



LAUP's Parent Engagement programs deliver high-quality support to parents and families, with the goal of empowering parents to increase involvement with their children's education. This evaluation examined the outcomes of the multiple Parent Engagement programs at LAUP. Analyses discovered that a number of benefits resulted from parents' school-based engagement and volunteering. These benefits included the following:

- Parents felt informed of their rights and empowered by the Parent Ambassador Program.
- Parents reported a solid home-school connection and greater at-home learning for children.
- Parents felt encouraged by their LAUP provider to participate in activities, become part of the learning process, and take an active role in their child's education.

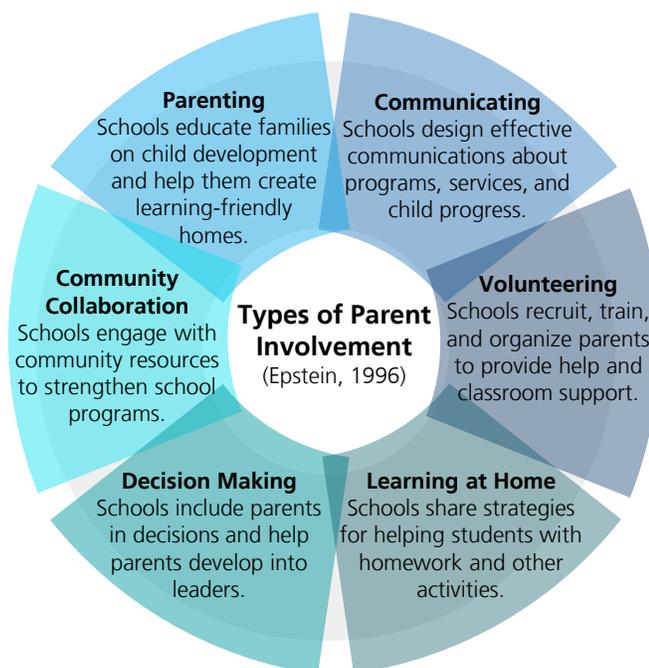
The impact of the Parent Engagement programs was widespread and positive. This brief presents findings of the program evaluation, as well as several recommendations for future practice.

Overview

Parent engagement plays an important role in LAUP's preschool model. It provides children with continuity between school and home environments, increases communication between parents and providers, and reinforces the role of parents in early education and development.

The framework of parent involvement proposed by Epstein (1996) served as a foundation for analyzing LAUP's parent engagement approaches.

This framework identifies the multiple ways in which parents can engage in their children's education at the home, school, and community levels, and conceives of all three levels as overlapping, interconnected, and interdependent.



The two key parent engagement programs at LAUP are the Parent Ambassador (PA) Program, and the Parent Engagement and Resource Specialists (PERS).

Parent Ambassador Program

LAUP's Parent Ambassador Program is a free program that educates, empowers, and mobilizes parents. The PA program motivates parents to become advocates for their children, families, and communities, and encourages them to inform others of preschool's positive impact on their families and communities. The Parent Ambassador Program is part of LAUP's Public Affairs office, and is a civic engagement program, as opposed to

traditional parent engagement programs which encourage involvement in the child’s classroom or school. Parent participation includes workshops and advocacy trips; for example, parents travel to Sacramento and speak with officials about preschool’s benefits to their communities.

Parent Engagement and Resource Specialists (PERS)

By contrast, LAUP’s Parent Engagement and Resource Specialists (PERS) support a more traditional means of parent engagement. The PERS help providers encourage parents to volunteer their time and talents at their children’s preschool programs. PERS are critical to the development and maintenance of parent engagement; they assume leadership roles and serve as primary lines of communication between families, homes, schools, and communities, with the goal of supporting children’s educational development. The PERS also encourage providers to support parents by providing them with resources such as opportunities for daily communication about their child’s developmental progress; information on educational opportunities, meetings, events, and classroom activities; verbal and written materials; suggestions for home and community-based engagements; and links to available community resources.

This program year, two new initiatives were incorporated into the work of the PERS. One was the Train the Trainer program. This program trained providers to lead parent workshops on their own (previously, the PERS had led parent workshops). Through this initiative, PERS helped providers strengthen their knowledge of parenting and child development, in order to support parents in continuing their children’s learning at home. The second new initiative, Strengthening Families, was an attempt to further develop parent engagement efforts. Strengthening Families’ goal was to help the PERS better assist providers in assessing families’ needs, building on family strengths, buffering risks, and promoting positive outcomes.

The Parent Ambassador Program increased parents’ subjective feeling of empowerment, knowledge of how to advocate for their children and knowledge of civic rights.

One of the primary impacts of the Parent Ambassador Program was to increase parents’ subjective feeling of empowerment, and to inform them of ways in which they could advocate for the well-being of their children. This impact is illustrated by the following interview excerpt:

Researcher: Did you feel that you had a voice and could speak up for an issue before the workshops?
Parent: Before? No.
Researcher: Do you feel that you have a voice now?
Parent: Yes. I just have to be prepared and look at my resources. But it’s in us to make a difference.

In addition to information and empowerment, another benefit to parents was their gain in knowledge related to civic rights. Some families were shocked to discover that regardless of their immigration or citizenship status, they were able to call elected officials, and were therefore allowed to have a voice in community decisions. As one mother stated, “They taught us how even if we are undocumented to not keep quiet.” Other impacts parents mentioned were: learning how to advocate for children, families, and communities; learning who their representatives were; and learning to craft and convey a message.

Parents reported benefits from the work of the Parent Engagement and Resource Specialists aligning to the targeted dimensions of Epstein’s parent involvement framework (1996).

Epstein’s parent involvement framework (1996) provides a base from which to examine and organize the impact of the work of the PERS and the effectiveness of their parent engagement efforts. Although schools may aim to address all six types of involvement, schools must also choose which practices to highlight, based on their unique population and needs. Impacts of the PERS are discussed within the framework provided by Epstein’s six dimensions.

Parenting

The PERS Train the Trainer workshops supported LAUP programmatic efforts in the area of parenting. Many parents reported high satisfaction with trainings and workshops, stating that their involvement in their children's learning and preschool experiences resulted in their own learning and growth as parents.

Communication

Parents and providers reported a variety of communication practices. For example, one provider sent out a survey to assess family needs, which facilitated support and follow-up with families. The PERS helped other providers to personalize communication by sending out personal invites and reminders. Providers also introduced new methods of communication; some added email, and some reported sharing DRDP results at parent-teacher conferences for the first time. Both providers and parents reported that these efforts were successful.

Volunteering

Parents reported benefits from volunteering. A major benefit of parent engagement, including volunteering, is improved student achievement (Loucks, 1992); however, LAUP parents noted additional benefits beyond achievement. By spending time in their children's preschools, parents observe and learn about their children. They may also learn about principles of child development, as they compare their own child with same-age children (Gelfer, 1991). When parents understand child development, they can provide developmentally appropriate support in their homes. Volunteering also allows for parent observation of teaching staff and other parents who are involved; parents reported that observation was an effective learning tool.

Learning at Home

Providers created support for learning at home by giving parents information on library activities, providing a lending library and literacy bags, promoting reading to children, inviting parents to read to children in the classroom, or creating a monthly family book club. Many parents reported that their child's preschool program provided home activities for parents and children, and taught them how to prepare for the transition to kindergarten.

Decision-Making

Parents were observed taking part in decision making processes, as in the Train the Trainer "Transition to Kindergarten" workshop. Providers' advocacy practices included encouraging parents to participate in the transition to kindergarten through parent workshops and visits to local schools. Parents who are active in their children's education gain knowledge, and they become more likely to ask questions, because they know that asking questions is their right. They become empowered, gain confidence, develop leadership skills, and make informed decisions; for example, they can choose the best kindergarten for their children, improving long-term child and family outcomes.

Community Collaboration

Parents reported community collaboration in the form of class trips and community-based activities, such as going to the library, a church, or community events. Community resource binders, which help parents to access community services and resources, were created or updated with the help of the PERS. Providers also made binders more accessible to parents by placing them within easy view and reach. These efforts support children, families, and schools by connecting families and children to networks of social support, as well as to needed services, programs, and resources (Sanders, 2001).

The major barriers to parent engagement were lack of time and language fluency.

The major barrier reported by parents and providers was time. This was the case particularly for working parents, parents who were in school, parents with health issues, and parents with other children (especially younger children or children with health issues). All of these groups tend to have less time and energy to be engaged (Garcia et al., 2002; Griffith, 1998).

Parents and providers also reported language fluency barriers to parent engagement. This issue is especially important to address, because LAUP works with a culturally and linguistically diverse segment of Los Angeles County's population.

The availability of family members to provide child care, the strength of invitations to participate and the quality of communication with providers were identified as key factors facilitating parent engagement.

For some parents, engagement was only made possible with the support of other family members, who either cared for the children so that the parents could participate in school activities, or attended school activities themselves because the parent was unable to attend. Again, this was particularly important for working and/or single parents, parents with health issues, and parents with other children. Another facilitating factor was the strength of invitations for parent involvement. Invitations demonstrate that parent participation in children's education is valued and encouraged by the school, which in turn may result in parents feeling more valued. This factor includes both the number of opportunities made available and parents' perceptions of invitations. A third facilitating factor was quality of communication, including the number, frequency, and types of contacts that occurred between parents and their children's preschool teachers and providers; parents' comfort in speaking with teachers; parents' satisfaction with children's teachers and preschools; and parents' confidence in teachers' skills.

Recommendations

This evaluation of parent engagement at LAUP provides a detailed initial assessment of LAUP's programs and their impacts. Future evaluations should consider additional efforts to capture the quality of parent engagement. Data capturing the quality of parent engagement efforts, rather than simply the number of services provided or hours invested, would provide a fuller picture of parent engagement at LAUP.

Two barriers to parent engagement were observed during the course of this evaluation. One major barrier was the issue of time constraints, especially among certain groups of parents. For this reason, future evaluations should extend beyond a school-based definition of parent engagement, with the understanding that many parents are unable to volunteer in the classroom. The second potential barrier to engagement was the need for services and written materials in languages other than English and Spanish. It is crucial to provide families with materials in multiple languages, and to provide translation services for parent workshops, trainings, and other activities, so that all families can participate.

Another issue to address is the implementation of Strengthening Families. Because this program is new, providers should be informed that LAUP intends to continue it. The program should also be presented in a clear manner, as it is currently unclear how this framework would be implemented in providers' everyday work. The PERS should highlight the importance of provider training in this area, and the PERS themselves should continue their own training, to ensure that providers and families can access supports.

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Appendix - Methodology

The Parent Ambassador (PA) Program, and the Parent Engagement and Resource Specialists (PERS) were

examined separately because they have different goals, and because there was minimal overlap between the sites at which each program was implemented. The goals of this evaluation were: 1) to develop an LAUP-specific definition of parent engagement; 2) to identify key aspects of parent engagement programs at the preschool level; 3) to understand the impacts and effectiveness of LAUP's parent engagement programs; and 4) to highlight factors that facilitate or hinder parent engagement.

Evaluation of these programs occurred during the 2013-14 program year, and relied upon both qualitative and quantitative approaches. Data analyzed was collected through multiple methods, including a literature review, parent surveys, parent focus groups, LAUP staff focus groups, pre- and post-program assessments, site visits, and site observations.

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