

Site Visit Report: Los Angeles Child Welfare-Early Education Partners Infrastructure Project

Award #: 90CO1062

Cluster: Child Welfare Education/Early Education Partnership to Expand Protective Factors for Child Welfare Involvement

Grantee: [UCLA-Department of Social Welfare, Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities](#)

Contact: Todd Michael Franke, Ph.D., tfranke@ucla.edu

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SUMMARY

Improving developmental outcomes and school readiness for young children involved with child welfare is a strong component of improving well-being, a priority in the child welfare field. To achieve this goal, the South County Regional Office of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and Long Beach Unified School District Head Start programs are using a 17-month Children's Bureau grant to increase referrals to and enrollment in early childhood education services for children involved with child welfare.

Infants and toddlers represent the largest segment of the nation's foster care population and are more likely than older children to experience recurrence of abuse and neglect. The Los Angeles Child Welfare-Early Education Partners Infrastructure project staff believe that children involved with child welfare that also attend an ECE program experience increased child safety through daily interactions with other child-serving professionals and increased communication between ECE staff and social workers. The project is focusing on expanding early childhood education enrollment through a partnership among Long Beach Unified School District-Head Start/Early Head Start (LBUSD-HS/EHS) programs, DCFS South County Regional Office, and the Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Project staff reported that although children in foster care are automatically eligible for HS/EHS, many DCFS social workers were unaware of the Head Start/EHS program. Additionally, they reported that social workers did not know about HS/EHS eligibility requirements, the benefits of ECE for children and families, available ECE resources in Long Beach, or the HS/EHS application and enrollment process.

Agency staff realized that in order to increase the number of children referred to and served by LBUSD-HS/EHS, as well as other ECE programs, agencies needed to:

- Reorganize program interactions
- Simplify the referral process
- Provide training for DCFS and ECE staff
- Inform parents, caregivers, and community partners about the benefits of ECE

Through the Children's Bureau grant, which ended on February 28, 2013, a computer-based referral system is helping the project achieve its goals. The electronic referral system now notifies DCFS workers of Head Start eligibility for children on their caseloads and allows them to easily refer children to the LBUSD-HS/EHS office. Prior to the grant, the referral system was limited to children ages 3–4. During the grant period, the electronic referral system was expanded to include children ages birth–5. Twenty-three HS-EHS sites that are part of the LBUSD, and other ECEs in the community, also were added to the referral system infrastructure.



Partnerships with other quality ECE programs (e.g. center-based child care providers, preschools, community programs) have been developed to facilitate enrollment when EHS/HS spaces are not available. The project has also created curricula for DCFS social workers, parents, ECE providers, and juvenile dependency court personnel, among others. The curricula are aimed at developing participant understanding of how to navigate the ECE system in order to connect families and children involved with the child welfare system to developmentally appropriate ECE programs, barriers to enrollment, and the benefits of ECE programs for young children involved with child welfare.

Since 2011, the project has increased referrals to HS/EHS by almost 200 percent. It also has established a system for referring and linking children to quality ECE programs when space is not available through HS/EHS.

Reprinted from *Children's Bureau Express*, "Site Visit: LA Child Welfare/Early Education Partners Project" (<https://cbexpress.acf.hhs.gov>).

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

Abstract

Using a 17-month Children's Bureau (CB) grant, the South County Regional Office of the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services (DCFS) and Long Beach Unified School District Head Start programs are working to increase referrals to and enrollment in quality early childhood education services for children involved with child welfare. The grant is part of CB's Child Welfare Education/Early Education Partnership to Expand Protective Factors for Child Welfare Involvement cluster. The project is focusing on expanding early childhood education enrollment in Long Beach through a partnership involving Long Beach Unified School District-Head Start/Early Head Start (LBUSD-HS/EHS) programs, DCFS South County Regional Office, and the Center for Healthier Children, Families and Communities at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA).

Goals for the Los Angeles Child Welfare-Early Education Partners Infrastructure Project include the following:

- Enhance the electronic DCFS and LBUSD HS/EHS referral system
- Develop a system for referring, linking, and tracking children involved with DCFS, but whom LBUSD HS/EHS cannot serve, to other high-quality early childhood education (ECE) programs
- Establish a mechanism for training Long Beach child welfare, ECE, juvenile dependency court staff, and parents and caregivers on the benefits of ECE, especially for children involved with child welfare, and navigation of related service systems

Infants and toddlers represent the largest segment of the nation's foster care population and are more likely than older children to experience recurrence of abuse and neglect. The project was grounded in the belief that children involved with child welfare who also attend an ECE program would experience increased child safety through daily interactions with other child-serving professionals and increased communication between ECE staff and social workers. Helping to better prepare children for future educational endeavors was also viewed as likely positive outcome.

Need For This Service

As of October 2012, 332 children ages birth–4 were under DCFS supervision in the Long Beach area. Just 125 (17 percent) of these children were enrolled in an ECE program, and an additional 100 children (30 percent) had been referred but were awaiting enrollment.

Project staff reported that although children in foster care are categorically eligible for HS/EHS, many DCFS social workers were unaware of the Head Start/EHS program. They also reported that social workers did not know about HS/EHS eligibility requirements (specifically that children in child welfare are automatically eligible for services), the benefits of ECE for children and families, available ECE resources in Long Beach, or the HS/EHS application and enrollment process—specifically enrollment timelines. Furthermore, the application process for HS/EHS was cumbersome and time consuming. If space was not available in LBUSD-HS/EHS, children were turned away, often without referrals to other ECE opportunities in their communities. LBUSD-HS/EHS teachers and other ECE providers also were not trained on the effects of trauma on children's behavior and school performance.

Project staff realized that in order to increase the number of children referred to and served by LBUSD-HS/EHS, as well as other ECE programs, the agencies needed to:

- Reorganize program interactions
- Simplify the referral process
- Provide training for DCFS and ECE staff
- Inform parents, caregivers, and community partners about the benefits of ECE.

To further this mission, an advisory committee was convened and consisted of staff from DCFS' South County Regional Office, LBUSD-HS/EHS staff, UCLA staff, staff from other community ECE providers, and staff from support and resource programs in the Long Beach community. Within the advisory committee is the core leadership team, which is comprised of local community leaders from the ECE and the child welfare systems.

VIRTUAL SITE VISIT HIGHLIGHTS

The virtual site visit occurred between December 11, 2012, and January 4, 2013 via phone interviews and emails with project staff. The interviews included several members of the advisory committee/leadership team, staff from the LBUSD-HS/EHS program, and project evaluators. The following is the date that each interview occurred:

- December 11, 2012: Steve Sturm, Program Manager, Early Care and Education Programs, DCFS;
- December 13, 2012: Todd Franke, Ph.D., UCLA, Principal Investigator
- December 20, 2012: Luanne Mauro- Atkinson, Assistant Director of Family Services, LBUSD-HS/EHS; Cynthia Ruiz, Community Liaison for the grant; and Family Services Supervisor, LBUSD-HS/EHS; and Alma Stansbury, Social Services Manager, LBUSD-HS/EHS.
- December 20, 2012: Sacha Klein, Ph.D., Michigan State University, project evaluator, and Stephanie Benson, MSW, Ph.D. student, UCLA, project evaluator.
- January 3, 2013: Frank Ramos, former Regional Administer (RA) of DCFS South County Regional Office and Art Lieras, current RA of DCFS South County Regional Office.

The interviews lasted between 30 minutes and 2 hours. Topics discussed included the following:

- The impetus to the development of the project
- The successes of the project
- The challenges of the project
- The early results of the project
- The evaluation process

- The sustainability of the project

In addition, information was obtained from the project's semiannual reports for the reporting periods of October 2011 through March 2012 and April 2012 through September 2012.

LESSONS LEARNED

Unique and Innovative Features

The Los Angeles Child Welfare-Early Education Partners Infrastructure Project ensured that members of the leadership team were those who could make decisions on behalf of their agencies or had access to those who could approve changes. The following project actions may be considered innovative and unique:

- **Electronic referral system:** DCFS social workers now utilize an electronic referral system that notifies them of Head Start service eligibility for children on their caseloads. The new referral system also allows workers to easily refer children to the LBUSD-HS/EHS office. Prior to the grant, the referral system was limited to children ages 3–4. During the grant period, the electronic referral system was expanded to include children ages birth–4, and 23 HS-EHS sites that are part of the LBUSD, as well as additional ECEs in the community, were added to the system's infrastructure.
- **System for referring and linking children to other ECE providers:** The LBUSD-HS/EHS Community Liaison has successfully identified and built partnerships with other quality ECE programs (e.g. center-based child care providers, preschools, community programs) to facilitate enrollment when EHS/HS spaces are not available.
- **Training offered to social workers, court officers and personnel, teachers, parents, foster parents, and caregivers:** In partnership with the Inter-University Consortium/DCFS Training Project¹, the project created curricula for DCFS social workers, parents, ECE providers, and juvenile dependency court personnel, including attorneys, Court Appointed Special Advocates (CASAs), and judges. The three core learning objectives of the training were to develop the following:
 - A clear understanding of how to navigate the ECE system in order to connect families and children involved with the child welfare system to developmentally appropriate ECE programs
 - A clear understanding of the common barriers to enrolling children ages birth to 4 involved with the child welfare system in ECE programs
 - A clear understanding of the potential for quality ECE programs to improve developmental outcomes and school readiness for children ages birth to 4 within the child welfare system

Training components for each demographic focused on the following:

- **Training for ECE providers** included a brief historical overview of the child welfare system, changing philosophical shifts in the role of public child welfare agencies, as well as information about the services provided by DCFS. ECE teachers also were trained on trauma-informed practice.
- **Training for DCFS social workers** included detailed information about what constitutes an ECE program. Training components that were relevant to both ECE providers and DCFS social workers focused on how ECE enhances and supports child and family protective factors; research regarding the potential of ECE to improve developmental outcomes, school readiness for children, and

¹ The Inter-University Consortium/DCFS (IUC/DCFS) Training Project is a collaborative endeavor between the Los Angeles County Department of Children and Family Services and the graduate programs of social work at California State University Long Beach, University of California Los Angeles, University of Southern California, California State University Los Angeles, California State University Northridge, and California State University Dominguez Hills. The goal of this collaborative is to increase the professional skills and knowledge of Los Angeles County public child welfare workers.

reduce child maltreatment; the availability and eligibility for free or subsidized ECE; and the structural limitations of the referral and enrollment process of the DCFS-LBUSD electronic referral system.

- **Training for parents, foster parents, caregivers, and court personnel** contained similar, although less detailed information. The training for parents also included information about navigating related services systems.

Challenges

- **Lack of feedback from LBUSD-HS/EHS after a referral.** DFCS social workers reported in focus groups that they frequently did not know whether a child they referred to LBUSD-HS/EHS was enrolled in a program. Although the infrastructure for electronic feedback is currently not available, LBUSD-HS/EHS has agreed to contact the assigned social worker with information regarding the child's enrollment status.
- **Availability of HS/EHS services, especially for EHS, which serves children ages birth–2.** DFCS social workers have been discouraged by the number of children referred to EHS who are not placed in the program because of the lack of availability. Because of the number of children who would clearly benefit from a HS/EHS, but there was not space available, the project contracted with Preschool Without Walls, an alternate ECE program focused on parental involvement that targets hard-to-reach families. Approximately 60 DCFS supervised children were referred to this program. In addition, the project partnered with the Advancement Project, which advocated for legislation to give priority to children involved with child welfare and juvenile justice for subsidized child care. The California legislature, however, did not pass the bill.
- **Inability of LBUSD-HS/EHS to share educational information even when the child is in DCFS custody.** California law prevents LBUSD-HS/EHS from sharing educational information with DCFS without the informed consent of the parent, which may be difficult to obtain if the child is in foster care. As a result, social workers are not always informed about the early education needs of the children in DCFS custody unless the court has provided, in a court order, DCFS with the right to obtain said information. The project is working with the juvenile dependency court to provide standard language in each court order that will allow DCFS access to early care and educational information. Although the full ramification of recent legislation is yet to be determined, project staff report that the recent passage of the Uninterrupted Scholars Act seeks to remove many of these barriers to sharing information for children who are under the jurisdiction of dependency court.
- **Resistance of some parents, particularly those receiving in-home services, to ECE programs.** Parents of children who remain in their home but who are under the supervision of DCFS are sometimes reluctant to place their children in ECE programs. If a parent does not follow through with the application process once they have been contacted by LBUSD-HS/EHS, the LBUSD-HS/EHS Community Liaison will make a home visit and discuss the parents' concerns, the benefits of ECE, and the enrollment process.
- **The HS/EHS policy that requires children to be removed from the program if they move out of the program's district.** Children are no longer eligible to receive services from the HS/EHS program if they move, and there is no guarantee services will be available in the new community. Project staff would like to see this policy change in order to provide educational stability, which is pertinent to educational success.

Successful Strategies and Keys to Success

As mentioned previously, since 2011, referrals to HS/EHS have increased dramatically. Additionally, the project improved DCFS staff and community partners' understanding of the benefits of ECE for children involved with the child welfare system and trained LBUSD-HS/EHS staff on trauma-informed practice. It also has established a system for referring and linking children to quality ECE programs when space is not available through HS/EHS. In order to accomplish these milestones, project partners identified the following keys to success:

- **Having the support of the partner agencies' leadership.** The leadership of each agency involved is very supportive of the project and understands the benefits of ECE for children involved with the child welfare system.
- **Ensuring the right people and right agencies are part of the leadership team.** Include those people who can make decisions on behalf of their agency/organization or have access to decision-makers. In addition, the leadership team meets biweekly, which helps to ensure the goals of the project are met.
- **Ensuring the child welfare system is 100 percent engaged in the process.** Having a management-level DCFS South County Regional Office staff member whose role was to increase the number of referrals to LBUSD-HS/EHS was a key factor for in achieving the project's goals.
- **Providing training.** Training child welfare staff on the importance of ECE in improving educational outcomes, especially for children involved with child welfare, was key to increasing referrals and enrollment.
- **Changing parents' views of DCFS.** The project worked to change parents' views of DCFS from one of interference to one that supports families, so that parents are open to participating in the program.

Other Lessons Learned

It is very important that referrals to HS/EHS be made and applications completed as early as possible, each year, to ensure availability within the program for the following school year.

OUTCOMES

Evaluation

The Los Angeles Child Welfare-Early Education Partners Infrastructure Project is being evaluated by Sacha Klein at Michigan State University and Stephanie Benson and Sei Young Lee at UCLA. The evaluators are utilizing various tools, including the following:

- **Participant Feedback Surveys:** These surveys were designed to collect data for the formative portion of the evaluation that addresses advisory committee participants' understanding of goals and project objectives discussed at each meeting, as well as to help determine if the overall format (e.g. length, location, materials utilized) of each meeting was effective. These surveys were administered at the first three meetings of the advisory committee.
- **Social Network Survey:** This instrument was designed to assess the impact of collaborative relationships between participating advisory committee organizations over the course of the project by documenting the changes in the level and strength of the collaborative relationships between the organizations represented on the advisory committee. The instrument requires each organization to assess the strength of the following seven linkages with each of the other organizations on the advisory committee:
 - Sharing information
 - Pooling funding

- Sharing staff
- Sharing resources
- Sending referrals,
- Receiving referrals
- Overall partnership quality

The survey was administered to participants at the first and second advisory committee meetings to determine a baseline and will be administered again at the conclusion of the grant period.

- **Evaluation of the joint DCFS-ECE provider trainings:** The evaluation of training consists of a pre- and posttest that includes both Likert scale questions and knowledge-based questions to evaluate training participants' competence and knowledge of each learning objective. Utilizing evaluation data from pre- and posttests from DCFS social workers and ECE providers, the analysis will address the following questions:
 - Did the training result in increased knowledge of the three stated learning objectives as measured via pre- and posttests?
 - Did the joint trainings benefit ECE providers and DCFS workers equally?
 - Did self-reported competence with learning objectives correlate to competence with knowledge-based questions?
 - How can the training be improved?
- **Focus groups:** The evaluation team drafted a focus group protocol and conducted focus groups with DCFS social workers and social work supervisors, parents, caregivers, and foster parents. The focus groups conducted with DCFS social workers revealed concerns about the lack of feedback from LBUSD-HS/EHS pertaining to program referrals. In addition, the social workers articulated a clear understanding of the benefits of ECE for children involved with DCFS, as well as the benefits for parents and DCFS staff, and indicated that the process to refer children to LBUSD-HS/EHS was not cumbersome and did not add to their workload.
- **Referral and enrollment data:** At the end of each month, DCFS and LBUSD-HS/EHS provided data to the evaluators that will allow them to answer the following research questions:
 - Was there an increase in the number/percent of DCFS children in Long Beach referred to high-quality ECE programs ?
 - How did changes in referral rates differ by child/family, demographics, and program type?
 - What barriers in the referral process were encountered?
 - Was there an increase in the number/percent of DCFS children living in Long Beach enrolled in high-quality ECE programs?
 - How did changes in enrollment rates differ by child/family, demographics, and program type?
 - What barriers to the enrollment process were encountered?

In addition, the evaluators will continue to analyze data after the grant ends to explore the relationship between ECE enrollment and child safety, permanency, and well-being outcomes, including developmental gains experienced by DCFS children who receive Head Start services and academic outcomes for DCFS children who attend LBUSD elementary schools.

Outcomes

According to project staff, during the year prior to the grant (October 2010 to September 30, 2011), 81 children in Long Beach were referred to LBUSD-HS/EHS. During the first year of the grant period (October 2011 to September 30, 2012), there were 166 referrals to LBUSD-HS/EHS. Since 2011, the project increased referrals to HS/EHS by almost 200 percent. Additionally, the

project increased DCFS staff and community partners' understanding of the benefits of ECE for children involved with child welfare and trained LBUSD-HS/EHS staff on trauma-informed practice.

Sustainability

The Los Angeles Child Welfare-Early Education Partners Infrastructure Project plans to continue its efforts after the grant period ends February 28, 2013. The referral system and the interaction and collaboration between DCFS and LBUSD-HS/EHS will continue, as well the advisory committee. The data sharing also will continue. There is concern about the funding of the LBUSD-HS/EHS Community Liaison position, as it is funded by the grant. Project leadership is exploring the possibility of using Masters of Social Work interns to continue some of the Community Liaison functions.

The project would like to expand to other DCFS offices in Los Angeles County, other Los Angeles County Head Start offices, and eventually countywide. In addition, the project partners are interested in having an exchange of information agreement that will allow for school systems to share educational information with DCFS for the children involved with DCFS.

ATTACHMENTS

- [Participant feedback surveys](#)
- [Social network survey](#)
- [Training pre- and posttests](#)
- [Focus group protocol](#)
- [Data tracking elements](#)
- [Training power point](#)