



RESEARCH BRIEF

ASPIRE (CARES Plus) Final Evaluation Report Program Year 2015-16

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The Comprehensive Approaches to Raising Education Standards (CARES) Plus program for Los Angeles County was funded through grants from First 5 California and First 5 LA and administered by Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) from 2011 to 2016. Renamed ASPIRE, this program provided one-on-one advisement, online CLASS training, video coaching on classroom practices through My Teaching Partner, and financial incentives to early childhood educators. The program also assisted in the completion of coursework, transfers, degrees, and permits, and in the implementation of quality teacher-child interactions in the classroom. The 2015-16 evaluation examined participant and program outcomes specific to this final year and across program years, as applicable. Recommendations were offered for future stipend programs with similar participant demographics.

Key findings from this evaluation include:

- The ASPIRE program met or exceeded all 2015-16 program goals.
- ASPIRE participants contributed to an expanded and diverse ECE workforce.
- Participants attributed recent educational and professional progress to the ASPIRE program.
- ASPIRE participants increased their knowledge and quality of ECE practices and programs.
- Participants experienced numerous benefits from their participation in ASPIRE.
- There were programmatic successes and challenges to implementing the ASPIRE program.

Overview

The Los Angeles Universal Preschool (LAUP) ASPIRE program served as the CARES Plus program for Los Angeles County. The ASPIRE program supported the completion of permits, coursework, and degrees, and the increased quality of teaching practices of early childhood education (ECE) professionals. To reach these outcomes, the ASPIRE program offered one-on-one advisement, online Classroom Assessment Scoring System (CLASS) trainings, video coaching on classroom practices through My Teaching Partner (MTP), and financial incentives to participants. In addition, the ASPIRE program collaborated with other organizations and institutions of higher education in Los Angeles County through the Los Angeles County Early Care and Education Workforce Consortium. The collaboration between the ASPIRE program and the Workforce Consortium focused on developing a more coordinated and effective professional development system for early childhood educators. The anticipated long-term impacts of the ASPIRE program, as well as the larger Workforce Consortium, were that ECE professionals in Los Angeles County would be better equipped to deliver high-quality services to children and families, and would experience greater rates of career advancement and retention in the field as a result of their qualifications. The ASPIRE program was funded through grants from First 5 CA and First 5 LA.

The ASPIRE program met or exceeded all 2015-16 program goals.

The ASPIRE program and the Workforce Consortium worked in tandem toward the same long-term impacts. As shown in Table 1, the ASPIRE program goals aligned with these impacts. The degree to which ASPIRE met each goal is also presented below.

Table 1. Alignment of ASPIRE Goals to Workforce Consortium Impacts

ASPIRE Goals	Long-Term Impacts
Recruit 1,000 early childhood educators who represent the diversity of Los Angeles.	Expanded ECE workforce.
Increase the preparation of the ECE workforce through the completion of coursework, permit, and degree requirements.	Better qualified ECE workforce.
Increase the incentives for early childhood educators to pursue educational and professional advancement.	Increased retention and advancement of the ECE workforce.
Increase the effectiveness of teaching practices and quality teacher-child interactions.	Increased quality of ECE practices and programs.
Structural change in institutions of higher education and organizations serving the needs of early childhood educators, leading to the development of more seamless educational pathways.	More effective ECE professional development system in LA County.

ASPIRE participants contributed to an expanded and diverse ECE workforce.

The ASPIRE program met the goal of recruiting over 1,000 culturally and linguistically diverse early childhood educators. During the 2015-16 program year, 1,180 applications were received and 1,105 participants enrolled (93%). This is relatively consistent with the rates from 2014-15 (96%) and 2013-14 (94%), and an overall increase from the rates in the first two years of the program (66% and 64% for 2012-13 and 2011-12, respectively). Demographic information for this year’s 1,219 participants is summarized in Table 2.

Table 2. Participant Demographics, 2015-16

Gender	
Female	96%
Male	4%
Ethnicity	
Asian	7%
Black/African American	13%
Hispanic/Latino	58%
Pacific Islander	0.5%
White/Caucasian	11%
Multiracial	4%
Unknown	7%
Primary Language	
English	60%
Spanish	30%

In addition, ASPIRE participants worked in a variety of child care settings. Over two-thirds of participants (68%) worked in a center, while 30% worked in family child care homes. The majority of participants were teachers (76%).

Participants attributed recent educational and professional progress to the ASPIRE program.

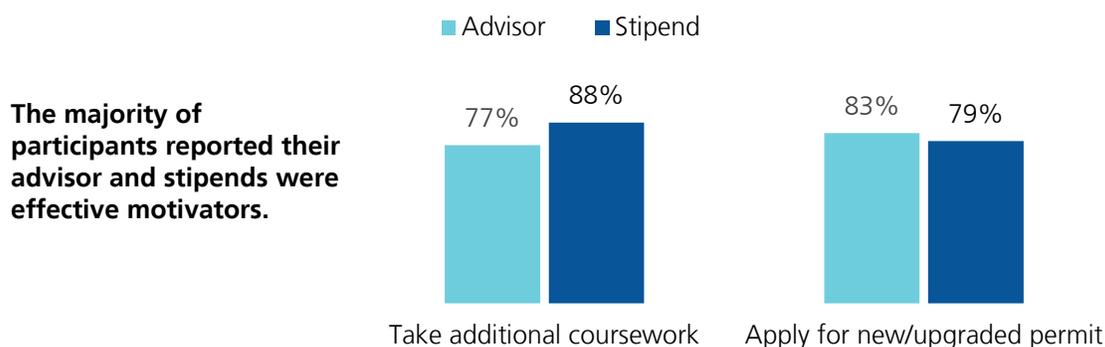
Better Qualified ECE Workforce

Across all program years, ASPIRE contributed to a better qualified ECE workforce by providing coursework, permit, and degree requirement assistance. In 2015-16, 70% of participants passed required coursework with a “C” or better, 7% of participants earned a degree, and 22% obtained a new or upgraded permit. The ASPIRE program also increased participant familiarity with the Child Development Permit Matrix and the CLASS observation tool.

As shown in Figure 1, the majority of survey respondents indicated that both the ASPIRE stipend and their ASPIRE advisor served as motivators for accomplishing academic and professional milestones. Participants

spoke highly of their advisement experiences.

Figure 1. ASPIRE Advisor and Stipend as Motivators



Returning participants emphasized that the motivation fostered through their participation in the ASPIRE program was instrumental in increasing their awareness of opportunities and setting higher educational goals.

Greater Retention & Advancement of ECE Workforce

The ASPIRE program increased the incentives for early childhood educators to pursue educational and professional advancement and continue working in the ECE field. A total of 776 participants met all program requirements and received the ASPIRE stipend. The majority of survey respondents (88%) reported that this stipend encouraged them to stay in the field of early care and education. Bonuses were awarded to participants for obtaining a degree (74), receiving a new or upgraded permit (246), or successfully completing the ASPIRE program for two or more years (511); the numbers of bonuses awarded in every category represent increases from the previous year. Additionally, 60% of participants who had received a promotion since enrolling in the ASPIRE program attributed that promotion to ASPIRE participation. Likewise, 44% of participants who had received a wage increase credited that raise to ASPIRE.

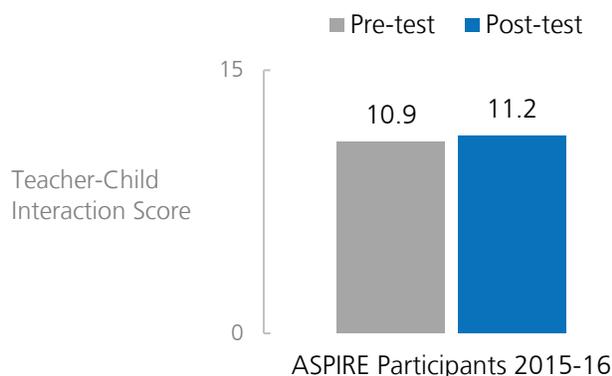
ASPIRE participants increased their knowledge and quality of ECE practices and programs.

Increased Quality of ECE Practices & Programs

Participants reported that the ASPIRE program increased their knowledge of CLASS-related classroom strategies (98%) and the majority found many CLASS-related services to be “very helpful” such as the online training, online video library, and the CLASS dimensions guide.

Pre- and post-scores on the “Teacher’s Knowledge of Effective Teacher-Child Interactions” assessment (Hamre et al., 2012) were compared for a total of 683 new and returning ASPIRE participants. These participants were required to complete CLASS training during the 2015-16 program year. Results for these participants show a significant increase in scores from the beginning to the end of the program year (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Pre-Post Changes in Knowledge of Teacher-Child Interactions*



Note: * statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level.

Participants were also asked if the ASPIRE program and the coursework they completed had an impact on the quality of their practices. The majority of ASPIRE survey respondents (99%) reported that the courses they took had helped to increase the quality of their practices.

More Effective ECE Professional Development System in LA County

The ASPIRE program increased the capacity of professional and academic advisors to provide support for educational advancement, permit attainment, and the implementation of best practices in the classroom. This increase in capacity was a result of the recruitment, training, and coordination of ASPIRE advisors who also worked for established training agencies or educational institutions across Los Angeles County.

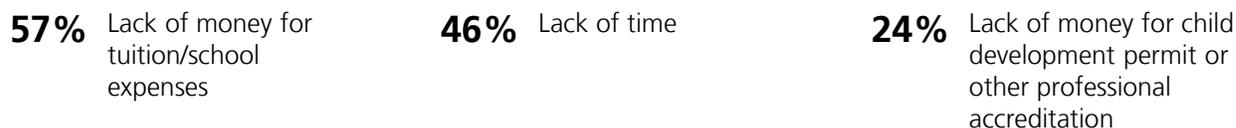
Participants experienced numerous benefits from their participation in ASPIRE.

Although ASPIRE participants reported experiencing a variety of challenges and barriers to their educational and professional goals, the most commonly reported challenge was a lack of money to pay for tuition and other school expenses (Figure 3).

The ASPIRE stipend awarded upon program completion was able to alleviate this burden for many participants. In fact, participants reported that the stipend made it possible to afford classes (85%) and to pay for summer living expenses (69%).

The ASPIRE program was also acknowledged for facilitating the development of professional knowledge, such as increased understanding of the Child Development Permit Matrix (90%) and greater clarification of their professional goals (95%). While many returning ASPIRE participants spoke of the benefits afforded through these stipends and resources, they also spoke of the personal motivation and sense of personal challenge that the program set for them.

Figure 3. Top Reported Challenges, 2015-16



There were programmatic successes and challenges to implementing the ASPIRE program.

During the 2015-16 program year, as in previous years of the program, the ASPIRE program staff and participants experienced significant success. ASPIRE achieved all program goals and received positive feedback from participants regarding the provided services. Although participants reported experiencing several challenges, a large number of participants achieved educational and professional milestones. Furthermore, a majority of these participants credited these successes to ASPIRE.

A major programmatic challenge identified as early as 2012-13 and persisting into the current year was the challenge of maintaining a high participant retention rate. In previous years, the most frequent reason for withdrawal was an inability to register for coursework for reasons such as overcrowding, lack of appropriate courses, inability to pay for courses, or conflicting schedules. In this 2015-16 program year, the most frequent reason was related to meeting deadlines. Of the 323 participants who withdrew from the program, 35% did not complete either the first or second advisement session by the required deadline. Further, a total of 17% did not meet the deadlines to register for CLASS training (14%) or complete the CLASS introduction (3%).

Recommendations

In its fifth and final year, the ASPIRE program achieved all program goals and effectively helped early childhood education professionals in Los Angeles County become better equipped to deliver high-quality services to children and families. Participants found these services instrumental in their recent educational and professional achievements.

Presented are some notable recommendations for future stipend programs serving similar demographics:

- Implement established recruitment strategies and work with partner CSUs and community colleges to recruit eligible working students.
- Offer advisement sessions (both required and “extra”) for participant support. Advisors for a new stipend program should be recruited from the 2015-16 ASPIRE program.
- Adopt higher thresholds for the coursework completion milestone (e.g., from a letter grade of C to an A or B).
- Develop more customized and individualized components to ensure that participants working in different settings (e.g., in FCCs vs. center-based programs), or those who are in different places in their educational and professional pathways, can receive the greatest benefits from their participation.
- Provide online CLASS training and, as an optional resource, access to the CLASS online video library. Acquire additional or updated videos for participant use.
- Provide more resources and tools for working with children who have special needs and/or demonstrate challenging behavior, as this population may be growing.
- Provide more rigorous and specific development opportunities for participants, including instructional support for subgroups (e.g., language learners) and behavior management.
- Work with stakeholders and workforce partners to collaborate and generate ideas for program improvement.

References

Hamre, B. K., Pianta, R. C., Burchinal, M., Field, S., LoCasale-Crouch, J., Downer, J. T., Howes, C., LaParo, K., & Scott-Little, C. (2012). A course on effective teacher-child interactions: Effects on teacher beliefs, knowledge, and observed practice. *American Educational Research Journal, 49*, 88-123.

Love, J., Hudgens, T., & Dong, L. (2013). *Los Angeles Early Care and Education Workforce Consortium: System change evaluation report, 2012-13*. Los Angeles, CA: Los Angeles Universal Preschool.

Appendix. Evaluation Methodology

A mixed-methods evaluation design was used to assess program and participant outcomes and to create recommendations for future programs. Data was collected from participants using the ASPIRE Application, ASPIRE Employment Verification Form, ASPIRE program database, Participant End-of-Year Survey, participant focus groups, and the Knowledge of Effective Teacher-Child Interactions Assessment (folded into the 2015-16 ASPIRE application and End-of-Year Survey). In addition to these sources and instruments, hard copies of transcripts were requested from ASPIRE participants twice, once at the beginning and once at the end of the program year. Transcripts and permits were requested in order to assist in advisement and to track program compliance and participant outcomes.

The overarching questions guiding this evaluation included:

1. To what extent did the ASPIRE program achieve its goals?
2. What were the perceived benefits of participating in ASPIRE?
3. What were ASPIRE’s programmatic successes and challenges?
4. What are the recommendations for future programs?

Qualitative data were coded and analyzed for emergent themes and categories. Quantitative data were entered into SPSS Statistics, version 24, and analyzed descriptively and using inferential statistics to calculate the significance levels of differences over time.

For more information about this evaluation, please contact researchmail@laup.net.