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Evaluation of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative: Year 5/6 Report

Executive Summary

May 22, 2009

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The First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative, which began in 2002, is a comprehensive program to promote language and literacy development, parenting knowledge and skills, and economic self-sufficiency among low-income families in Los Angeles County through 1) grants to selected agencies providing direct services and 2) funding for the Family Literacy Support Network (FLSN) to support capacity-building efforts among these agencies and throughout the county. The number of agencies receiving grants has changed over time, with new grantees added in 2005-06. In total, 24 four-year grants were awarded to 22 agencies (grantees). Each grantee provided services through each of their four interrelated family literacy program components: 1) early childhood education (ECE), 2) parent-child interactive literacy activities (PCILA), 3) parenting education, and 4) adult education.

First 5 LA has contracted with the American Institutes for Research (AIR) since the beginning of the Initiative to evaluate the Initiative's implementation and overall effectiveness. The first four years of the evaluation (Phase I) focused on process, outcomes, and policy-relevant issues (Quick et al., 2007). This executive summary (and the accompanying report) presents findings from Year 5 (2006-07) and Year 6 (2007-08) of the evaluation, which continued to examine family outcomes but also explored in greater detail the relationships between elements of program quality and those family outcomes.

Focus and Approach of the Year 5-6 Evaluation

Six key research questions guided the evaluation efforts in Years 5 and 6. We addressed three questions related to participant outcomes:

1. How are family literacy program participants growing and changing over time?
2. What is the relationship between program participation and outcomes?
3. What is the relationship between program quality and participant outcomes?

In addition, three questions related to FLSN and grantee program outcomes:

4. What is the range of program quality among grantees?
5. What factors facilitate or impede program quality improvement?
6. What is the relationship between FLSN support and grantee program quality improvement?

To address these questions, as in prior years of the evaluation, we used a mixed-methods design to collect qualitative and quantitative data at all levels of the system. Over the two years, our methods included:

- In-person or telephone interviews with all 22 grantee program directors in Years 5 and 6;
- Surveys of all 22 program directors and 138 teachers in Year 5, and 21 program directors and 157 teachers in Year 6;
- Site visits to eight grantee programs (including observations of eight parenting education classes, eight PCILA classes, and eight parent focus groups) in Year 5;

- Analysis of extant data (including grantee-collected service records, family demographic data, adult reading assessments, parent surveys, and children’s language surveys) in Years 5 and 6;
- An in-depth child outcomes substudy in Year 5 (including direct assessments of 158 children in the fall and 141 in the spring (112 at both time points), classroom observations at 21 programs, 96 parent interviews, and observations of 100 parent-child book-reading sessions); and
- FLSN staff interviews in Years 5 and 6 and extant data analysis, including a review of FLSN staff summaries of notes taken from their Year 5 technical assistance site visits to grantee programs. (Notes from the FLSN’s Year 6 site visits were not available in time to include in the analysis.)

Key findings from the analyses of these data are highlighted below. Although we present results linking programmatic characteristics with outcomes (as well as linking changes in program characteristics with FLSN support), we cannot conclude that there is a causal relationship; other factors may be contributing to positive outcomes observed. (Determining causality requires an experimental design, which was not feasible given costs and First 5 LA’s concerns about randomly assigning families to intervention and control conditions.) Selected programmatic recommendations based on these findings are also presented.

Child and Family Outcomes

A central focus of the evaluation has been the assessment of child and family outcomes in a range of domains. Overall, we found statistically significant positive growth among parents and children on a range of outcome measures. In addition, in the absence of a randomized design, we examined the relationships between level of participation and growth on outcome measures to capture the potential contribution of the program to child and family outcomes. We found some support for the hypothesis that greater impacts would be observed among families receiving greater levels of service.

Adult learning outcomes

Overall, results from parent assessments and focus groups suggested that programs participating in the Family Literacy Initiative continue to support the English language development and continuing education of the parents participating in their programs.

- As in prior years of the evaluation, we found that parents participating in adult education classes (ESL and/or ABE) through the family literacy programs showed statistically significant growth on their CASAS reading assessment scores over the course of the year.
- Furthermore, we found that parents who participated in more hours of adult education classes showed more growth on the CASAS reading assessment.

Parenting outcomes

Parent reports of their own behaviors at two points in time, direct observations of parent book-reading strategies, and analyses linking time spent in the program to parenting behaviors all suggest that family literacy programs contribute to parents’ knowledge about, and capacity to support, their children’s learning.

- Parents' responses on the parent survey provided evidence that their knowledge of the importance of reading to their children right from birth and their access to literacy resources (the number of children's books in the home and visits to the library) have increased over time.
- Information from parent survey responses and direct observations of parent-child interactions indicated that parents routinely read to their children – even more so at the end of the program year – and use a wide range of strategies to engage their children in the books they read together, though the focus of book-reading discussions among the parent-child dyads we observed seldom extended beyond the literal content of the book.
- Parent survey results and focus group responses alike indicated that parents are learning to value education and hold high expectations for their children as well as for themselves; they are becoming increasingly involved with their child's classroom and school – practices that should support children's success in school into the future.
- Parent survey responses suggested that more households were characterized by low TV viewing by children (less than two hours per day) and high parent involvement in children's TV viewing by the end of the program year, though there was more of an increase in involvement than a decrease in TV viewing.
- Although we found that parents who attended more hours of parenting education and PCILA did not show more growth on a composite scale of language and literacy activities with their children at home – our primary parenting outcome measure – they did show growth on several specific practices, including library use and frequency of reading to their children.
- Greater participation in PCILA was associated with higher levels of several types of parent talk during one-on-one book-reading sessions with their children – most notably talk that goes beyond the literal content of the book, which research has shown to be associated with later reading skills. However, no positive relationships were found between hours of parenting education alone and such parent talk.

Child outcomes

We also found evidence that children are growing and developing in a range of domains throughout their participation in the early childhood education (ECE) component of the family literacy programs.

- English language skills (as measured by the Pre-LAS language screener) increased for 3-to-5-year-olds in the child outcomes substudy, as did receptive vocabulary (as measured by the PPVT) – which indicates that children's English language development accelerated to bring them up to nearly the level of national norms.
- Children demonstrated statistically significant growth on emergent literacy skills; by the end of the year, study children named more letters and colors, and demonstrated greater story comprehension and concepts about print – critical skills that are predictive of later achievement.
- Assessments of numeracy and early math skills showed significant growth for study children in terms of naming numbers and counting objects, but not in terms of problem solving.

Program Quality and Participant Outcomes

Greater emphasis was given to the measurement of program quality in Years 5 and 6 of the evaluation. In addition to assessing indicators of quality, we explored relationships between program quality and family outcomes; we found some evidence that higher program quality is associated with more positive outcomes.

Quality characteristics in the adult education classroom

Drawing on data from surveys of adult education teachers, we found many characteristics of quality reflected in the adult education component of the programs. In addition, several features were associated with more positive outcomes for parents.

- Although we found that credential rates among adult education teachers dropped somewhat from Year 5 to Year 6, teachers are relatively experienced, with 12.5 years of teaching experience, on average.
- Adult education teachers reported utilizing various instructional approaches in order to meet students' diverse learning needs, including using hands-on activities. We found that greater use of these more interactive instructional practices, and less time spent in lecture format, was associated with greater adult learning. However, teacher reports of their use of hands-on activities declined from Year 5 to Year 6.
- Overall, we found that adult education teachers are relatively satisfied with their access to appropriate materials and resources, though there was an overall decline in the reported adequacy of resources from Year 5 to Year 6. This warrants attention since we found that parents in programs where teachers rated classroom resources – both the learning materials and the physical environment – more highly showed more growth in their scores on the CASAS reading assessment.

Quality characteristics in the parenting education and PCILA classrooms

Analyses of survey responses from parenting education and PCILA teachers showed that there is variation in the programmatic approaches to these parenting components as well as variation in teacher qualifications and practices. In addition, we found that several aspects of quality in each of these components were related to positive outcomes for parents.

- Although qualifications (in terms of holding relevant credentials and permits) vary among parenting education and PCILA teachers, the average teacher is relatively experienced, with an average of 7.6 years of experience for parenting teachers and 4.5 years of experience for PCILA teachers. Moreover, having a more experienced PCILA teacher was found to be associated with positive outcomes for parents.
- Parenting education teachers reported using a variety of curricula to guide their instruction, and they reported covering a variety of topics in their instruction, though the most common emphases were on building parents' self-esteem, child development, and strategies for reading with children and supporting their learning. We found that more attention to topics related to children's learning – the original intent of the family literacy model for parenting education – was associated with greater parent growth on the composite measure of language and literacy activity at home.

- Teachers' reports of their instructional methods suggested that they divide their time between lecture, hands-on activities, and discussion. We found that parent involvement through discussion and interactive activities was associated with parent learning; parents in focus groups confirmed that group discussions with the teacher and their peers were the most valuable for their learning.
- Parenting education and PCILA teachers rated the availability and quality of classroom resources as generally adequate, though somewhat less likely to be rated as always adequate were computer equipment, parenting education textbooks, and materials for supporting children with disabilities in the PCILA classroom. We found that having sufficient resources was particularly important for the PCILA classroom, with more adequate resources associated with greater increases over time in parents' use of language and literacy activities with their children.

Quality characteristics in the ECE classroom

We observed significant variation across the 22 grantee programs in terms of the content and focus of ECE classes as well as teacher practices and interactional style.

- ECE teachers are relatively experienced, with an average of slightly less than 10 years of teaching experience. Just under half of ECE teachers surveyed reported having a bachelor's degree, half reported having a degree or coursework in early childhood education, and two-thirds reported holding at least a CDA or associate teacher permit.
- Overall, interactions between children and adults in the ECE classroom were rated by independent observers as being in the "medium quality" range on the CLASS in terms of emotional support and classroom organization. Of greater concern, however, is the "low quality" rating given, on average, for instructional support, which is most predictive of later positive outcomes for children. Teachers were also observed to interact with children most frequently in a didactic manner, with relatively little scaffolding and elaboration of children's responses.
- Regarding the content focus of activities in the ECE classroom, surveyed teachers rated all topics listed as very important. Most likely to be rated by teachers as the top priority, though, were social-emotional development and language development, followed by literacy learning.
- Independent observations of ECE classroom activities indicated that about equal attention was given to language and literacy activities as to "aesthetics" activities (such as art and music) in study classrooms, and most of the literacy time was characterized as having adults read to children.
- The average rating on the ECERS-E literacy subscale was just below "good" quality for ECE classrooms observed, though there was wide variation among grantees. ECERS-E ratings were highest for books and literacy materials, and lowest for writing and sounds in words.
- In the ECE classroom, teachers reported that the quantity and quality of materials and resources were generally sufficient for their needs. Materials for diverse learners, especially for children with special needs, were rated somewhat lower, however.

Component integration

Grantee programs continued to struggle to fully integrate their four components into a coherent system of services for families, though most reported employing a range of strategies, including holding regular integration meetings with teachers from each of the four components and reinforcing core messages across the four components (such as using thematic units to tie the content of each component together).

- Integrating the adult education component continued to be a challenge for programs. Although many adult education teachers reported that they align their curricula with topics covered in the other components, most reported that they have infrequent communications with teachers in other components.
- Although the frequency with which adult education teachers shared and received lesson plan information across components was not significantly related to parent outcomes, we found some evidence of the benefits of greater familiarity with family literacy programming among adult education teachers. Specifically, having adult education teachers with more years of experience teaching in a family literacy context, as well as having classrooms with a greater proportion of family literacy students relative to other non-program adults, were associated with greater CASAS score growth among parents.
- Although one might assume that parenting education and PCILA would be most likely to be well integrated – both with other components and with each other – there appeared to be less communication between teachers across these two components than would be expected, as PCILA teacher reports suggested that they are somewhat surprisingly unaware of what happens in parenting classes. However, results indicated that a higher level of integration of parenting education with the other components of family literacy programs was associated with greater parent learning.
- ECE teachers reported feeling relatively well informed about the activities in the PCILA classroom, but somewhat less aware of the content of parenting classes, and even less aware of what goes on in the adult education classroom. Overall, the majority of ECE teachers reported integrating themes or topics discussed in other components in their classroom activities, and about half reported making some modifications to their curriculum for the purposes of integration.

Support for Program Quality Improvement

The evaluation also explored the FLSN's role in supporting quality improvement efforts, and examined the relationships between FLSN support and changes in grantee program quality characteristics.

Focus of the FLSN's work

The primary role of the FLSN is to provide training, support, and guidance to grantees to facilitate their progress toward becoming model family literacy programs. In addition to trainings and networking meetings, the FLSN provides much of its support to the grantees through customized technical assistance site visits, where FLSN staff discuss grantee challenges, observe program activities, and offer feedback, advice, and resources to move grantees forward.

- As has been the case throughout the course of the Initiative, grantee program directors reported high levels of satisfaction overall with the support and feedback provided by the FLSN. By far the most appreciated benefit of FLSN support, as reported by program directors, was the networking opportunities FLSN events provide.
- Giving priority in Year 5 and 6 to parenting education and PCILA, the FLSN focused one mandatory training each year on these components, and addressed one or the other during more than a fourth of their grantee site visits. Support in these components was highly rated by program directors, and reported grantee needs in each area were somewhat lower by Year 6.
- FLSN staff identified ECE as the component with the most room for improvement and therefore focused one of their mandatory trainings each year on ECE. Less attention was given to this component during the FLSN's customized technical assistance site visits though.
- Compared to other components, support from the FLSN in the area of adult education was not rated as highly by program directors, though reported needs in this area were also not very great.
- According to summaries of FLSN site visit notes, although FLSN staff discussed issues related to quality improvement during the majority of visits, time spent during visits was focused more on administrative issues, such as developing and documenting program policies and discussing data entry procedures..
- The FLSN provided two training opportunities on integration, and overall support from the FLSN on integration was rated highly by program directors; however, according to the Year 5 site notes, component integration was one of the areas addressed *least* frequently during customized technical assistance site visits, and grantee reports of their needs in this area remained high – and even appeared to increase – from Year 5 to Year 6.
- Program directors reported facing significant challenges in fundraising, and identified achieving fiscal sustainability as a major area of need. To address this, the FLSN offered two optional trainings related to sustainability; however, only 1 percent of the needs addressed during site visits concerned fundraising or sustainability in Year 5, and compared to other topics, grantees were less positive about FLSN help in this area overall.

Outcomes associated with FLSN support

In addition to considering grantee perceptions of impact, we examined changes in grantee program quality characteristics from Year 5 to Year 6 and assessed the relationship between these changes and the level of support received from the FLSN in Year 5. In doing so, we found that there are several aspects of program quality that showed greater growth among grantee programs that received more technical assistance site visits from the FLSN.

- We observed an overall decline in grantee reports of their needs for additional support from Year 5 to Year 6, suggesting that grantees were feeling more confident about the quality of their programs in Year 6.
- We found possible evidence of the impact of the FLSN's emphasis on discussions about administrative policies and procedures with grantees during site visits. The number of FLSN

visits was associated with greater reported use of formal policies and procedures (such as having written job descriptions and policies for documenting and following up on referrals) among grantees.

- Consistent with FLSN emphasis on parenting education and PCILA, we also found some changes in parenting education practices related to FLSN support. Specifically, the number of FLSN site visits grantees received was positively associated with changes in parenting education teachers' reports of their focus on topics related to parents' ability to support their children's learning.
- Grantee program directors rated the FLSN's support in the area of ECE as being relatively useful, and we found statistically significant positive relationships between the number of site visits grantees received and changes in three aspects of ECE component quality: teachers' reported use of formal lesson plans, use of curriculum guidelines, and focus on language and literacy skill development in the classroom.

Recommendations

Based on the findings described above (as well as additional findings described in more detail in the full report), we developed a series of recommendations to support grantee program improvement. A partial list of these recommendations is presented below.

Adult education

1. The FLSN should consider providing (or helping to identify) training opportunities for adult education teachers that address effective instructional strategies for the family literacy population.
2. Programs should evaluate the availability of resources for the adult education classroom and explore ways to enhance the quality of the classroom environment and teachers' access to adequate learning materials and resources where needed.

Parenting education and PCILA

3. Programs should continue to offer opportunities in parenting education classes for parents to share their experiences and discuss issues with the instructor as well as with a group of their peers.
4. Programs should continue to encourage parents to read to their children and talk about what they are reading – pointing out pictures, asking children to count or label objects, or talking about what just happened in the story, for example. But they should also encourage parents to develop their children's concept development and critical thinking skills and enhance their comprehension by going beyond the literal content of the book to engage in higher-level talk – for example, asking children to make predictions, evaluate the story, or make connections to their own experiences.
5. Programs should look for ways to enhance the availability of materials and resources for their parenting and PCILA components, especially by ensuring that parents have the books they need to support their learning and that PCILA classrooms have the space and materials for all parent-child pairs to fully engage in learning activities.

Early childhood education (ECE)

6. The FLSN should continue to support grantee program improvement in the area of ECE and should increase technical assistance attention given to this component during site visits.
7. To enhance teacher-child interactions and support scaffolding of children's learning, the FLSN should consider offering training to provide teachers with strategies for modeling language, expanding on children's responses, scaffolding their learning, and fostering concept development and higher-order thinking skills. The CLASS manual and training videos could be used to support a training and technical assistance initiative in these areas.
8. Although the relative attention to language and literacy activities appears to have increased since Years 2 and 3, more emphasis on these activities, especially going beyond reading to children to address phonological awareness and the development of writing awareness and skills, is warranted.
9. Given the wide variation in ECERS-E scores, the FLSN should consider targeting its technical assistance to grantees that have a particular need for creating more literacy-rich environments and experiences for children.

Component integration

10. The FLSN should expand its focus on component integration, assessing the level of integration among grantee programs and providing direct technical assistance to help individual grantees enhance this aspect of their programs – perhaps even incorporating this into FLSN staff's observation work at grantee sites.
11. The FLSN should consider providing additional training opportunities (such as the Foundations in Family Literacy training) or materials (for staff in partner agencies unable to attend trainings) for:
 - adult education teachers who might be new to family literacy in order to strengthen their understanding of the goals of family literacy, to facilitate integration, and to provide ideas for addressing the unique needs of family literacy parents;
 - parenting education and PCILA teachers to enhance the integration of these two components with the other components and with each other; and
 - ECE teachers to support integration with the other components, especially with parenting and adult education.

Other aspects of program leadership and administration

12. Especially given budget cuts, the funding match, and the Initiative's anticipated "sunsetting" in 2010, the FLSN should increase its focus on sustainability support for grantees. FLSN staff should work with grantees to review their sustainability plans and provide specific guidance during technical assistance site visits, as well as provide targeted networking opportunities for grantees to share promising approaches and funding sources for program sustainability.
13. The FLSN should continue to reinforce the need for grantees to have policies and procedures in place to guide their practice, but FLSN staff should increase their focus on quality improvement in the four component areas.

14. Although the FLSN should continue to encourage and support grantees' use of data for program improvement, time spent on the details of data collection and data entry during on-site technical assistance should be reduced at this stage of the Initiative, so that more attention can be given to program quality improvement. The FLSN should consider ways to revise its data guidance documents to simplify them and make them comprehensive enough to replace some of the one-on-one discussions about data collection details.

Next Steps

The First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative has been supporting children's learning and development, parents' progress toward their adult learning goals, parents' capacity to support their children's learning, and, ultimately, family literacy and self sufficiency over the past six years. In 2010, it is anticipated that the Initiative will "sunset" – or at least a decision about coming to a close will be made by the Commission. In recognition of the Initiative's longevity and in anticipation of the upcoming Commission decision, the evaluation is taking several new directions in the final two years. First, we will take a *retrospective* look at the Initiative. This will involve stepping back and taking a broader perspective on quality and outcomes, analyzing in greater depth data collected over the past six years. Building on the findings presented in this report, we plan to examine patterns of change in the quality of family literacy services as well as in child and family outcomes over a longer period of time. We will also examine best practices for service delivery, including successful component integration and long-term sustainability, and follow up on barriers and facilitating factors related to achieving "model" (or exemplary) program status – the original goal of the Initiative.

Second, we will take a *prospective* look at the Initiative – exploring outcomes for parents and children that endure long after families leave the programs. We will conduct a follow-up study of Initiative alumni – parents who graduated (or exited) from the grantee programs – to explore their continued use of positive parenting practices and their involvement in and support for their children's education. We will also conduct an elementary school follow-up feasibility study to examine children's outcomes in kindergarten and beyond, comparing outcomes for children who participated in family literacy programs to a demographically matched comparison sample of children who did not participate in these programs.

Together, these two approaches to exploring longer-range outcomes – for families and programs alike – will enable the evaluation to characterize the Initiative's history as well as its legacy.