

CHAPTER 5:
ESTABLISHING CONNECTIONS BETWEEN EVALUATION
AND PROGRAM IMPROVEMENT

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SPEARHEADED BY LEADERS of the professional, academic, and business communities, a coalition of educators and civic leaders in Los Angeles County came together to take up the challenge offered by Walter Annenberg. In December 1994 the Annenberg Foundation awarded \$53 million to the Los Angeles Annenberg Metropolitan Project (LAAMP) to support school reform across several school districts in Los Angeles County, including the Los Angeles Unified School District. The Annenberg award required that LAAMP raise an additional \$53 million in public and private matching funds.

CONTEXT AND HISTORY

LAAMP set out to accelerate school reform by building on existing district, community, and school efforts, including the reform efforts of the Los Angeles Educational Alliance for Restructuring (LEARN).

LAAMP articulated a theory of action with seven Action Principles¹ for effective learning environments:

1. stable learning communities of intimate scale;
2. a broad, intellectually challenging curriculum;

3. inclusiveness among parents and stakeholders;
4. decentralization of control of resources and decision making;
5. linking professional development to the creation of stable learning communities;
6. reallocation of professional time in schools and families of schools in ways that make it possible for teachers to engage in ongoing conversations about curriculum, pedagogy, standards, and the students themselves; and
7. public accountability.

LAAMP created support organizations known as School Families, designed to link schools to each other more closely than they were in the existing district structure. School Families, on average, consisted of six elementary schools, one or two middle schools, and one high school in the same feeder pattern and geographic area. In all, LAAMP funded twenty-eight K–12 School Families involving 252 schools and about 200,000 students in fourteen school districts. By strengthening articulation across elementary, middle, and high schools and by serving students K–12, LAAMP's leaders hoped that the results of their efforts would remain part of the schools' operations when the Annenberg funding cycle ended.

1. See Goldschmidt (2002) and Gribbons et al. (1999) for details on these principles.

Believing in public accountability, LAAMP emphasized basing decisions on data, using evaluation results, and assessing the effectiveness of School Families' reform efforts by their ability to improve student achievement. According to Kerchner et al. (2000), LAAMP's emphasis on accountability dramatically changed the context of education reform in Los Angeles.

For a comprehensive evaluation, LAAMP contracted with the Los Angeles Consortium for Evaluation (LACE), a collaborative effort among researchers at the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at the University of California at Los Angeles; the University of Southern California's Center on Educational Governance; and the Claremont Graduate School University. Over the five years of the contract, LACE engaged in several studies, ranging from large-scale, quantitative inquiries into implementation and impact to more fine-grained case studies of particular LAAMP focus areas.

This chapter describes how an external program evaluation team that headed up one of the several comprehensive evaluation studies worked hand-in-hand with program staff and others seeking to build and improve one program within LAAMP, Parents as Learning Partners (PLP). The evaluation events reflected the LAAMP philosophy of accountability. They were also shaped, in part, by the participation of the Weingart Foundation, which made a major grant to LAAMP for parent involvement. The Weingart

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Foundation required separate external evaluations of the two initiatives it supported: PLP and Design for Excellence: Linking Teaching and Achievement (DELTA), an initiative in teacher professional development. PLP and DELTA were somewhat autonomous within the LACE evaluation because they had a direct funding stream and clients to whom they reported.

This chapter first provides an overview of the PLP program and its external evaluation. Next, it reviews the chronology of events to demonstrate how a dynamic relationship among the program, the funder, and the external evaluation team was coupled with keen insight on the part of the program coordinators and program staff to build successful relationships. It concludes with lessons learned.

OVERVIEW OF THE PROGRAM AND THE EVALUATION

The Parents as Learning Partners Initiative

Building on research (Epstein 1995) that identified six types of parental involvement – parenting, volunteering, learning at home, decision making, communication, and collaborating with the community – the Parents as Learning Partners initiative recognized parents as vital participants in the academic lives of their children. The PLP theory of action held that students are more likely to succeed in school when parents and teachers

- have a common sense of shared responsibilities and expectations for students' learning;
- help each other provide learning experiences;
- establish and maintain two-way communication.

This equal partnership between parents and teachers would be apparent in – and measurable by – changes in parents' and teachers' behaviors, perceptions, and attitudes. In turn, these changes would provide a supportive and consistent learning environment for children. As a result, children would develop better attendance, pay more attention to their studies, and form better homework habits, ultimately leading to improved grades and achievement.

Thus, PLP's expansive vision encompassed changes in schools, teachers, parents, and students. The program sought these changes through three types of activities:

- parent education on how to communicate with teachers, assess student work, and provide academic support at home;
- professional development for teachers on ways to involve parents in the classroom, effective outreach efforts, home-learning activities, and volunteer recruitment strategies;
- school services to increase the frequency and quality of parental involvement, such as installing voice mail for parent-teacher communication and establishing lending libraries to encourage parent-child reading.

Within this framework, each School Family and school established specific goals. Some goals were unique, such as expanding child-care services. Many objectives were similar, such as increasing the number, type, and quality of parent workshops.

The External Evaluation Design

The PLP evaluation was one of several LAAMP studies conducted as part of the comprehensive evaluation through the National Center for Research on Evaluation, Standards, and Student Testing at UCLA. The PLP evaluation was unique in its structure at UCLA because it was completely autonomous from the other LAAMP studies. The PLP evaluation had its own funding stream, was designed and run independently by the senior researcher, had its own reporting structure, reported independently to LAAMP, and was treated as a separate project. The only overlap was that it was reviewed internally by the same UCLA reviewer/editor. This independence was a by-product of the fact that the PLP evaluation had its own funding stream and its own independent senior researcher/principal investigator. As a result, the PLP evaluation took a different, more integrated approach than the other LAAMP studies.

Based on the approach of the senior researcher of the evaluation team and the willingness of the PLP director, the evaluation was integrated early on into program development and implementation. A differ-

The Parents as Learning Partners initiative recognized parents as vital participants in the academic lives of their children.

entiated set of questions allowed the evaluation team to look at the behaviors and attitudes of teachers and parents as students progressed through school. The PLP evaluation tracked a random sample of parent-child pairs from second to fifth grade in program and comparison schools in two of the LAAMP school districts, the Long Beach Unified School District and the Los Angeles Unified School District. A multiyear perspective was well suited to the theory behind the program, which held that a school-family partnership would help students' progress over more than a single year.

In the first year (1997–1998), the evaluation focused on implementation and operation:

- Where have the School Families started out?
- What professional development and parent education have School Families implemented/offered that target parent involvement?

In subsequent years, the evaluation focused on impact:

- What are the effects of PLP on teachers?
- What is the impact of PLP activities on parents?
- What is the effect of PLP on students' behaviors and achievement?
- Which family or school processes that affect achievement are enhanced by the parent involvement program?

Integrating the district and school staff at the design stage established key rapport with the schools, cluster leaders, and districts.

Using a rigorous design and triangulation of data, the analyses were based primarily on the comparison of PLP and non-PLP teachers, parents, or students. Regression analyses were also conducted using controls for teacher, classroom, parent, and student characteristics to investigate the influence of PLP on student achievement.

The care that went into designing the comparisons proved important in evaluating PLP impact. Six PLP schools – two from each School Family – were chosen with the help of the local district and program staff to represent the range of parent involvement efforts in the district and area. A comparison school was matched with each program school based on geographic area, parent involvement efforts, involvement in large-scale urban reform efforts, and student and teacher characteristics known from several extant data sources.²

Arrangements for obtaining and analyzing student-achievement data were negotiated separately with each district. In finding matched comparison schools, Long Beach Unified School District offered also to match the PLP and non-PLP schools on the basis of prior

2. These data sources included: parent involvement items from the local needs survey for teachers conducted in spring 1997; self-reported teacher demographics and teacher-reported student and classroom information from the same survey; school-level student information from the California Basic Education Data System; and school-level test scores on the district's nationally normed tests in reading and mathematics. Teacher and student demographics were compared for each program school against each potential match school.

student achievement; however, in the Los Angeles Unified School District this was not possible.

In the first year, a parent phone survey was conducted in program and comparison schools, selecting a random sample of parents of students in grades two through five. It was administered in seven languages: English, Spanish, Chinese, Vietnamese, Armenian, Russian, and Khmer. The telephone survey was readministered to the parents of the original random sample of second graders when those students were in third and fifth grade. In addition, teachers completed paper-and-pencil surveys when these students were in third and fifth grades – all ninety-five third-grade teachers in 1998–1999 and sixty-two fifth-grade teachers in 2000–2001.

With the encouragement of the Annenberg and Weingart foundations, the evaluation team believed that the evaluation should measure effects on student achievement. This support from the funders was crucial in legitimizing the evaluation team's access to achievement data and the resources needed to analyze those data.

Communication

Integrating the district and school staff in the very beginning of the evaluation, at the design stage, established key rapport with the schools, cluster leaders, and districts. Continuing to work with the district staff, cluster leaders, and principals, although time-consuming, built a base of understanding and support for the evaluation and the initiative that helped on many levels. This support grew gradually, fed by the positive response of teachers, principals, and midlevel district staff about the PLP program and the increasing awareness of the district and school staff that their efforts to partner with parents to support children's learning at home was not impossible and would help student's academic success. This support was nurtured and assisted by the PLP program staff and the evaluation team. Feedback to participants soon took on a life of its own as a powerful part of the initiative.

The PLP program staff also worked closely with the evaluation team. In fact, expecting to use the evaluation data in planning for each school year, program staff found it hard to tolerate even a two-month delay between data collection and reporting. As a result, preliminary evaluation findings were

often presented informally in regular meetings as staff finalized their plans for the upcoming year. Final reports followed and were presented to school staff, PLP staff, and the funder. These communication structures and relationships set the foundation for work that continues today as a result of PLP efforts.

Besides having the program, the evaluation, and the funder married to each other from the inception of the PLP initiative, the PLP program director further solidified this bond by setting up a Core Implementation Team (CIT). The CIT consisted of the funder, the program director, the external evaluation team, one representative from each funded School Family, and the district facilitator for each of the two districts involved in PLP. This team met monthly during the first year and then every other month, with meeting locations rotating to the home site of each member.

The CIT meetings provided an invaluable forum for everyone to roll up their sleeves, ask hard questions, and make things happen. The meetings were a place where the team worked through implementing every aspect of the program; discussed the key elements of the evaluation; organized the work of the schools and districts; updated each other about key events, challenges, findings, and necessary tasks; and focused everyone's efforts on student outcomes. Discussions ranged from events at the school sites and the inclusion or deletion of questions in the evaluation instruments to budgets and timelines and ways of improving the program based on findings. Many improvements to the program were made as a result of the CIT group looking at research results together and discussing implications.

Summary of Evaluation Findings

Over the five years of the Annenberg Challenge grant and the Weingart funding, PLP made progress at various levels (for more complete details, see Quigley 1999, 2000, 2002, forthcoming):

- Teachers and other school staff raised their level of awareness about the importance of parent involvement and set firmer goals.
- More teachers engaged in professional development targeted toward parent involvement and used voice mail.

- Schools continued to offer parent education, and parent satisfaction with the workshops increased.
- Parents contacted and visited their children's classrooms more often. More parents supported homework and reading regularly with their children at home. Parents reviewed children's homework more often and borrowed more education materials from the schools.
- Third-grade students in PLP schools in the Los Angeles Unified School District (LAUSD) scored 5.72 percentile points higher in reading and 4.81 percentile points higher in language arts on the Stanford Achievement Test, ninth edition (SAT-9), in 1998–1999 than students in non-PLP schools. This difference was found after controlling for student performance in reading or language arts, respectively, in the fall and for student ethnicity, income status, Title I status, Limited English Proficient status, third-grade class size, number of third-grade teachers, teachers' emergency credential status, parent education, and employment status of the household. (No differences were found in math scores.)

PLP appeared to influence LAUSD students' reading and language arts performance on the SAT-9 through quality of communication between teacher and parent; parents feeling comfortable at the school and being present on campus, not necessarily in the

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classroom; and parents providing reading support and general academic support and structure in the home.

Overall, PLP affected student academic achievement by improving the quality of interaction between parents and children in the home and through the quality (not quantity) of interaction and communication between parents and teachers. Importantly, these qualitative improvements were not captured in monitoring the amount of time a parent spent at the child's school or in the child's classroom (as is normally tracked by evaluations of parent involvement programs), but by measuring parent-child interactions in the home and parent-teacher interaction.

EVOLUTION OF THE INTEGRATED EVALUATION APPROACH

Three elements – a rigorous evaluation approach, school-site and macro-level team structures, and effective, multi-way lines of communication – were all integral to the success of the PLP program and have modeled an effective approach for program evaluation. This dynamic is best understood by looking in depth at a chronology of PLP's program development and evaluation.

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3. *Parents on Your Side* (Canter & Canter 1991) gives educators the skills to gain the support of parents and to follow a consistent approach to working with parents, particularly those of at-risk students.

Year 1 (1997–1998):

How to define and reach depth of program

The program and the evaluation got off the ground simultaneously, both beginning with planning. LAAMP and PLP first worked with schools to develop action plans and budgets. The plans varied in size, scope, and clarity. Although the Weingart Foundation was pleased with the plans, foundation representatives suggested at one of the first CIT meetings that the plans should take a longer view, focusing on the goals they intended to reach in five years, not just in the first year. This suggestion prompted the schools to realize they should work more closely together.

Schools, districts, and School Families spent time formulating content for parent and teacher education workshops. Different School Families drew on Joyce Epstein's (1995, 2000) materials and tips, as well as Lee and Marlene Canter's (1991) *Parents On Your Side*,³ but adapted the content of these workshops to fit their particular needs. Some schools and School Families also contracted with PLP-approved service providers for parent education workshops or outreach for events.

Funding flowed very slowly during the first year. As a result, schools and School Families had a difficult time implementing big-ticket or outsourced items, such as the lending libraries and voice mail systems.

In planning for the evaluation, the Weingart Foundation continually stressed the importance of linking student achievement to each school's or School Family's PLP efforts. The need to measure activities against intended goals was also emphasized in many conversations among CIT members, program staff, and district people.

Setting the stage for data collection, the evaluation team at UCLA selected the program and control schools, chose students at the schools through random selection, then designed and constructed the parent phone survey and interview protocols. Data were collected in school-site interviews in the fall and in the phone survey of parents of second through fifth graders in the spring. Demographic and academic performance data were also requested from the Long Beach and Los Angeles school districts.

At the end of the first school year, the evaluation team reported to the CIT on the question: Where have the School Families started out? Based on data

collected in interviews with principals and school parent coordinators at the program and comparison sites, the presentation stated that:

- It was a new concept for schools to dedicate formal professional development time to parent involvement.
- Parent involvement was seen as an add-on program and solely part of Title I.
- Few teachers were receiving instruction on how to involve parents in the academic programs of their children, even at schools with more developed parent involvement programs.
- Parent education workshops were focused, not on academics or communicating with your child's teacher/school, but on parenting skills.

This information spurred important conversation and reflection about the direction of the program. The CIT discussed how to build depth into the program and how to measure the achievement of its aims. The team realized that PLP had to reach a critical mass of parents and teachers by focusing on *academics*. Parents as well as teachers needed to be informed in order to have higher expectations for students. This would mean more and better outreach to attract parents into activities that would help them support their children's learning.

The Weingart Foundation emphasized that technical assistance funds were intended to build capacity for staff at all levels. Principals should take on more involvement and leadership in PLP. District administrators needed to be better informed and included in program operations. The funder also reiterated that, rather than replacing existing plans and activities, PLP was intended to strengthen them or to create innovative parent involvement activities consistent with goals formulated by each School Family.

During this meeting and subsequent meetings over the summer, it was decided to take the following steps in Year 2:

- In order to analyze program quality, depth of activities, and how activities linked to PLP goals, PLP would require self-evaluation plans from each School Family.

At the end of the first year, the team realized that PLP had to reach a critical mass of parents and teachers by focusing on academics.

- Implementation plans and budgets would be monitored at the school and Family levels.
- The CIT would develop a parent involvement rubric, adapted from Anne Henderson's work, for self-evaluation in conjunction with school-site visits to assess the depth of programs and activities. Schools would rate themselves as novice, apprentice, proficient, or distinguished. Matrices for each site would show the relationship of PLP to overall School Family plans.
- Teacher training was essential to prepare teachers to work with parents. Using *Parents on Your Side* as a model program, all teachers should be reached.
- PLP decided to send program staff, district PLP administrators, and school principals to the "Action Team" training by Joyce Epstein and to implement more of the National Network of Partnership Schools (NNPS) tools she had developed.
- Each district's PLP administrator would need to work closely with the PLP School Family's steering committee or core team in order to oversee PLP activities and promote their alignment with School Family Learning Plans. This meant attending all school-site meetings and CIT meetings.
- Parent mentors/ambassadors and community representatives needed clarification of their job descriptions, duties, and accountability. The funder also emphasized that PLP support of their time was intended for direct outreach to parents.

The internal evaluation early in the second year found that schools faced varying challenges and needs in implementing core elements of the PLP program.

- Outreach activities needed to be strengthened.
- Training for staff at all levels should build the leadership required to sustain programs.
- Data sharing and the communication of evaluation findings should be more widespread. By the end of the summer, the twelve evaluation sites across the three School Families received school-level reports from the evaluation team, known as the “Notes to Principals” report. These reports compared a school with other schools in the PLP Program and with a set of comparison schools chosen as controls. The report compared the schools with respect to PLP and parent involvement activities, plans for parent training and teacher professional development, and parents’ comments on how to improve parent involvement at the school.
- Presentation of evaluation findings to key stakeholders was deemed important for gaining and keeping buy-in as well as increasing the depth of the programs.

Year 2 (1998–1999):

How to engage all the needed players

In the second program year, an internal evaluation took responsibility for focusing on the implementation of the PLP program at all sites. The external evaluation would track impact on parents and teachers and the resulting changes in student behavior and achievement.

In the internal evaluation, PLP program staff conducted daylong site visits, interviewing all stakeholders (including parents, teachers, principals, parent ambassadors, teacher’s assistants, coordinators, and Action Teams) in focus groups that lasted from thirty minutes to an hour. In addition, the site-visit team reviewed such documentation as meeting agendas, parent workshop schedules, and sign-in sheets. The visits focused on two questions: What challenges is the school facing in creating school/home partnerships to improve academic achievement? What areas of need are common to all PLP schools, and what actions does the project staff need to take to meet the needs of the schools?

The internal evaluation found that schools faced varying challenges and needs in implementing core elements of the PLP program. Some schools did not have enough space to house a Parent Center to offer a large array of workshops. Others were unable to hire a parent ambassador, leaving teachers to shoulder the responsibility of outreach and PLP implementation.

The most common challenge was in implementing effective school Action Teams. Schools were at different stages, with some having no Action Team at all and one school having a team with consistent membership and regular meetings. It was clear that all Action Teams needed more guidance and support to become a strong, permanent part of their schools. Communication between parents and teachers also needed improvement.

The challenges that surfaced in these site visits were brought to the attention of the school and program staff so that they could brainstorm and find solutions. The site visits provided opportunities to look inside the schools and determine what steps PLP should take. They also illuminated many creative examples of how schools were reaching out to parents and increasing parent-teacher communication. These examples were shared across sites.

The external evaluation began the second year by identifying the cohort that would be followed for the rest of the evaluation. Phone numbers and attendance information for the sample of second-graders randomly selected in the previous year (now third-graders) was updated with the help of office managers at the evaluation sites. In addition, this sample was freshened from the original random selection to maintain an adequate longitudinal sample size. Data collection on these students in 1998–1999 included a parent phone survey, paper-and-pencil surveys of teachers in fall and spring, and overall demographic and academic performance data from the two districts (only academic achievement data on the SAT-9 was available from LAUSD). The teacher survey included questions about discipline and reward strategies; communication with parents concerning homework, discipline, and academics; and an evaluation of the child's motivation, academic performance, discipline, and parental involvement.

Early in 1999, the evaluation team completed and shared with the CIT an "Initial Steps" report, a baseline report organized by School Family that compared the PLP evaluation sites with the non-PLP, comparison sites (Quigley 1999). The report included results from data collected in 1997–1998 from the parent phone survey and fall school-site interviews, and overall demographic and academic performance data.

The "Initial Steps" report revealed that PLP schools had raised their level of consciousness about the importance of parent involvement and had set firmer goals in the initial implementation year than non-PLP schools. The parent education workshops and programs were still "business as usual," however, with few enhancements, and there was little focus on academics. There had been trouble with implementing the voice mail system and very little energy spent on building other communication mechanisms among parents, teachers, and school staff.

Professional development for the PLP teachers still did not focus on the kind of parent involvement that specifically supports academics (but prior to PLP, there had generally been no professional development that targeted any sort of parent engagement).

One School Family had developed content for teacher workshops and was planning to mandate them in the second year of the grant. The other two School Families had yet to develop a curriculum and plan for teacher professional development.

Coordinating sessions of parent education had been a challenge for most of the school sites. The evaluation team pointed out the need for schools to monitor and track parental participation and to evaluate their own progress and outreach. Outreach to parents and teachers needed more emphasis.

Basically, the report confirmed that "Not much was there" concerning a program that targeted equal relationships between parents and teachers with a specific focus on children's academic learning. In the CIT meeting, however, the evaluation team's report and presentation encouraged the program and schools to translate awareness of the importance of parent involvement into more concrete behaviors. Increasing parent participation and two-way communication between parents and school staff, especially teachers, would require a more concerted effort by program and school staff. They would have to try to reach all teachers and other staff through professional development or other venues, as well as to increase outreach to parents and families.

These themes spurred conversations at the CIT meeting about how to improve communication among parents, administrators, teachers, and staff. The CIT also discussed several items important to the Weingart Foundation's board: implementation teams, outreach to parents, installing communication equipment, number of parents reached, approaching critical mass, strengthening Action Teams of principals and teachers, using self-evaluation forms based on the research of Anne Henderson and Joyce Epstein, and sustainability of the work supported by the grant. As a result of that discussion, several new steps were decided upon and taken during the rest of the program's second year.

- The program created several new avenues for parents to discuss the academics of their child with the schools:

Coffee with the Principal: an intimate gathering, held on a regular basis, where questions and open discussion are encouraged.

Coffee and Conversation: opportunities for parents and staff members to gather in an informal atmosphere where relationships can be built and barriers reduced.

Tea for Ten: originally developed for parents who could not attend morning meetings; became a set of gatherings where parents of successful students share their parenting, which are then assembled in a format that can be used with other parents.

- In Year 2, twenty-two schools sent teams composed of an administrator or designee, teachers, and parents to the PLP Action Team training.
- Recognizing the need for more teacher professional development in parental involvement focused on academics, PLP facilitators collaborated with the California State University, the largest teacher-training institution in California, to design a curriculum and assist new teachers in this area.
- LAAMP and PLP required school-level action plans instead of School Family plans. These school plans covered goals and activities for five years as well as an implementation plan for Year 2, budget information, technical assistance plans, and governance or staffing changes.
- The senior researcher of the evaluation team or the School Family facilitator visited the schools to present findings to school administration, parents, and teachers at each site.

In general, teachers had lower expectations and a lower assessment of a child's academic standing than did the parents.

The school-level reports helped principals and School Families to see their own progress and challenges in relation to others. Parents' verbatim comments from the phone survey were presented after editing out parents' names to protect the confidentiality of comments about particular staff members. The survey provided the principals with the voices and concerns of their parents. These presentations and reports proved unexpectedly popular. A few principals called to request presentations, and, over time, more and more parents and school staff attended them.

It took a lot of work on the part of the program staff and schools to push the implementation and development of the program to a new level. At the end of the school year, the CIT made plans for Year 3 (1999–2000) in view of the following challenges.

- The challenge of involving teachers was very evident. The surveys of the external evaluation, the site visits of the internal evaluation, and informal discussion with School Family facilitators all revealed that many teachers did not know how to involve parents. More collaboration and integration between DELTA and PLP were suggested. It was also noted that a large disconnect existed between parents and the teachers and administrators who, in most cases, did not live in the school community. PLP needed to help teachers embrace students' achievements and interact with parents on behalf of students, as well as to encourage and help parents advocate on behalf of their children's education.
- Parents and teachers needed a greater sense of urgency about children's achievement. This was evidenced by the mismatch between teachers' expectations and evaluations of student performance and parents' expectations and assessment of their child's skills. In general, teachers had lower expectations and a lower assessment of a child's academic standing than did the parents.
- There was still a long way to go in achieving depth in the program. Although some schools were "getting it," PLP needed to provide leadership in making parental involvement in academics a higher priority for districts. It was thought that PLP could not create change without some tension.

Evaluation could help by providing “disturbing” data, such as low test scores and the disparity in teacher/parent expectations.

- There was general concern about the legacy of the Annenberg Challenge grant, which was approaching its last year. What behaviors and attitudes would have changed? How well would the program be sustained?
- Program staff criticized the “slowness” in the availability of external evaluation data for use in planning. Although the external evaluation team had worked fast, moving from data collection to findings and presentation in a matter of months, the program staff wanted results more quickly.

Three main themes emerged: involving teachers more fully; continuing to increase the depth of the program for parents, teachers, and students; and thinking more seriously about impact and sustainability of the PLP initiative. Each member of the CIT recognized the need to focus on impact, not just progress.

Year 3 (1999–2000): Recognizing the value in evaluation data

Concerns about the program and its evaluation were looming as the third year of the grant began. With the grant ending, LAAMP was surveying its accomplishments and intending to fund only effective activities. This context placed pressure on PLP. In the absence of SAT-9 data, there was no way to link PLP to student achievement. LAAMP and the PLP program recognized that the program’s implementation was weak and uneven in many ways. The PLP evaluation, with its longitudinal design and phone survey of a large parent sample was costly, particularly given that it was not yielding results concerning student achievement. There was much discussion within LAAMP, PLP, UCLA, Weingart, and the CIT about how to continue an external evaluation of PLP.

In the interim, the evaluation team and program staff united more strongly to obtain the third-grade SAT-9 data. They sent joint letters to people in the two school districts, underlining the importance of the data for the program and the evaluation.

While options for restructuring and cutting back the PLP evaluation were being discussed, SAT-9 data came in from LAUSD and the analysis began immediately. The evaluation team analyzed the third-grade data from the teacher survey, the parent phone survey, and the SAT-9, finishing a second-year evaluation report that addressed these questions:

- What are the effects of PLP on teachers’ practices?⁴
- What is the impact of PLP activities on parents?⁵
- What are the effects on students’ third-grade achievement?

Meanwhile, the PLP program staff were deepening the activities of parents and teachers. PLP funded and built innovative activities such as the following into the School Families:

- The *Mother-Daughter College Awareness project*, involving 300 elementary and middle school girls and their mothers at twelve schools. This project targeted girls with the potential to be the first in their families to graduate from college. The girls worked with their mothers to improve their education and life skills, develop leadership abilities, and set high professional goals. Activities included college visits, goal-setting workshops, enhanced adolescent/parent communication, and career planning.
- The *Model Classroom project*, implemented with teachers at four elementary schools to provide teacher professional development, ideas on how to involve parents in classroom instruction and homework activities, resources on student-led conferencing, and mutual encouragement and support.

4. The report described third-grade classroom characteristics based on the PLP teacher survey administered in fall 1997 and spring 1998 to teachers in the six elementary schools participating in PLP and the six comparison elementary schools. Then it presented information on the professional development environment based on school interviews and the PLP teacher survey. Finally, it described interactions between the third-graders’ parents and teachers, using the PLP teacher survey and the PLP parent phone survey, administered to a random sample of 673 parents in twelve schools during spring 1998 (when their children were in second grade) and to the same parents in spring 1999 (when their children were in third grade).

5. These findings are based on the PLP parent phone survey.

In many schools, teams found that parents needed training to become strong, informed, and committed leaders.

Two other innovative programs – Action Teams and the Parent Curriculum project – illustrate how programs were created and grew. Action Teams had started in the PLP LAUSD schools, where PLP worked with twenty-five schools to create Action Teams designing and implementing systematic, comprehensive approaches to parental involvement. Using Joyce Epstein’s conceptual framework (Epstein 2000, Setisinger 1996), the teams involved parents, teachers, administrators, and community members in developing long-term parent engagement plans, training parents to work with teachers and administrators, and providing technology resources.

The school-site teams were fully established at most of the schools within three years of the beginning of the grant. The teams created one-year “action plans” with a budget and a three-year outline of the school’s vision for parent involvement. Each team formed subcommittees by goal. Two of the goals and subcommittees had to be academic (one in literacy and one in math) to parallel the student outcome goals. The other two were nonacademic such as family health or partnership subcommittees.

Action Teams at the school sites integrated parent involvement goals with overall plans for school improvement. The meetings were also a venue for delegating tasks and identifying ways of using talent. Most important, regularly scheduled meetings provided time for working out the implementation of a school’s vision and plan with all key stakeholders present. In these meetings, where opinions were freely sought and problems addressed, team mem-

bers developed trust, respect, and support for each other. Stability of team membership, open communication, and the written plan mitigated tension or fragmentation within a team.

In many schools, teams found that parents needed training to become strong, informed, and committed leaders. Parent leadership training was established that enabled parents to participate in decision making regarding their children’s education. Activities were put in place to develop leadership and to examine ways of engaging all stakeholders in planning. Parent leaders worked tirelessly to enable other parents to become confident, respected participants at the discussion table alongside teachers and other education professionals.

The Parent Curriculum project grew out of one Action Team’s recognition that teachers were often uncomfortable in discussions with parents. The team decided to alleviate this potential communication gap with an innovative program. First, the team designed a portion of the school’s teacher professional development to address strategies for communication with parents. Second, the principal, parent coordinator, and fifty teachers developed a Parent Curriculum for each grade level, based on the California Standards. The teacher first teaches the lesson to parents as if the students were in the classroom, so that the parents hear the lesson from the child’s point of view, understand the concepts behind the “interactive homework” that will require them to work with the child, and receive instruction on the homework. Then the teacher teaches the lesson to the children, and the parents and children complete the homework together at home. This Parent Curriculum is now being used for the entire School Family. Not only has it improved parent-teacher communication, it has focused this communication on academic achievement and support.

Toward the middle of the third year, the PLP evaluation report with the SAT-9 data was finished. The findings were first presented to a CIT meeting, where the following findings were considered especially important:

- The most dramatic finding was that, controlling for teacher, student, and parent characteristics, LAUSD third-graders in PLP schools scored 5.72 percentile points higher in reading and 4.81 per-

centile points higher in language arts on the 1998–1999 SAT-9 than non-PLP students. Further analysis showed that performance was significantly higher when parents felt welcome at the school, attended schoolwide events, and believed that teachers kept them informed. Students also had higher achievement when parents supported academics, especially reading, at home. Math scores were not significantly different.

- Twice as many teachers in PLP schools (50 percent) had professional development that focused on parental involvement than the non-PLP teachers (25 percent), although they said they were not receiving enough preparation for engaging all types of parents. About 70 percent of PLP teachers were accepting responsibility for parental involvement.
- Communication between schools and parents was generally one-way, with information going out from teachers to parents, in both PLP and non-PLP schools. However, some PLP teachers (25 percent) reported more frequent communication and some two-way communication.
- Both PLP and non-PLP parents had less involvement when their children were in third grade compared with second grade, and they helped their child with homework less often. Decreasing parent participation as students progress through the grades is a trend well documented in other research; however, the decline in PLP parents' participation was less severe than among non-PLP parents.
- More PLP parents felt that parent workshops and activities were helpful and worthwhile, compared with non-PLP parents.

In comparing schools over the two years, the evaluation found many differences in favor of the PLP schools. For example, PLP parents were more likely to drill students at home, read with the child every day, and have someone help the child daily with reading or homework. In the PLP schools, parents received more newsletters and bulletins. More PLP parents attended trainings, especially on parenting skills. PLP parents were particularly positive about workshops on how to help children with schoolwork, communicate with teachers and staff, and

practice reading at home. Teachers at PLP schools had significantly more opportunities for professional development targeted at parent involvement, and they believed more strongly that involving parents in education was worth any effort. PLP administrators had a greater desire to involve teachers in engaging parents and understood parent involvement as a process critically important to a quality education.

These findings added up to the beginnings of a shift toward a more inclusive, academic-focused culture. By involving administrators, teachers, and parents in expanding parental engagement, PLP had created a systemic approach that proved change is possible. However, PLP needed to affect a critical mass of parents, and this was not happening. The evaluation team recommended that PLP “hammer home” this need with principals and district staff, target even more teachers through other structures in the school, and get more parents to participate more regularly.

Overall, the CIT members were happy with PLP's breadth of vision, intensity of focus, and the significant differences found in its home learning practices and student achievement. The CIT recognized that the key now was to institutionalize PLP activities and reallocate funds to make parent involvement a core priority at schools.

Having reviewed these evaluation results, LAAMP found funds to survey the parents and teachers as the PLP cohort moved into fifth grade. The evaluation as originally designed was put back into full swing.

Performance on the SAT-9 was significantly higher when parents felt welcome at the school, attended schoolwide events, and believed that teachers kept them informed.

**Year 4 (2000–2001)
and Year 5 (2001–2002):
Back in the saddle again**

The external evaluation team collected data in 2000–2001 on the students who were now in fifth grade. The team reinstated the parent phone survey, the fall and spring teacher surveys, and interviews of the program staff. Extra effort went into finding current phone numbers for the sample. Although many of the study sites had new principals who were not aware of the evaluation, all twelve schools consented to be in the study again. The evaluation team also renewed its emphasis on gaining SAT-9 data from the districts, seeking data from the students' fourth- and fifth-grade years. The districts provided the data in early 2002 and analysis got under way.

In Year 4, the PLP program initiated plans for district scale-up to bring the initiative into more schools in the two participating districts. PLP efforts were started in eight additional elementary schools in the Long Beach district as well as eleven additional elementary schools, one additional middle school, and one additional high school in the Los Angeles district. Both districts committed to sustaining PLP efforts until 2006. Besides growing the program into more schools, PLP focused on building Action Teams at more schools, further developing the content of the Mother-Daughter College Awareness project and finishing the Parent Curriculum project for all grades.

Also important in building a legacy from PLP, Families In Schools (FIS) began operation as a new nonprofit organization with the mission of building

partnerships of families, schools, and communities to help students achieve academic success. Annenberg Transition funds, obtained from the submission and approval of a transition plan to the Annenberg Foundation, supported the start-up of FIS, along with other funds from public and private sources. The organization has four goals:

- strengthen the capacity of families to support their children's academic achievement and access to higher education
- engage educators to increase and sustain their capacity to partner with families to improve academic achievement
- leverage resources to develop and sustain programs for parental involvement essential to increasing student achievement
- develop and disseminate "best practices" through evaluation, research, and practical experiences

Established in early 2001, by mid-2002 FIS was serving five school districts, six Head Start programs, twelve Early Education Centers, nine Child Development Centers, sixty-four elementary schools, seven middle schools, eight high schools, and 36,000 families. FIS works on family literacy, parent education, family support and awareness of college readiness, teacher training, and the planning and organizing of family involvement at schools and districts. FIS leverages improvement and support in these areas through research and evaluation on impact and program quality as well as sharing best practices and lessons learned.

Sustainability of the PLP effort was shown by the structures in place at the schools and districts and the continuation of school plans, including Action Teams. School districts are funding most of the costs paid previously by the grant. Staff have stayed in place at the school sites and the district level.

In sum, three main elements – a rigorous evaluation approach and design, school-site and macro-level team structures, and effective, multi-way communication lines – were integral to the success of the PLP program and have modeled an effective approach for program evaluation. The next section outlines overarching lessons learned.

Definitive research designs inform programs about how to improve their depth, refine their processes, and leverage support for sustainability.

LESSONS LEARNED

Over the course of the PLP evaluation, the program staff, the CIT, and the evaluation team found that evaluation is a process of looking backward in order to steer forward more skillfully. Several lessons were learned as the external evaluation team worked closely with the program staff, school and district staff, and the funder.

Lesson 1

Programs need to understand how they operate and what challenges they face as well as their impact in order to be effective at change and improvement. Definitive research designs inform programs about how to improve their depth, refine their processes, and leverage support for sustainability. Using data from internal and external evaluation can help programs achieve their goals. This use of data is also supported by the final evaluation report on LAAMP (Goldschmidt 2002), which found that the schools and School Families that consistently implemented two of the LAAMP action principles – parent involvement and data use – demonstrated higher student achievement.

Lesson 2

District and principal support are key to effecting school change because they set the direction and tone of schools' priorities. Establishing the belief among district staff and principals that parental involvement is critical to children's learning is the key that allows for choices to be made about time and money that create the willingness and opportunity of schools and families to partner. The buy-in and support of both district staff and principals is one of the necessary steps in building partnerships with parents/families that support and improve a child's academic learning environment.

Lesson 3

Multi-way communication with stakeholders at all levels is key for buy-in, for maintaining focus on goals, and for improving programs. Communication surrounding improvement should not be "ad hoc" but formalized in specific settings and structures. Communication needs to be started early, continued

Communication surrounding improvement should not be "ad hoc" but formalized in specific settings and structures.

often, and directed at all participants to gain a 360-degree view. Interim findings must be delivered promptly and at all levels to keep people on target. With feedback and communication, there is less slippage in implementation, and program development sustains its momentum.

Lesson 4

Building communication lines and improving the quality of parent-teacher communication are the conduits for increasing student achievement. When parents and teachers communicate specifically about how parents can support classroom learning through learning strategies at home, and when parents engage in learning activities with their child, the child experiences a supportive and consistent learning environment, resulting in improved achievement.

Lesson 5

Joining mixed groups of stakeholders in conversations around the tough issues of implementing a program and around interim evaluation findings expedites the building of a program and allows a close watch on its improvement and impact. This type of collaboration is possible in teams where members talk, listen, and celebrate the process and progress of their mission. These teams should exist both at the macro level and the site level of program operation.

Lesson 6

Funders are looking for educators who respond to their questions about change and accountability. It is the evaluation-oriented educators and program staff who will have the ear of people who fund education. This means that the evaluator(s) should continually look ahead to communicate about possible improvements, and that educators should learn to report student outcome data clearly keyed to their mission – the development of children.

Lesson 7

An infrastructure for evaluation begins with human development – developing a mindset and shared plan among stakeholders in support of evaluation use. It requires formal procedures for involvement of all stakeholders; clear roles and responsibilities; means for collecting, analyzing, sharing, and acting on information; and methods for periodically refining the interaction between the evaluation and the program. The will to evaluate in an open, participatory manner is key.

Lesson 8

Evaluators should play an integrated role at stages much earlier than the writing of a final report. Evaluation data can help program development and program improvement by informing program participants and decision-makers. This should act as a wake-up call to evaluators about the scope and type of function they play in improving programs. Interactive, early communication between program and evaluation staff is essential in building an effective program.

In sum, evaluation is a means for strengthening programs, schools, and education. If evaluation is seen as a continual learning process, it becomes an integral part of the renewal intended to make schools more effective and to move them toward their goals and ideals. Evaluation, the systematic judgment of the value of programs, projects, personnel, and other parts of the educational system, is essential. In the words of Michael Scriven (1991, p. 4), “Without such a process, there is no way to distinguish the worthwhile from the worthless.”

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