deadlines. It's all easier said than done because, as you know, school people are busy and it is hard sometimes to get their attention to collect the data, but we have a very persistent staff and we also offer incentives. We provide gift certificates to teachers for educational materials; if they can collect 60 percent of the parent surveys by the assigned date, they get a \$30 gift certificate in the mail. When they come to training and they bring their teacher survey completed, they get a \$5 Starbucks gift certificate. We have given teachers lanyards for their keys and magnets that they can give their families. They're a small investment that helped us to collect the data that we need.

I think the evaluations were fairly inexpensive because we did a lot of the work ourselves. The two evaluation contracts came to \$60,000 yearly. Both evaluators told me that they actually lost money, but they loved the

program and were happy to do it. We contracted out the data entry, and we hired a program assistant. We spent about \$128,000, not including my time or the coordinators time, which were the highest ticket items. I can say probably a couple hundred thousand a year would be what it would cost. We supported our evaluation through public and private funding.

Let me talk about some of the challenges that we encountered and how we took care of some of the problems. We learned that the scope of the evaluation was too large. We learned that we didn't have to include that many participants to get the information we needed. In the future we will be conducting an evaluation on a smaller scale.

The recruitment of control schools was extremely challenging. We know that we have to allow a lot of time for building relationships with these schools. We did end up giving the control schools free books for their school libraries, but it was very hard to get them to sign up without an incentive. We also gave teachers incentives after the fact, and sent them gift certificates. In the new memoranda of understanding with the school districts, we are adding that the district will help us recruit the control schools, not just the program schools. In terms of the parent surveys, most of the parents were Spanish-speaking only. The formal level of education of most of the parents was rather low, so every survey that we did was a challenge. The first survey was too long so we cut it back to fewer items. We also feared that parents were over-reporting because nobody wants to be a bad parent. Because the survey is a self-report, we question the validity of some of the parents' answers. And we don't have the resources to be able to do one-on-one interviews with them where we can see them, look at them in the eye, and ask the question. Parents were also unfamiliar with surveys. They had not done a survey before and found it hard to complete.

Another challenge involved survey administration. Because of the scale of the evaluation, we were not able to afford graduate students to distribute the surveys. We had to train teachers to help us to administer the survey. Even though they had a protocol on what to do and how to do it we don't know exactly how they administered the survey. Because we're doing a smaller scale evaluation of families this time around, our staff will be at the parent workshops to do the surveys.

We not only surveyed parents but also conducted student assessments. The assessment tool used in the first year was not easy to use. We solved that challenge by finding classroom teachers who were unemployed at the moment. The evaluator trained classroom teachers to interview the students and we were extremely pleased with how that went, but it cost a lot of money. We under-budgeted this item. While we would love to use teachers again for the assessment, right now we just don't have the funds. We took a cheaper route in the second year and used a literacy checklist. It was not very comprehensive, and getting teachers to collect pre and post data was very challenging. The teachers themselves were not very happy about the assessment. We're not going to do a checklist like that again, because even though the number of assessments collected was large, the data were not very good. Something that worked very well was getting the school districts to release the teachers, and as I mentioned earlier having group interviews with the teachers. The bigger challenge was working with district staff because they are very, very over-extended in L.A., and I'm sure everywhere. Getting them to work with us for program improvement, and using evaluation findings to that end is still a continuing challenge. That is not something we're going to claim that we solved. We're still working on it.