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# First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative Evaluation



## *Phase I Final Report Executive Summary*

American Institutes for Research, March 2007



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This executive summary provides an overview of Year 3 (July 2004 – June 2005) and Year 4 (July 2005 – June 2006) of the external evaluation of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative. In the following pages, we describe the focus of the evaluation and data sources drawn upon for the analysis, and highlight key findings and recommendations summarized in the Phase I final report. Additional detail is available in the full report.

### **Overview of the Initiative and Phase I Evaluation**

In 2002, the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative provided funding for three interrelated components:

1. Expansion and enhancement grants to 15 family literacy programs throughout LA County providing adult education classes, parenting education classes, early childhood education (ECE) services, and parent-child interactive literacy activities (PCILA) to families with children birth to age five.
2. The Family Literacy Support Network (FLSN), which provides training and technical assistance to the grantees as well as outreach to other programs in the County and engages in advocacy work for the field of family literacy.
3. A four-year evaluation of the implementation of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative and its impacts on children birth to five and their families.

Phase I of the Initiative-wide evaluation has been conducted through a partnership between the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the Center for Improving Child Care Quality (CICCQ) at UCLA. In the final two years of the Initiative evaluation, the evaluation team continued to investigate many of the themes identified in Years 1 and 2, related largely to process, implementation, and early outcomes. In addition, we examined the quality of instructional components and overall program quality, and continued our investigation of outcomes for participants, including adult learning outcomes and changes in parenting behaviors, and children's developmental progress and outcomes. We also began to link those outcomes to the quality and quantity of services received. Examination of the activities of the FLSN also continued in Years 3 and 4, with increased attention to the impacts of FLSN training and technical assistance on grantee program quality outcomes. We highlight findings in each of the following five areas:

1. Characteristics of program leadership and administration
2. Implementation and impacts of the adult education component
3. Implementation and impacts of the parenting education and PCILA components
4. Implementation and impacts of the early childhood education component
5. Role of the FLSN in supporting continuous quality improvement among grantee programs

To examine these topics, the evaluation drew on a variety of data sources in Years 3 and 4:

- Site visits to all 15 grantee program sites, including program director interviews, staff and parent focus groups, and classroom observations—Year 3

- A survey of program directors—Year 4
- Participant data downloaded from the First 5 LA online data system (e.g., attendance, First 5 LA participant profiles, Desired Results Developmental Profiles (DRDP), California Even Start Performance Information Reporting System (CA-ESPIRS), Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) Reading assessment)
- An in-depth child outcomes study (including independent child assessments by trained assessors, classroom observations, parent interviews, and teacher surveys)
- A review of grantee reports and invoices
- A review of Family Literacy Support Network (FLSN) deliverables, FLSN site visit notes summaries, and interviews with FLSN staff

Key findings in each of the areas examined and recommendations are highlighted below.

### **Program Leadership and Administration**

Before examining the quality of the individual components—adult education, parenting education and PCILA, and ECE—of family literacy programs, we identified the characteristics of program leadership and administration for the programs as a whole.

***Program leadership:*** *On the whole, program directors are well-qualified and have in place policies to ensure staff quality.*

- All program directors have at least bachelor's degrees, most have a background in early childhood education, and about half have a background in adult education. On average, they have six years of experience in family literacy programs.
- Most programs have policies and procedures in place to ensure staff quality, such as written job descriptions and annual performance reviews. However, only six program directors currently conduct regular classroom observations to ensure quality. Sixty percent of program directors reported relatively high staff turnover, but generally program directors did not cite staffing as a significant challenge for them; only a few described difficulties securing appropriate staff.

***Component integration:*** *Component integration varies by program, though achieving full component integration remains a challenge for many grantees.*

- Program directors report using various strategies for program integration. Three-quarters (77 percent) reported using themes to integrate instructional content in each of the four components.
- Most program directors reported that teachers regularly attend integration meetings, though adult education teachers attend somewhat less.
- Program directors report that full integration (i.e., across all four program components) is still difficult to achieve, and two indicated some uncertainty about what full integration should look like in their program.

***Recruitment, attendance, and retention:*** *Programs have policies in place to ensure participant attendance and have achieved relatively high rates of participation.*

- Eighty percent of program directors indicated that their program has a written attendance policy, and another 14 percent reported that they are creating one.
- Grantees achieved their target attendance rates of 70 percent in Year 4. They also came close to this benchmark in Year 3, even though the requirement was not introduced until Year 4.
- The average family attended program services for approximately 10 months.
- Although most programs do not have plans in place to recruit families for their programs, most report that recruiting families, retaining participants, and achieving high attendance rates are not challenges.

**Sustainability:** *Grantee programs have benefited from First 5 LA funds, though achieving long-term sustainability remains a challenge.*

- Program directors report that First 5 LA funds have strengthened program infrastructures and accountability systems, allowed programs to expand and grow, and helped improve sustainability by enabling the leveraging of other funds.
- Program staff and parents all reported that their programs provided a unique set of services not available elsewhere.
- Sustainability remains the greatest concern held by grantees.
- Only 43 percent of programs had a written fundraising plan at the end of Year 4, though another 43 percent were working on one (now required by First 5 LA).

## **Supporting Adult Learning through Adult Education**

**Adult education program quality:** *Programs generally had qualified teachers for the adult education component of their family literacy programs, and many adult education programs were standards-based, but some opportunities for improvement remain in terms of reducing class sizes and offering more opportunities for interaction.*

- The majority of adult education teachers have a Bachelor's degree (98 percent) and an adult education teaching credential (97 percent).
- Two thirds (64 percent) of program directors reported that their adult education curriculum was based on state or district standards or CASAS competencies.
- Parents reported that they would like smaller ESL classes, with fewer levels combined in the same class, and more opportunities to practice speaking and writing.

**CASAS reading achievement:** *Parents demonstrated significant growth in reading achievement over time, and there is some evidence that more hours of adult education is associated with better results.*

- In both years, parents showed significant growth on the CASAS reading assessment, and those with lower scores at Time 1 (the first assessment of the year) showed more growth at Time 2 (the last assessment of the year).
- In Year 4, there was a significant relationship between the number of hours the parent attended ESL and ABE classes, and CASAS reading scores at the end of the year.

## **Supporting Parenting Knowledge and Practice**

**Parenting education and PCILA program quality:** *Parenting education teachers are also generally well qualified, but emphases and formats of parenting education and PCILA classes vary widely.*

- Most parenting education teachers have a BA (95 percent), and 77 percent have a general adult education credential or an adult education credential with a specialization in parent education, while fewer (72 percent) of PCILA teachers have a BA.
- Parenting curricula vary widely; 33 percent of program directors reported their curriculum is based on standards. Common topics covered in classes include child development, discipline, nutrition, and communication.
- Parents reported that they enjoyed their parenting classes, though they wanted to have more input on topics and more time in class for discussion.
- Programs also varied in their approach to PCILA activities. Some emphasized teacher-directed activities, while others emphasized free-choice activities, though literacy activities occurred in only half of the PCILA sessions that were observed.
- Teachers modeled behaviors for parents but little feedback or parent coaching was observed.

**Parenting outcomes – CA-ESPIRS:** Parents demonstrated significant increases in home literacy behaviors over time; and more hours of parenting education and PCILA is associated with more positive home literacy behaviors.

- Across all grantee programs, there was statistically significant growth in the proportion of parents meeting or exceeding the Even Start benchmarks from Time 1 (first assessment of the year) to Time 2 (last assessment of the year) on all of the CA-ESPIRS indicators. Specifically, compared to Time 1 assessments, parents at Time 2:
  - Engaged in more reading and writing activities themselves
  - Kept more children’s books and other literacy materials in their home
  - Read books and told stories to their children more often
  - Exhibited more interactive reading behaviors (significant in Year 4 only)
  - Were more likely to report having a library card
  - Visited and brought home books from the library more often
  - Limited their children’s television watching, and used television as a learning tool more often
  - Were more involved in their children’s schools
- In both Years 3 and 4, the more hours a parent participated in parenting education and PCILA, the greater the growth shown on all three parenting outcomes examined: the number of children’s books in the home, the frequency with which the parent reads to the child, and the use of four interactive literacy behaviors when reading to the child (stopping reading and asking the child to tell what is in a picture, stopping reading and pointing out letters, stopping reading and asking what will happen next, and asking the child to read with the parent).

## Supporting Children’s Learning through Early Childhood Education

**Teacher qualifications:** Teachers in the early childhood education component of the programs were somewhat less well qualified than adult education and parenting teachers, as is typical in the field of early care and education, although they had higher credentials than the state average.

- Program directors reported that just over half (55 percent) of ECE teachers have a BA.
- Over half (57 percent) of ECE teachers have a child development Teacher Permit, and 67 percent have at least an Associate Teacher Permit or Child Development Associate (CDA)

**Classroom environment and teacher practice.** Overall, grantees offered ECE services with environments rated as “good” using standardized measures, although teachers spent relatively little time engaging children in language and literacy activities and scaffolding their learning.

- Average ratings on the Early Childhood Environment Rating Scale–Revised (ECERS-R) across the 15 grantees were 5.2, which is classified as “good” on the 1–7 scale.
- Teachers spent very little of their interaction time with children elaborating on their responses or scaffolding their learning.
- Only about 10 percent of class time on average was spent engaged in literacy activities.
- Teachers reported using data to adjust curricula when needed, to set goals for individual children, to group children appropriately, and to communicate with parents about children’s progress.

***Child progress on the DRDP:*** Children demonstrated significant growth on the DRDP over time, and there is some evidence that higher levels of participation is associated with higher growth.

- In both Year 3 and Year 4, children eight months to five years old demonstrated significant growth on each Desired Result in the DRDP:<sup>1</sup>
  - Children are personally and socially competent
  - Children are effective learners
  - Children show physical and motor competence
  - Children are safe and healthy
- We found a significant positive relationship between the total number of hours children in the 3-5 year age group participated in early childhood education, child care, and PCILA, and their growth on all four Desired Results. This indicates that children who spent more time in the family literacy programs showed higher ratings by Time 2 on the DRDP (after controlling for age and Time 1 rating) than those children who spent less time in the program.

***Child outcomes in kindergarten:*** Children who were followed into kindergarten demonstrated significant growth after leaving the family literacy program, and there is some evidence that more time spent in the program is associated with better outcomes.

- We found that children's English language skills (as measured by the Pre-LAS) continued to improve after they entered kindergarten. In fact, while most children were assessed in Spanish at Time 1, nearly all were proficient enough to be tested in English in kindergarten. Other indicators of children's literacy skills (story and print concepts; and naming letters, numbers, and colors) also showed significant growth between their first year in the family literacy program and kindergarten. The positive trend in score growth over time suggests that children entered kindergarten ready to learn and continued to improve.
- Child's age at initial enrollment in the family literacy program was associated with kindergarten outcomes, such that, in general, children who were younger at enrollment had higher literacy scores in kindergarten. This suggests that younger children who have had more time in the program may have benefited more from the family literacy programs.

***Children's development and ECE component quality:*** Children in programs with higher quality ECE services—especially more language and literacy input—demonstrated more growth.

- Higher scores on two subscales of the ECERS-R—teacher-child interactions and language and reasoning—were associated with higher ratings for children on Desired Result 1 (Children are personally and socially competent) and Desired Result 2 (Children are effective learners).
- The percentage of time ECE teachers spent on literacy activities was significantly and positively related to higher ratings on Desired Result 1 (Children are personally and socially competent) among children at Time 2.
- Children in the child outcomes study who were observed to engage with books reading or pretending to read more often in the family literacy programs had higher story comprehension scores in kindergarten.
- Somewhat surprisingly, children in the child outcomes study who were read to more often in the programs did not have higher comprehension scores, suggesting that children's active engagement in literacy activities contributed more to story comprehension outcomes than just being read to.

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<sup>1</sup> Growth for children in the birth to seven months group was not statistically significant, given the relatively small numbers with two assessments.

***Children’s development and parent input:*** *There is some evidence that parents’ home literacy behaviors are associated with positive child outcomes.*

- For children in the 18-35 month age group in Year 4, increases in the number of books in the home and in the frequency that parents read to children were both associated with increases in mean ratings on Desired Result 1 (Children are personally and socially competent). However, for three-to- five-year-olds, there were no statistically significant relationships found between parents’ home literacy behaviors and either of these outcomes.
- No significant relationships were found in either year for toddlers or preschoolers between parents’ CASAS reading score and children’s ratings on Desired Results 1 or 2.
- Among child outcomes study participants, parents who reported being more involved in literacy activities at home had children with higher scores on several of the assessments in kindergarten. For example, parents who spent time teaching their children letters and reading skills had children with higher story comprehension scores.

## **Continuous Quality Improvement and the FLSN**

***FLSN technical assistance:*** *In Years 3 and 4, the FLSN focused on using the “Framework for Continuous Quality Improvement” to support grantee program improvement, and grantees reported progress as a result of FLSN assistance.*

- In Years 3 and 4 of the Initiative, there was a shift in the focus of FLSN training and technical assistance, from establishing the four components and completing First 5 LA deliverables to sustainability and using the Framework to improve program administration and the parenting education and PCILA components.
- Though the amount of training provided to grantees has remained consistent throughout the Initiative, the amount of onsite technical assistance provided to grantees in Years 3 and 4 decreased from Years 1 and 2.
- Grantees continued to have overwhelmingly positive responses to FLSN support, particularly in the areas of providing opportunities to network with other family literacy programs, providing opportunities for staff development, and identifying funding sources.
- Grantees demonstrated progress toward model status in several areas and grew increasingly skilled at completing First 5 LA deliverables and identifying their own technical assistance needs. An assessment of grantees’ overall progress toward model status reveals some areas for improvement, including increasing parent involvement in curricular planning for parenting education and PCILA, component integration, using data for quality improvement, increasing the literacy focus of activities in PCILA and ECE, and sustainability.
- FLSN staff feel that implementing the Framework for Continuous Quality Improvement, as a resource for technical assistance providers as well as grantees, was a major success in Year 4, and although understaffing remains a challenge for the FLSN, grantees find the services provided by the FLSN to be of consistently high quality.

## **Conclusions and Recommendations**

Overall, findings suggest continued growth in learning among children and families and greater growth among families with higher levels of program participation. Although these relationships do not imply causality, they are suggestive, and taken together with findings demonstrating links between program quality and outcomes, we see a pattern of positive connections that we will be exploring further in Phase II.

Some parallels can also be seen between findings from this evaluation and the Third National Even Start Evaluation, published in 2003. The Even Start evaluation also found a relationship between hours of

participation and child outcomes as well as linkages between outcomes and the extent to which parents and children participated in literacy services. The report also concluded that there was not sufficient emphasis on language acquisition and reasoning.

Many of the findings presented in this Phase I final evaluation report are encouraging. Given the links between program quality and outcomes and the wide range in observed quality, it is not unreasonable to assume that targeted quality improvements in the family literacy programs will lead to even more positive results for children and families. To this end, we offer of the following recommendations for consideration:

1. ***Focus on quality, not just quantity.*** We find that families who receive more hours of service demonstrate greater growth on outcome measures in each of the component areas, which suggests that some level of intensity is important. However, program quality factors were also associated with positive outcomes. First 5 LA has set minimum levels of service that all grantees must make available to families, thus emphasizing the importance of the *quantity*, or intensity, of services provided. While this is a positive step toward holding grantees accountable to a high standard of service, it is also important to set a standard for the *quality* of family literacy services provided to families. Quantity without quality is not likely to produce the benefits desired from a family literacy program.
2. ***Increase attention to literacy in the ECE classroom and strengthen teacher-child interactions.*** We found consistent links between teacher practice in the ECE classroom, in particular, the time teachers spent engaging children in literacy activities and actively scaffolding their learning, and children's developmental progress and outcomes. Given the relatively low proportions of time teachers were observed to spend supporting children's learning in these ways, we would expect to see even greater growth if more attention is paid to language and literacy activities and supportive instructional strategies.
3. ***Continue to work on supporting grantee development to enhance parenting education and PCILA.*** One of the key goals of family literacy programs is to provide parents with the knowledge and tools they need to support their children's learning, and this is accomplished through parenting education classes and PCILA time. Although parenting outcomes were positive, we found variation among programs, especially in regard to how PCILA is structured, and relatively little emphasis given to direct coaching of parents to support their learning. This is an area that the FLSN has identified as a focus area for Phase II of the Initiative, and we encourage the FLSN to work with grantees to further refine their approach to PCILA to enhance opportunities for parent learning.
4. ***Maximize the impact of the four components by increasing their integration.*** The family literacy model rests on the assumption that families benefit most when they participate in all four components and when those components are aligned to create a well articulated and coherent experience. However, full integration remains a challenge for many grantees. The extent to which programs have integrated the four components varies, as do interpretations of the term integration. The FLSN's Framework addresses the concept of component integration, but some focused attention, with practical guidelines for how to improve integration, would be a useful next step.
5. ***Extend use of data by grantees to support continuous quality improvement.*** Overall, grantees have demonstrated great progress on their comfort with data – from attendance data to assessment data – and many attribute their progress to the FLSN. However, there is still a need

for continued development. In particular, many grantees are not actively analyzing and interpreting their data and using it to support program improvement efforts. If continuous quality improvement is to be a requirement for grantees, using data to support their efforts should also be a (continued) focus of technical assistance and training.

6. ***Continue to support grantee sustainability by providing training and technical assistance to grantees.*** Grantee agencies have benefited greatly from First 5 LA funds, expanding and enhancing their programs over time. With the new matching requirement for grantee funding, though, the pressure on grantee program staff to engage in grant-writing and other fundraising activities will continue to increase, and securing adequate funding for their program has been by far the greatest challenge reported by grantees. Given this need, we recommend additional attention be given to building capacity among grantees to achieve sustainability.
7. ***Continue to provide customized technical assistance to grantees, especially those with greater program improvement needs.*** There is wide variation in grantee program structures, services, and strengths, and each grantee has its own unique set of technical assistance needs. Although the addition of the new grantees means a total of 22 grantee agencies to serve, we encourage the FLSN to provide support tailored to individual grantee needs to the extent possible. If enhancing the quality of services provided to families is to be a priority for the Initiative, grantees – especially those with the greatest program improvement needs – will need customized technical assistance along the way.

In addition, findings from the first four years of the evaluation suggest several areas for further exploration. In particular, we will continue to assess the linkages between quality and outcomes, focusing more explicitly on each component as well as examining the role of the FLSN in continuous quality improvement efforts. A few design changes are being made in Phase II to support these goals. Phase II of the evaluation will: 1) gather more comprehensive program quality data, especially for the adult education, parenting education, and PCILA components; 2) increase the sample size for the child outcomes study to improve estimates of impacts, 3) collect more detailed data on expected outcomes from the parenting education and PCILA components; and 4) more directly link FLSN technical assistance activities to program improvements.