

Report of the Evaluation of the Polk Bros. Foundation's Full Service Schools Initiative

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Executive Summary

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INTRODUCTION

This report summarizes the findings of a three year evaluation study of the Full Service Schools Initiative (FSSI), a pilot project funded from 1996 through 2000 by Chicago's Polk Bros. Foundation. The purpose of FSSI was to test a research-based framework for expanding school-based and school-linked services that would broaden support for children's well-being and school readiness, and compliment key features of the Chicago school reform movement in elementary schools. A three year evaluation revealed a number of ways that FSSI contributed to improving school performance and supporting student learning.

DESCRIPTION OF THE INITIATIVE

Beginning in spring 1996, the Polk Bros. Foundation funded three Chicago public elementary schools to each partner with a nonprofit organization (or lead partner agency) of their choice to develop full service schools. Grants were made jointly to the school and the lead partner agency, which acted as the fiscal agent for the partnership. Each partnership was eligible to receive up to \$310,000 over the three-year course of the Initiative. Implementation of the grants began in January 1997 and continued through December 1999.

The three school-agency partnerships represented the north, west and south sides of the city. All were located in communities with a high proportion of low-income residents. The schools included predominant populations of African-American and Hispanic families. Each school came to the Initiative with a recent history of implementing improvements to academic quality and instructional effectiveness. Each was a fairly typical neighborhood school for its size and ethnic makeup, evidencing many of the administrative and academic vulnerabilities that slowed improvement within Chicago elementary schools.¹ The lead partner agencies represented three distinct approaches to school collaboration and service delivery. One partner was a neighborhood-specific community organizing entity. Another was a large social service provider with offices in several Chicago neighborhoods. The third provided school-based counseling for students and implemented the Comer School Development Process in a network of Chicago public schools.

FSSI set out an overall goal of improving the physical and psychological well being of children in order to more effectively support their school-related behavior and academic achievement. Four objectives for implementing FSSI were articulated to support this goal:

- 1) To improve the access of students and families to a wide range of support services by integrating and coordinating service delivery, and expanding uses of school facilities;
- 2) To involve parents, faculty, service providers and other community members in planning services and monitoring their success;
- 3) To improve the relationship between parents and school staff and improve the climate for parent involvement in school life;

¹ On the North Side, Brentano Math and Science Academy partnered with Logan Square Neighborhood Association. On the South Side, Marquette Elementary partnered with Metropolitan Family Services. On the West Side, Riis Elementary partnered with Youth Guidance.

4) To create more and stronger linkages between classrooms and community support services.

FSSI also set out a general framework for structuring a full service school reflecting these objectives. Each school-nonprofit partnership was required to organize and maintain an oversight committee composed of local service providers, parents, and school faculty and staff that was responsible for surveying parents and teachers to determine the types of programs and services they believed would be most beneficial for themselves and their children, monitoring the quality and appropriateness of what was offered at the schools, and determining how Polk Bros. Foundation funding would be allocated. Annually \$45,000 was reserved at each school to cover salary and support costs for a full-time resource coordinator who recruited volunteers and a variety of agencies to provide programs and services at the school, enrolled students and parents in programs, and worked with teachers and program providers to ensure that what was offered supported the school's academic program. The lead partner agency was expected to help facilitate the oversight committee, provide entrée to other community service providers, and assist the principal in supervising and supporting the resource coordinator.

The menu of programs offered at each full service school varied according to the needs and desires of the parents, students, and teachers. However, most schools offered academic and social enrichment programs for students and educational programs (i.e., GED, ESL, and computer training) for adults. The Chicago Board of Education's dislike of programs that took students out of class influenced the decision of the partnerships to offer programs for students primarily during non-school hours. Programs for parents took place during the school day as well as after-school, in the evenings, and on Saturdays.

KEY FINDINGS

The overall finding of the evaluation is that the framework advanced by FSSI proved robust, flexible, and adaptive in expanding resources in support of student growth and learning during the after school hours. Through FSSI all three schools instituted programs that addressed barriers to learning and supported child and family development. All three schools laid the groundwork for broader community participation in the oversight and planning of after school activities. Finally, the moderate annual budget of FSSI proved adequate to support the work of one full time resource coordinator and seed pilot programs, although supplementary funds were necessary to diversify and improve programs.

Many efforts were underway in each school during the FSSI period to improve student outcomes, and no simple causal links can be drawn between FSSI and improvement at the three schools. But through FSSI all three schools instituted programs that addressed barriers to learning and supported child and family development. Seven central evaluation findings are summarized below.

Finding 1: Indicators of school performance continued to improve during FSSI

The evaluation compared trends in student mobility, attendance and truancy with demographically similar schools (by ethnicity, enrollment and poverty levels) and CPS as a

whole from 1995 to 1999.² Rates of attendance and truancy were similar to comparison schools, and better than CPS schools as a whole. The FSSI schools showed lower student mobility by 1999 than comparable schools and steeper rates of decline in mobility. Interviews indicated that families were deciding to remain in the communities served by the FSSI schools for reasons that included the enriched after school programs at the FSSI schools.

Finding 2: Measures of student learning improved during FSSI

The evaluation compared trends in standardized test scores with demographically similar schools and CPS as a whole. Academic performance improved at all three schools during FSSI. In most cases the rates of improvement exceeded CPS, and equaled or marginally exceeded comparison schools. But there also was considerable variation within each FSSI school in the test performance of children at different grade levels.

- ITBS reading scores improved at rates exceeding the citywide average at all three schools (CPS 9% vs. Brentano 9.8%; Marquette 10.5%; Riis 18.7%). Comparison schools posted average gains of 9% to 13%. More FSSI students than average were meeting or exceeding national ITBS reading levels.
- Brentano and Riis significantly exceeded the citywide ITBS math scores and exceeded their comparison schools by small margins, typically 2-3 percentage points. Marquette reversed a downward trend in math and climbed back toward citywide averages by 1999.

Finding 3: FSSI increased after-school resources at all three schools

The FSSI schools increased resources and developmental opportunities for students and families. Together the three schools offered 415 programs between January 1997 and December 1999, mostly after 3 PM. The number of after school programs at each school increased annually. While the majority of programs targeted students, adult education (e.g. GED and ESL) and family development (e.g. Family Math) were offered consistently at the three schools.

Finding 4: FSSI increased community partnerships in support of student learning

The FSSI schools increased the range and diversity of their community alliances. By December 1999, each school was acquiring resources from at least 25 community or city organizations. The number of collaborative relationships grew an average of 43% across the three years of FSSI, with more programs providing direct services and academic support.

Finding 5: Teacher involvement in FSSI programs increased over three years

The number of teachers involved in planning or providing after-school activities increased by more than 20% at all three schools. By 1999, about one-third of teachers were active in FSSI across the three schools. Students surveyed viewed school staff as better informed about after school programs and more helpful to students by 1999.

² School-level CPS administrative data were used for the comparative analyses of school performance and student learning. All other findings summarize change over time within the FSSI schools without reference to comparison schools.

Finding 6: FSSI increased student participation in after school programs

Across the schools, between one-third and one-half of enrolled students participated in an after-school program. The two large schools (Brentano and Marquette) created more than 1,400 program openings each from 1997-1999. In a survey of student involvement, the number of students who indicated at least occasional involvement in programs grew by 10% from 1997 to 1999. The largest increase in involvement came among Latino students. Student participants tended to indicate higher levels of school involvement among their parents and more sources of social support, factors that may have facilitated their involvement in programs.

Finding 7: FSSI increased the availability of supportive adult relationships for students

Student program participants reported more relationships with supportive adults in after school settings than did non-participants. At two schools, students reported an increase in the number of adults available to render help and support from 1997 to 1999.

RECOMMENDATIONS

A study of implementation issues focused on the key roles of the school principal, oversight committee, lead partner agency, and resource coordinator in each partnership. The study points toward a number of steps that could improve planning and governance within FSSI, extend its reach to more children, and sharpen its connections to academic goals. Recommendations include the following:

The Principal's Role: The study revealed a range of ways in which Principals played an indispensable role in advancing the goals of FSSI. But incompatibility between some aspects of principals' leadership and FSSI objectives sometimes hampered development.

Future implementations of FSSI should emphasize the need for consistent engagement and collaborative leadership on the part of the principal. Create an orientation process that helps principals to understand the issues raised by leading community school processes, focusing particularly on case materials and mentorship with effective community school principals.

The Oversight Committee: The FSSI oversight committees accomplished the fundamental objective of convening parents, teachers and programs providers to set a service agenda. But the committees sometimes struggled to clarify their missions and authority.

FSSI should develop a process to assist future community schools draw up an organizational plan and rules of procedure for their oversight committees. This process should be guided by a manual for committee development that draws upon lessons from FSSI and the experience with full service schools around the country. Include membership issues among the core questions to be addressed in committee organizational plans.

Student Participation: Students and other youth in the community have invaluable information and perspectives to contribute to school-based service delivery. The potential roles of students

(particularly upper grade students) as knowledgeable contributors and collaborators remained underdeveloped in FSSI.

Given the close affinity between youth development principles and community schooling, the question, “How can students contribute?” should become a core consideration in FSS leadership development and program creation.

Parent Involvement: Parent representatives played a key role in governing FSSI, operating its programs, and providing support services such as childcare. In some ways the partnerships had only begun to explore the many ways that more parents could lead FSSI and influence school leadership.

The question “How can parents get involved?” should be among the core considerations in FSS leadership development and program creation. In addition to representing parents and refreshing parent membership, oversight committees should recruit and support parents for leadership roles within programs, set clear goals for parent involvement, and track success quantitatively and qualitatively.

The Lead Partner Agency: A distinctive feature of FSSI was the development of close partnership between the school staff and a partner agency with strong community ties. Despite the predictable difficulties entailed in collaboration, all three FSSI lead partners contributed expertise and unique value to the school-based efforts.

Continue to develop the convening, supervisory, programmatic and oversight roles of a lead partner agency, including the provision of financial support for staff assigned to the full service school.

The Resource Coordinator (RC): FSSI emphasized the need for a well-funded resource coordinator to devote undivided attention to the nurture of afterschool programs and school-based services. FSSI demonstrated the credibility and value of this position in schools serving low-income students and families.

Establish the RC position within CPS at a level comparable to faculty. Assure sufficient funding within FSSI to support at least one half-time assistant resource coordinator, and assure that the roles that RC’s play in community groups do not compromise their time for school-based activities.

Link the School Day and After School Agenda: While it took some time, FSSI made headway in linking the everyday worlds and concerns of teachers, parents and service providers. A number of promising experiments began to emerge that combined the strengths of teachers and service providers.

Structure the resource coordinator’s time to include significant overlap with the school day, and frequent engagements with teachers and school personnel. Involve teachers in referral processes that allow them to connect their knowledge of students with after school opportunities.

Include Key Support Personnel in FSSI Planning: Building engineers, security staff and other key support staff played key support roles in helping to establish credibility and security of afterschool programs. Occasional problems with these personnel could also generate conflict and slow program development.

Recruit key support personnel to participate in FSSI planning, and solicit their input into oversight committee policies. Lobby the Chicago Public Schools to create positive incentives for building engineers and other staff to support the development of after school programs.

DESCRIPTION OF THE EVALUATION

Evaluation was built into FSSI from its planning phase forward, and the evaluator given extensive access to planning and program activities. An evaluation was designed to address two broad questions³. First, to what degree did the three school partnerships accomplish the objectives established for FSSI by the Foundation? Second, was the FSSI framework of governance and service planning set out by FSSI effective in supporting the accomplishment of FSSI's objectives? The evaluation employed both qualitative and quantitative research methods to address these questions, including the following:

- Collection of aggregate achievement information for Chicago Public Schools, published annually by the Illinois State Board of Education
- Collection of survey information from parents, teachers and 4th through 8th graders using the Comer School Climate Survey and a Neighborhood Resource Survey designed specifically for FSSI
- Interviews with key informants (planners and participants) (three times a year)
- Focus groups (and selected interviews) with students, parents, teachers and service providers
- Semiannual survey of new and continuing linkages between schools and other organizations
- Annual survey of teacher involvement in FSSI activities
- Quarterly survey of new and continuing programs being offered or sponsored by each school
- Regular attendance at planning and oversight meetings, and observation of programs

³ The evaluation team began its work while the Project Director was Research Director at the Center for Talent Development at Northwestern University. In April 1999 the evaluation moved with its director to Chapin Hall Center for Children at the University of Chicago.