This executive summary provides an overview of the evaluation of the first year of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative (June 2002 – May 2003). In the following pages, we describe the Initiative itself, the evaluation design, preliminary findings—or emerging themes—and next steps for the evaluation. A full report is also available.

Overview of the Initiative

As part of First 5 LA’s 1999-2000 strategic plan, $13 million was allocated to launch a comprehensive Family Literacy Initiative. The Initiative funds three interrelated parts:

1. **Family Literacy Program Grantees** – Three-year grants were awarded to 15 agencies in Los Angeles County that operate four-component family literacy programs for the purpose of expanding or enhancing their family literacy services. Each of these programs must incorporate:
   - intergenerational activities between parents and children that foster learning and appropriate social and emotional development (often referred to as parent and child together (PACT) time);
   - parenting education and training to enable families to provide nurturing and stimulating environments for children;
   - parent literacy and academic training that promotes economic self-sufficiency; and
   - early childhood education (ECE) that prepares children from birth to 5 years to succeed in school and in life.

2. **Training and Technical Assistance** – Three years of funding supports the development and operation of the Family Literacy Support Network (FLSN). A collaboration between the Los Angeles County Office of Education (LACOE), the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD), and several consulting agencies, the FLSN is charged with:
   - improving the quality of family literacy services in LA County by developing the 15 grantees into exemplary programs through training and technical assistance;
   - expanding the number of four-component family literacy programs throughout LA County through outreach activities;
   - advocating for program enhancement, replication, and sustainability; and
   - developing its own infrastructure so that it can sustain its services to programs serving families with children aged birth to five.

3. **External Evaluation** – A four-year independent evaluation of the implementation and impacts of the Initiative—the expanded or enhanced family literacy programs as well as the FLSN—is also being conducted. The study addresses process, outcome, and policy-relevant research and evaluation questions and is intended to help First 5 LA learn about the most promising family literacy program models so they can be replicated throughout Los Angeles County and serve as “teaching sites” for future investments.

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1 These dates correspond to the grantee contract year. However, data collected on FLSN activities through September 2003 are also incorporated here.

2 For a copy of the complete report, please contact Katie Fallin at First 5 LA at 213-482-9489.
Approach to the Evaluation

In October 2002, the American Institutes for Research (AIR) and the Center for Improving Child Care Quality at the University of California at Los Angeles (UCLA) were selected to conduct an evaluation of the implementation of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative and its impact on children birth to five and their families in LA County. The evaluation is both formative (i.e., interim findings are reported on an annual basis in order to enhance implementation and program results) and summative (i.e., program impacts will be described at the end of three years of program implementation). The first year of the evaluation focused on addressing six key questions:

1. What is the range of family literacy program characteristics?
2. What were the successes and challenges in the implementation of the programs?
3. How have First 5 LA grants benefited family literacy programs?
4. What is the range of activities in which the FLSN has engaged?
5. What were the successes and challenges in the implementation of the FLSN?
6. What were parents’ perspectives on the early impacts of the programs?

Theory of Change

To guide the evaluation, the AIR/UCLA team, in consultation with First 5 LA, the FLSN, and the grantees, developed a theory of change for the Family Literacy Initiative. This model, depicted in Exhibit 1, illustrates the relationships between the various inputs (e.g., funding), outputs (e.g., technical assistance, family literacy program components), outcomes (e.g., child outcomes, program outcomes), and anticipated long-term results of the Initiative. Identifying the various components that comprise the Initiative and the expected linkages between them provides a framework through which the components and the relationships among them can be evaluated.

Exhibit 1. Overview of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative Theory of Change
Data Collection and Analysis

In order to become more familiar with the Initiative, the grantees, and the FLSN, and to assess early implementation and impacts, the evaluation team collected data through three primary research activities in Year 1:

1. Site visits to all 15 grantees in May of 2003, including:
   - observations of PACT time, ECE classes, parenting education classes, and adult education classes;
   - interviews with program directors and executive directors;
   - focus groups with program staff, including teachers from each of the four components (i.e., PACT time, ECE, parenting education, and adult education teachers); and
   - focus groups with adult participants.

2. Compilation of data and reports submitted to First 5 LA by the FLSN and the grantees as part of their grant requirements (e.g., grantee planning phase reports, performance plans, and year-end reports; FLSN quarterly reports, calendars, and Scope of Work).

3. Interviews with First 5 LA staff, a Commissioner, FLSN staff, and family literacy experts to obtain contextual information on the Initiative and the FLSN’s activities.

Data collected from these activities were summarized and analyzed. Through this analysis, a set of common themes emerged. These “emerging themes,” or preliminary findings, suggest areas for further exploration and specification in Year 2 and are described below.

Emerging Themes from Year 1

In this section, we highlight the emerging themes that address each of the key research questions covered in Year 1. Where findings are quantified, it is important to note that the number of responses reported represents the frequency with which topics were raised independently by respondents during structured interviews. It is possible that these issues would have been reported by others had we explicitly asked about them. As we move into the second year of data collection, these themes will be examined in greater depth to determine the extent to which they prove to be robust findings over time and across grantees.

What is the range of family literacy program characteristics?

To present a single profile of the “typical” First 5 LA family literacy grantee or family literacy program would obscure the important fact that there is substantial variability across grantees. There is no typical family literacy program. Grantees vary in terms of their lead agency, location, years of experience, and many other characteristics. The grantees are divided fairly equally between those whose lead agency is a school district and those affiliated with a community-based organization (CBO). Grantees are distributed throughout most Los Angeles County service planning areas (SPAs). Nine programs are located on elementary or adult school campuses; the other six offer services out of church facilities, private buildings, and community centers.

Though each of the 15 Family Literacy Initiative grantees is unique, they have the shared objective of providing services to families with children birth to five in the form of four-component family literacy programs. Program goals identified by grantee staff center around four common ideas: 1) to promote children’s learning and help them become ready for school, 2) to help parents see that they are their child’s first and most important teacher—their child’s advocate and partner in learning, 3) to help parents develop healthy relationships with their children, and 4) to improve adult literacy,
particularly English language skills. In support of these goals, grantees offered a variety of program services to families in their communities in Year 1.

- **All programs provided ECE services to support preschoolers and, in eight programs, infants and toddlers in their cognitive, social-emotional, and physical development.**

- **PACT time was a relatively new component for some grantees and appeared to be the most variable across grantees.**

- **Parenting education activities ranged from staff debriefing with parents about PACT time to classes that provide information on topics such as discipline, communication, and the importance of parent-child interactive play.**

- **All of the grantee programs provided English as a Second Language (ESL) instruction for parents; five also offered Adult Basic Education (ABE) classes and five offered General Educational Development (GED) classes.**

- **In addition to the four components, most grantees offered supplementary family support services to family literacy participants, such as mental health services or nutrition workshops.**

It is the integration of family literacy services that makes family literacy programs unique and, in theory, more effective than programs that offer one or more service components (i.e., adult education, early childhood education, parent education, etc.) that are not part of a comprehensive, integrated, and holistic set of services. In Year 1, we observed substantial variation in both the level of integration and the strategies that programs used to accomplish integration, with adult education the least likely component to be integrated with the other three program components.

- **Staff at approximately half of the programs indicated that they used common curricular themes or topics as a way of integrating the four components.**

These programs typically selected a theme for a particular week or month and then planned activities around that theme that could be incorporated into the curriculum for two or more program components. For example, one program selected an aquatic theme for one month. For the ECE component, children were learning about fish and eating fish-shaped snacks. In ESL classes, parents did a unit on going to the beach, learning vocabulary that would enable them to talk with their children in English about what they were learning. “The hope is that with knowledge and information they get in other classes,” explained the parenting education teacher, “that parents will be able to discuss it with their kids at home.”

- **Though common planning time for staff took place at a few grantee sites, staff from many of the programs reported that they would like to do more shared planning across program components.**

Several programs set aside time each day or each week for staff from each of the four components to engage in planning activities and facilitate integration. With this kind of planning, “everyone knows what everyone is doing,” explained one program director.

**What were the successes and challenges in the implementation of the programs?**

Grantees made great strides this year, providing much-needed services to numerous families in their family literacy programs. A number of factors were identified by grantees as major contributors to their successes. For many programs, First 5 LA funds enabled them to fill a gap in their program’s services, increase the number of families served, or address an important community need. The majority of programs identified the hard work and dedication of their staff as their greatest strength. One program’s executive director explained, “If [the teachers and coordinators] didn’t show the love
and concern they show towards parents and kids, the parents wouldn’t return and the kids wouldn’t want to be there either.”

In the course of implementing their four-component family literacy programs, grantees encountered a variety of challenges that made full implementation of their programs more difficult. These challenges involved meeting the multiple and complex needs among the families served, meeting the reporting needs of funders, coordinating with partners and collaborators, and allocating their limited resources.

- **One of the most frequently cited challenges to implementation was obtaining adequate and affordable space—reported by nine grantees.**

  This challenge often affected the number of families programs were able to serve and the range and quality of services that could be offered. One program director reported that due to limited space, they are unable to serve the families on their long waiting list. Another program director mentioned that her biggest challenge is serving children birth to three since they do not have the appropriate facilities.

- **Although many programs counted their staff as one of their greatest assets, 10 of the 15 programs reported challenges related to hiring and retaining adequate staff and integrating new staff into existing programs.**

  Many programs grew in size as a result of their First 5 LA grant, and finding and supporting new staff to meet the needs of their growing programs posed challenges for a majority of programs. One program director reported that her staff “nearly double[d]” in size with their First 5 LA grant.

- **Most grantees reported that adult education was the most difficult component to integrate.**

  Partnering with adult schools that had their own curriculum and numerous non-family literacy program participants contributed to the challenge of integrating adult education with the other three program components.

  Although many programs would like to link adult education and early childhood curricula, one program director reported that they “need to be sensitive that ESL teachers can’t revise their entire curriculum in order to be aligned with what is happening in the preschool classroom.” Another program director explained that integration is difficult and “not a top priority for adult school teachers” because “there are many adults at the school who aren’t family literacy participants.”

- **More grantee programs reported struggling with retaining program participants than with recruiting them.**

  Recruitment was not identified by program staff as a major obstacle to program implementation, and six programs even had waiting lists. For those programs that needed to recruit new families, word-of-mouth was the most commonly cited recruitment strategy.

  On the other hand, seven of the 15 grantees discussed their experiences related to retention of participants in the programs. Staff reported that some parents had difficulty meeting all of the requirements of the four-component program; others had to leave the program because of job responsibilities or changes in family circumstances. Program staff identified a number of factors that promoted retention among participants, however, including a supportive staff, the availability of infant/toddler child care, and the social network that developed among parents. “Parents connect with other parents and stay for years because of this,” explained one staff member.

- **Barriers to family literacy participation included lack of transportation, lack of child care for particular ages of children not served by the program, employment commitments, and family obligations.**
Staff at multiple sites explained that a lack of affordable child care forced many parents with younger children to bring their infants or toddlers with them to adult education and parenting classes. In some cases, parents with infants or toddlers were unable to attend at all. In addition, for parents who work during regular business hours, participating in family literacy services can be a significant challenge, and, as a result, most programs enrolled primarily mothers, many of whom are not employed outside of the home.

While grantees faced a number of challenges, program staff has been creative and persistent in responding to those challenges. In many cases solutions were reached without causing delays or disruptions in program implementation.

**How have First 5 LA grants benefited family literacy programs?**

The 15 First 5 LA family literacy programs were awarded grants ranging from $339,000 to $501,000 and averaging $487,497 per grantee, to be used to expand or enhance their programs over three years.

- The 15 grantees expanded or enhanced their family literacy programs in a variety of ways, including adding new services such as computer or GED classes, increasing the number of families served, adding evening classes and activities to reach working parents, adding infant and toddler classes, and upgrading facilities and materials.

All 15 programs used First 5 LA funds to hire additional family literacy staff or to increase the hours of existing staff. By increasing staff hours, programs were able to expand the number of families they served by offering additional ESL and ECE classes, offer new evening programs to reach working parents, or offer classes and care for infants and toddlers to reach more parents as well as more children. Grantees also enhanced program services by offering new courses such as GED or computer classes, providing outreach to families, and by enhancing existing classes, such as adding additional levels of ESL instruction. Staff at three sites indicated that by hiring a family literacy coordinator, increasing a coordinator’s hours, or paying for staff planning time, program staff increased the level of integration across all four components.

In addition to using funds to increase personnel hours, all programs used First 5 LA funds on non-personnel expenditures such as additional classroom space, computers, library materials, playground equipment, and instructional materials.

Grantee staff identified a number of benefits resulting from their access to First 5 LA funds, such as First 5 LA’s flexibility regarding the ways that funds could be used. For one program, one of the greatest benefits of First 5 LA funds was the independence it allowed them from their school district. “The First 5 connection has been excellent,” explained another program director, and “the Network has been fantastic . . . a very big resource.”

**What is the range of activities in which the FLSN has engaged?**

Intended as a key support for grantees, the FLSN initiated a variety of activities in Year 1. In addition to start-up activities, such as putting staff in place and building an infrastructure across multiple organizations, FLSN staff provided services to grantees and performed activities related to outreach, advocacy, and sustainability.

- Much of the FLSN’s staff time and effort in Year 1 was devoted to establishing its infrastructure, defining the roles of staff and collaborators, and providing staff development experiences for the FLSN team—laying the foundation for sustainable service delivery.

Staff from LACOE and LAUSD comprise the core of the FLSN, supported by three consulting organizations: the National Center for Family Literacy, Appel & Associates, and
Perry & Associates. Defining roles for each of these contributors was a major focus in Year 1 and was accomplished, in part, through the FLSN leadership team, which includes staff from each of these organizations and meets monthly to guide the work of the FLSN.

- **The primary focus of FLSN activities in Year 1 was on grantee training and technical assistance, with particular attention given to supporting grantees in developing their performance plans.**

  Through their performance plans, grantees identified their own needs, set objectives within each of the four family literacy component areas, and identified resources and supports needed. Performance plans provide a snapshot of grantee status and then evolve as progress is made and needs change. “We need to know where we are and where we’re going,” explained one FLSN team member, and the performance plans help FLSN and grantees to do this together.

- **Addressing a primary need of the grantees (as identified by the FLSN during Year 1), the FLSN developed and provided training on data collection tools that grantees need to use to meet the requirements of First 5 LA and support program improvement.**

  Through training and technical assistance, the FLSN helped grantees navigate their way through the First 5 LA requirements and improve their data management strategies for meeting ongoing reporting needs and supporting program improvements and sustainability. All grantees implemented procedures for gathering common participant information upon enrollment, tracking participant attendance by program component, and developing performance plans to fulfill data reporting requirements and support program improvement.

### What were the successes and challenges in the implementation of the FLSN?

In Year 1, the FLSN had numerous accomplishments. For example, they developed a cross-agency staff and an infrastructure to guide their work throughout the next two years of their grant and beyond. They developed relationships with 15 grantees and provided training and support to them throughout the year. All 15 grantees submitted performance plans, planning phase reports, and year-end reports to First 5 LA under the guidance of the FLSN. The FLSN supported the training of nine individuals (two from the FLSN staff) to become certified family literacy trainers, increasing the number of certified trainers in California from one to 10. But, as with any new organization, the first year was not without its challenges.

- **The greatest challenge faced by the FLSN in Year 1 was recovering from the delayed start of its contract, which came three months after the grantees had received their grants, leaving FLSN staff feeling behind schedule.**

  Originally, separate proposals were submitted by LACOE and LAUSD. After reviewing these separate proposals and determining each had unique merits and complementary strengths, First 5 LA encouraged the two organizations to collaborate and submit a joint proposal. In addition, First 5 LA raised the award amount and asked that the scope of the proposed FLSN activities be extended to provide assistance to non-grantees as well. These changes caused the FLSN to start later than planned. “Starting up late was a challenge,” explained one FLSN staff member. “The minute they let the horses out of the gate, we had to get started working on deliverables. So we had to backtrack to get to know the grantees, find out where they were before the Initiative, etcetera.”

- **Due to the delayed start and initial needs to build their infrastructure and get to know the grantees, the FLSN staff reported having less time available for individualized needs assessment and direct and tailored services to the grantees. They focused instead on working with grantees in group or regional settings to set up assessment and data collection systems.**
Over time, needs identified in grantee performance plans have been (and will continue to be) augmented with needs identified by FLSN staff and used to develop grantee action plans, which, according to FLSN staff, consist of “a prescription for how to address the needs stated in their performance plans.” This process is in the early stages, however. “An important next step is to put it all together,” explained one FLSN staff member.

- *The absence of an electronic tracking system meant that documenting the activities of the FLSN and its contacts with grantees has been more difficult.*

FLSN staff reported that documenting their activities during Year 1 was challenging at times, since they have not had an electronic system in place for recording their activities and interactions with grantees. (An online system is being developed by First 5 LA for use across initiatives, but it has not been available in Year 1.) The absence of this system also made it difficult to accurately depict the level of service that has been provided to the grantees in this report.

Although the FLSN has not had a full year of focused activity directed at addressing the needs of the grantees, *grantee perceptions of the FLSN were quite positive in Year 1.*

- *Program directors—who had the most contact with FLSN staff in Year 1—reported having a clear understanding of the role of the FLSN: to provide training and support.*

  “They’re the support system,” one program director explained. “They are conveyors of information.”

- *Program directors were appreciative of FLSN services and were overwhelmingly positive in their assessments of their support.*

Training provided to the grantees enabled them to create and implement individualized performance plans and collect the data required by First 5 LA. One program director stated that, “[FLSN staff] are extremely helpful and are only a phone call away. Doing the performance plans has helped me to grow, and the Network has helped with that.”

- *A few grantees expressed interest in more (and more convenient) support, and having that support more closely aligned to their individual needs.*

Two program directors also mentioned that increased opportunities for grantees to interact with each other—so that veteran programs could share their expertise and newer programs could gather ideas—would be appreciated.

**What were parents’ perspectives on the early impacts of the programs?**

In the first year of their First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative grants, the 15 grantees served numerous families, most of whom were low-income Hispanic or Latino families with limited English. Although concrete data on program impacts (from assessments) will not be available until Year 2, qualitative data from focus groups with parents were used to explore *self-reported impacts.* Overwhelmingly, parents reported that they and their children benefited from their involvement in the family literacy programs.

- *The majority of parents in focus groups stated that, as a result of participating in First 5 LA family literacy programs, they learned to provide better care and learning opportunities for their children, improved their English skills, increased their self-confidence, acquired a support network, and/or spent more quality time with their children.*

Parents noted that they learned the importance of talking with their children and spending time together. One parent commented, “Sometimes when they are small we don’t think that we need to talk with them, but we have learned they need us to talk to them all the time.” The
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vast majority of parents also reported that they learned how to be a teacher to their children, reading stories to their children and asking them questions to encourage discussion.

One mother said that as a result of her ESL classes, she is finally able to communicate with her children’s teachers during parent-teacher conferences. Others said that they practice English with their children at home and have begun reading to their children in English.

Another parent reported benefiting from the sharing that goes on during parenting class. “It’s nice to share the experiences so you know that other parents have the same issues and you are not alone,” she explained, “and together you can find a solution.”

- The majority of parents interviewed stated that since enrolling in First 5 LA family literacy programs, their children have learned skills that will prepare them for school, become more social and independent, and increased their self-esteem.

Parents described how their children have learned about colors, numbers, the alphabet, songs and rhymes, art, and computers. In one program, several parents had children in first and second grade who had previously participated in the program. These parents explained that their older children are more advanced than their peers who did not participate in the program. “It really helps to get children ready for school,” a parent stated.

Another parent noticed that during PACT time, “kids feel important that their moms are helping.”

Although most parents had very positive comments about their family literacy program, some had suggestions for program improvements as well.

- Parents’ suggestions for program improvement included altering the length and scheduling of program services to better meet the needs of families, and upgrading of facilities and materials.

- Parents in four programs suggested increasing the number of ESL classes or instructors to serve parents with differing levels of English proficiency.

Next Steps: Year 2 Evaluation Activities

The emerging themes from our Year 1 data suggest further avenues for exploration in Year 2. The evaluation team will again conduct site visits to grantee program sites, review documents and data submitted by grantees and the FLSN to First 5 LA (including new data submitted through the online reporting system), and conduct interviews with a variety of stakeholders, including FLSN staff. In addition, several new data collection activities will be introduced:

1. Program staff surveys will be administered to program directors and program instructors in the spring of 2004 to collect information on a variety of topics (including grantee activities, staff participation in FLSN activities, and staffing structures), and to probe more systematically those issues related to the emerging themes from Year 1.

2. Observations of FLSN meetings and activities will be conducted to understand the nature of the services that the FLSN provides as well as their evolving strategies for program-level data tracking and service delivery.

3. Child outcomes will be assessed for a subsample of children randomly selected to participate in the child outcomes study, which includes direct assessments of children, observation of children in their classrooms, parent interviews, and surveys of ECE or kindergarten teachers. Two cohorts of children will be followed through their kindergarten year to assess the impacts of family literacy program participation on children over time.
4. **Outcome data collected by grantees** will be reviewed and analyzed. These data include:
   - data on children’s development from the Desired Results Developmental Profiles (DRDP);
   - adult reading performance data from the Comprehensive Adult Student Assessment System (CASAS) reading assessment;
   - behavioral indicators of adult learning and family stability from the Participant Profile Form; and
   - data on adults’ parenting knowledge and skills from the California Even Start Performance Information and Reporting System (CA-ESPIRS).

4. **Additional surveys and/or short interviews with non-grantees** who have participated in FLSN activities will be administered to assess FLSN impacts beyond the 15 grantees receiving First 5 LA funds.

**Conclusion**

Grantees’ implementation of the First 5 LA Family Literacy Initiative has encompassed a range of activities, all of which have included some degree of expansion and/or growth, new reporting requirements, and building of new relationships with the FLSN and in some cases, other community agencies. Grantees have been bolstered by the support of the FLSN, which has provided assistance and leadership for grantees in developing and implementing new program performance plans. At the same time as they were providing support to the 15 new grantees, the FLSN succeeded in creating its own infrastructure to enable ongoing delivery of its core service areas, including technical assistance and training, outreach, advocacy, and sustainability.

The emerging themes described in this report represent findings from preliminary data collection activities conducted by the evaluation team, in addition to documents and reports produced by grantees and the FLSN. As First 5 LA data systems linking all of the grantees with the FLSN are implemented over the coming months, a rich database will become available to examine in greater depth the activities and impacts of the Family Literacy Initiative. In addition, the AIR/UCLA evaluation team will be augmenting local data with a focused child outcomes study, periodic site visits, surveys, and interviews. The evaluation team will continue to revisit the emerging themes presented in this report in subsequent years to determine the extent to which they can be substantiated through the qualitative and quantitative data to be collected over time. In addition, as new data are collected, more fine-grained analyses will be possible, and new themes and findings will be addressed.