

Final Evaluation Report



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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This report evaluates the impact of the Schools First Program, a three-year initiative of the Center for School Change (CSC) and the Cargill Foundation. The program aimed to increase student academic skills in reading or math, and to improve family support for strong education at 11 Twin Cities schools. All 11 schools had at least 60 percent of students who qualify for free or reduced priced meals and 52 percent students of color. Following are the key findings.

- Overall, the Schools First program demonstrated success in reaching the goals of increasing student academic performance in reading or math, and improving family support for strong education. Seven of the 11 schools, or 64 percent, achieved their academic goals and all 11 schools met their family goals within three years. The pedagogical ideas and actions learned in the Schools First Program made a lasting imprint on many schools. The majority of schools will also continue the Schools First Program's efforts to promote parent and family involvement in student learning.
- Contributing factors to program success included CSC support, Schools First conferences and workshops, CSC advocacy for participating schools, the importance of grant funds, and the Schools First professional development programming to generate innovative teaching methods to improve student performance. Teachers attributed better student performance to a number of methods learned through the Schools First Program.
- Challenges to program success included project-related factors such as a lack of volunteers and the approaching end to project funding, which had paid for important staff reflection time, family incentives and communication supplies. Other challenges were related to student demographics, including attendance declines due to student mobility and difficulties finding effective instructional practices for English language learners. Institutional barriers such as budget cuts, leadership changes, school calendar changes and the burden of multiple assessments also challenged program success.
- The evaluators suggest that CSC and Cargill explore ways to disseminate the learning from this program and build upon this program's successful model and fund other urban education reform initiatives that also include effective elements. Foremost is ensuring the critical elements identified by this evaluation are in place in future programming. This includes focusing on a few goals, providing regular planning time, linking sites to needed resources, leveraging CSC and Cargill visibility and credibility for advocacy, and providing opportunities for schools to share best practices. In addition, recommendations for meeting challenges identified in this report include:
 - Exploring instructional practices for English language learners and mobile student bodies;
 - Advocating for changes in the education system that reduce student mobility;
 - Exploring ways to leverage the capacity of the participating teachers and principals to support their peers;
 - Encouraging program participants to continue sharing effective practices and support one another to sustain the enthusiasm and commitment;
 - Fostering linkages between schools and community organizations to find and retain classroom volunteers; and
 - Sharing the evaluation results with schools.

INTRODUCTION

This report evaluates the impact of the Schools First Program on students, families, and the community. The evaluation report has seven sections: an executive summary; introduction; program description; methodology; findings; a discussion of critical factors, challenges, and sustainability; and conclusions with recommendations. This program is an initiative of the Center for School Change (CSC) at the University of Minnesota’s Humphrey Institute of Public Affairs and the Cargill Foundation. The program aimed to increase student academic performance in reading or math, and to improve family support for strong education. The 2003-04 school year was the last of this three-year education reform initiative.

PROGRAM DESCRIPTION

The Schools First Program operated at 11 schools in the Twin Cities metropolitan area: ten schools were located in Minneapolis and one was located in Brooklyn Park¹. Ten were district schools and one was a charter public school.

School descriptions. Student enrollment varied from school to school during the 2003-04 school year, with an average enrollment of 364 students. The majority of the schools served a high proportion (ranging from 60-95%) of students who qualify for free or reduced price meals, and students of color (ranging from 52-98%). Approximately one-fifth of the students were also English language learners. The percent of students with special needs status ranged from 7 to 24 percent. The table below outlines student demographic information by school*.

School (Grades)	Students	Students of Color	F/R Meals	ELL Status	Special Education
Bottineau (PK-2)	128	66 (52%)	77 (60%)	20 (16%)	17 (13%)
Cityview (K-8)	564	525(93%)	510(90%)	144(26%)	91 (16%)
Cooper (K-5)	190	146(77%)	149(78%)	69 (36%)	29 (15%)
Franklin (6-8)	616	601(98%)	565(92%)	125(20%)	126(20%)
Jordan Park (K-5)	436	416(95%)	394(90%)	66 (15%)	49 (11%)
North Star (K-5)	543	517(95%)	516(95%)	122(22%)	80 (15%)
Parkview (K-6)	309	238(77%)	222(72%)	8 (3%)	46 (15%)
Performing Arts Magnet (K-5)	95	93 (98%)	83 (87%)	0 (0%)	8 (8%)
Sanford (6-8)	425	276(65%)	304(72%)	74 (17%)	101(24%)
Sojourner Truth (K-8)	241	237(98%)	214(89%)	38 (16%)	18 (7%)
Zanewood (K-6)	454	382(84%)	331(73%)	154(34%)	53 (12%)

*Source: Minnesota Department of Education Data Center (<http://education.state.mn.us>). Data represented the count of students who were enrolled over October 1 of the 2003-04 school year.

¹ Originally there were 12 schools selected for the Schools First Program. One of the schools, a school that had a contract with Minneapolis Public Schools, was unable to enroll the number of students it had proposed. Since this school also had a certain number of students in its agreement with the Center for School Change, and this number was not reached, the school was removed from the Schools First Program.

Program strategies. The Schools First program employed several strategies to achieve the program goals, including:

- The CSC staff met monthly with teams of teachers and the principal at each participating school. CSC staff helped the school team focus on their targeted academic and family goals, reflect on progress toward those goals, facilitate team problem solving and provide access to resources to address classroom or school needs. CSC staff support has also been responsive to unique school or project needs, such as advocating on behalf of a school to remain open, tutoring students, and helping teachers and community members build a playground.
- Two conferences were held for participants each year; one conference during the school year and the other during the summer. Up to 12 team members could attend each conference. Conference presentations were made based on school requests. Nationally recognized authorities such as Joyce Epstein of John Hopkins University met with the school teams to help increase knowledge of proven practices in math, reading, and family involvement. Substantial blocks of time were scheduled for individual school teams to plan. Opportunities were provided for schools to share effective instructional practices and family involvement strategies. Both conferences were held in facilities (a northern Minnesota lake resort and the Cargill head quarters) that encouraged relaxation, fun, and as teachers reported, “*made them feel like they were important.*”
- School teams were required to select one academic and one family goal on which to develop their plans. Six schools worked on projects to increase student reading skills and five targeted math skills. Schools were held accountable for making progress by requiring each school to collect data to assess progress toward their goals. When goals were achieved, \$10,000 was given to the school to be used as the school team determined.
- Evaluation technical assistance was provided to assist schools in tracking data, developing data collection tools, and analyzing and interpreting evaluation findings.

METHODOLOGY

This evaluation attempted to answer two evaluation questions: To what extent did project activities contribute to (1) increasing student improvement in reading, writing or math; and (2) improving family support for strong education. A variety of data sources were used to answer the above questions, to include:

- Annual Project Surveys to gather information on the support received from CSC and Cargill.
- Site visits to six schools each year to observe Schools First program activities.
- Staff focus group sessions held annually with six schools to check the validity of data collected and to discuss observed impacts on students, families, and the community.
- Best practice discussions with schools during the summer workshop sessions.
- Review of each school’s annual implementation report.

The methods employed for analysis were specifically tied to the evaluation questions stated for the project. All survey data were analyzed using SPSS. Qualitative data were analyzed and grouped by themes. Each school’s annual implementation report was also reviewed and summarized in a matrix to describe progress towards stated academic and family goals. Some limitations existed with this evaluation, including:

- Site visits and focus group sessions were conducted with only six of the 11 schools to provide a sample descriptive analysis of project activities and impact.
- No data were directly gathered from parents to describe their involvement. Information gathered for the evaluation was collected directly from the schools.
- All data collected for the evaluation was in the form of self-reports².
- It is important to note that at some schools, the absolute number of students involved at the end of three years was small. Mobility at many schools was sizable and greatly reduced the number of students who could be tracked over the three years of the program. One or two students not making the desired progress at schools with few students could significantly alter the results.

FINDINGS: PROGRAM IMPACT

Student academic performance. Seven of the 11 schools, or 64 percent, achieved their academic goals within three years. In addition, almost all (95 percent) teachers were satisfied with the progress in academic achievement: Twenty-eight percent of teachers were “extremely satisfied,” 41 percent of teachers were “very satisfied,” and 26 percent of teachers were “satisfied.”

Specifically, five schools achieved and exceeded their **reading** goals. North Star, Performing Arts Magnet, and Cityview increased the percentage of students in their cohort making a year’s progress on the NALT assessment by at least 34 percent (goals for improvement ranged from 10-15%). The number of 8th grade students at Sanford Middle School passing the MBST reading test also increased from 28% to 58% percent over three years. By 2004, 94 percent of students at Bottineau were at grade level or made at least one year’s growth in reading achievement (baseline was 71%).

Notably, Cityview also met an additional reading goal. The school’s second goal was to increase the reading levels of students by a year’s growth at 90 percent using a curriculum assessment. The results showed that 94 percent of the students achieved a year’s reading growth as measured by this assessment.

Two schools successfully achieved their **math** goals. At Zanewood, 72 percent of the 2nd and 3rd grade students demonstrated progress toward grade-level math proficiency (baseline was 46%). Park View also increased the number of 2nd, 3rd, and 4th grade students on track to pass the MBST for three separate cohorts (one cohort, for example, started at 33% and improved to 71%).

While students in most program schools improved their academic performance, four schools did not achieve their academic goals. At Cooper, the goal was to increase the percentage of students making a year’s progress by 15 percent (baseline was 49%). The school came close to meeting its goal with an increase of 12 percent (improved to 61%). The Jordan Park school also fell short of achieving its goal of increasing the percentage of students not scoring in the low

² All the schools located in Minneapolis were tested with the NALT. NALT data were released to school principals and testing coordinators by the Research, Evaluation, and Assessment (REA) Office of Minneapolis Public Schools on May 28, 2004. Annual growth from spring 2003 to spring 2004 was adjusted by REA in August 2004 to reflect the extra month between the two testing administration dates.

category of the NALT in math by 15 percent (the school reported an improvement of 10 percent). Sojourner Truth Academy was unable to reach its goal of 63 percent of students scoring at or above grade level in math on the NALT (baseline ranged from 26-27 percent and the school achieved 33-39%). Franklin Middle School did not meet its goal of 60 percent of current 6th grade students passing the Minnesota Basic Skills Test (MBST) in 2004 (the school achieved 40 percent).³

Family involvement. At the end of three years, the number of families involved in all 11 Schools First schools increased. In fact, nearly all (94 percent) of the teachers reported being satisfied with the progress to improve family involvement: Forty-two percent of teachers were “extremely satisfied,” 35 percent of teachers were “very satisfied,” and 17 percent were “satisfied.”

Parent participation improved in a number of ways. Parent attendance at **conferences** rose from 56 percent to 98 percent at Cooper, 77 to 97 percent at Park View, 86 to 98 percent at North Star, 69 to 79 percent at the Performing Arts Magnet, and 72 to 81 percent at Cityview. At Bottineau, all families attended at least one conference and 97 percent attended one or more school events. Both open houses and conferences increased from 20 to 80 percent at Sanford Middle School.

More parents also attended **school events**. Ninety-five percent of the parents at Sojourner Truth Academy attended four or more school events (99% attended two or more events). At Franklin, the number of parents attending fall conferences increased from 122 to 170. The percentage of parents taking part in family math activities at Zanewood increased by at least 10 percent each year so that by 2004, 92 percent of families participated in the monthly family math activity. Jordan Park also improved parent participation in **training** from 18 percent to 74 percent (an increase of 56 percent). Teachers also perceived greater overall parent participation during the third year than in the first two years of the project.

Two schools also held themselves accountable for an additional family engagement goal. Bottineau targeted 80 percent of families to attend one or more school events and Park View committed to ensuring that 85 percent of continuously enrolled families signed out at least one math backpack. Both schools met these additional goals.

Please note that the process for tracking students and parents varied among schools. Some schools measured progress for all grades or selected grades, while others followed a specific cohort from year-to-year. Attachment A contains a matrix outlining goals and progress made at each school.

³ In spring 2000, the school reported that 37 percent of their 6th grade students were projected to pass the MBST in reading according to the NALT results. Furthermore, the school reported that 53 percent of their eighth grade students in spring 2000 had passed the reading section of the MBST.

DISCUSSION

This section contains three components: critical factors that contributed to program success, challenges encountered during implementation; and program sustainability.

Critical Factors

- **Center for School Change (CSC) support fostered school success.** In particular, the focus on a few specific goals, opportunity to learn and try new instructional strategies, time for planning and reflection, accountability, and advocacy were key elements of the program's support. Schools reported that CSC staff consistently helped teachers remain focused on project goals. Teachers explained that with many unique student needs and the demands placed on them by administration, they were often distracted from focusing on project goals. The monthly team meetings with CSC staff members helped them maintain focus. Eighty-six percent of teachers found the support from CSC liaisons was either "extremely helpful" (63%) or "very helpful" (23%).

Teachers also reported that CSC support led to greater school accountability and performance. Teachers at one site commented, *"We have learned from other grantees and statisticians on how to collect and evaluate performance data. The accountability protocols have improved the way our school has done business in the past three years."*

- Teachers pointed to the **Schools First conferences and workshops** as useful in providing the time to plan, learn new ideas, and share best practices. Participation was high. Eighty-two percent of the 2003-04 Schools First participants reported attending School's First conferences and workshops. One participant's comments represent the value experienced by many, *"The time was well used by the team to share information, ideas, and strategies that would help move the initiative toward its goals."*

Another indication of usefulness was the teachers' willingness to implement learned strategies. Many sites reported applying the ideas and best practices from the conferences directly to instruction. Two sites added that the training on best practices in math instruction contributed to better teaching and improved student performance. Teachers at another site reported application beyond the Schools First grades, *"Our school team greatly valued the time to work together at summer retreats and monthly meetings. These common meeting times provided the opportunity to integrate the Cargill grant math goals into school-wide endeavors."* The newly learned and implemented instructional techniques and the capacity to independently establish and monitor performance were skills reported by school staff that will last beyond the funding of the Schools First program.

While not a specific strategy outlined in the original program design, CSC advocacy for participating schools was highly valued. In particular, the advocacy was cited as crucial to avoiding one school's closure. Team members from this school valued two aspects of the support: the CSC advocacy on the school's behalf to remain open and developing the organizing skills needed to mobilize parents and community members. Teachers specifically said, *"We didn't get closed last year because of Joe's help."*

- **Funding.** All sites emphasized the importance of grant funds. Funding was used in a wide variety of ways, including strategic planning, curriculum development, monitoring student progress, and to implement the Easy Caller phone system to regularly call families. While each school used the funds to achieve their particular goals, teachers across sites valued the funds to pay for substitute teachers for professional development and to supply food and incentives to create a welcoming atmosphere for families and translators. Several teacher teams noted that while the financial incentive was “nice,” it was less important than the time allotted for planning and reflection, learning and using effective instructional and family involvement practices, and focusing on a few goals and accountability.
- **Schools First professional development programming generated innovative teaching methods to improve student performance.** Teachers attributed better student performance to a number of methods learned through the Schools First Program. Many schools successfully used small groups with **individualized attention**. One school employed volunteers and staff “prep specialists” to provide the individual attention behind better student performance. Another school utilized smaller and leveled reading classes and trained staff to teach at differentiated reading levels.

Teachers also pointed to **an array of useful instructional methods**. Schools relied on repetition, games, and interaction with multiple adults. One school, for example, instituted an accelerated reading program with computerized quizzes to improve scores, while another site highlighted the success of all-day kindergarten. Students with language barriers benefited from interpreters at another school.

- **New ways to engage parents.** Teachers reportedly adjusted their approaches to increasing parent involvement at school events. Schools created new ways to **communicate** with parents. Multiple sites cited frequent and casual conferences at convenient times for parents. Another site hired liaisons to increase attendance by facilitating communication with parents. Teachers at one site also focused on “home to school” communication. Teachers elsewhere used “math backpacks” as well as a computer software program to generate progress reports for parents and prepare children for testing situations. Across a number of sites, teachers noted using appropriate vocabulary or interpreters when parents did not speak English as their first language.

Teachers described engaging **parents in activities with the students**. For example, one school invited parents to poetry and performing arts, jump rope, and math classes. Another school used parent friendly math games to engage parents. Yet another school held a welcome back barbeque and multiple family math nights.

Teachers also recounted offering **incentives** for participation such as free transportation, meals, and raffles. One site attracted parents by creating a parent computer lab.

- **Other factors.** Positive publicity was a source of greater parent involvement. Cohesive leadership at one school was also singled out as a critical factor to success.

Challenges

- **Project-related barriers.** Most of the sites faced two project-related challenges. First, multiple schools struggled with a **lack of volunteers**. Many sites unsuccessfully requested volunteers from Cargill employees and retirees. While the CSC staff participation was appreciated, teachers consistently reported that additional volunteers would have significantly benefited students. Second, the **conclusion of funding** will affect program sustainability. While the improved teaching capacity will be maintained, the extra time to reflect and learn is not expected to be maintained by many sites. Incentives for families and communication costs are also expected to be lost. Some sites were looking for new grant opportunities to supplement their budgets but also noted the time needed to pursue the outside funding was minimal. Teachers also explained that the **lack of CSC staff support will be greatly missed**. Teachers indicated the personal support, focus on priority goals, access to resources, and advocacy would be valuable to continue. Many asked that Joe and Jean periodically meet with the teams.
- **Student characteristics.** Student **mobility** was the most commonly cited barrier to achievement. Staff members witnessed declines in attendance due to mobility, and frequently worked hard to address the needs of new students. Teachers commented, *“Even while continuously enrolled, several students were moving with their family from one apartment or shelter to another.”* Another teacher reported, *“The student mobility rate in our school is still a frustration for teachers...It is difficult in this multi-age [type of school] setting to constantly assess student needs and respond with matching instruction.”*

Teachers also noted that parent involvement similarly decreased when families moved a number of times during the school year.

Teachers emphasized the difficulty of finding effective **instructional practices for English language learners**. The language challenge was noted particularly for three sites. Teachers at one site said, *“During the Schools First project we have transitioned 150 new ELL students and their families...it has been a challenge to adjust our programs and services to meet their needs.”*

A few teachers also noted the lack of **effective teaching practices for children with Attention Deficit Disorder**.

- **Institutional barriers.** Staff members at a few sites cited institutional barriers to student success. **Budget cuts** created problematic staff shortages, especially when teachers were strained to plan after-school events. Multiple assessments often tired students and diminished performance. The change from **year-round to a nine-month school year** and **changes in leadership** in three schools presented unique challenges as well.

Sustainability

- **Instructional practice.** The pedagogical ideas and actions learned in the Schools First Program made a lasting imprint on many schools. For example, one school will continue to use “Leapfrog” materials developed over the three years of the project. Another school will continue the new math vocabulary exercises and activities, as well as the ADD math

programming. Yet another school will continue the reading program as a supplemental K-3 reading program, while one school will move its computer lab into the school-wide preparation schedule.

In addition, most schools will continue to provide students with individualized attention. One school will continue to offer specialized reading classes for students below the required reading level and another school will continue to utilize small group instruction. Another school will also continue to provide before-school homework help and one-on-one tutoring.

- **Family engagement programming.** The majority of schools will continue the Schools First Program's efforts to promote parent and family involvement in student learning. For instance, one school will continue to operate its Pizza and Math program. Another school will continue family math nights. In fact, the same school is establishing a 2004-2005 Cargill Action Team to organize and implement family involvement activities in the next school year. Two schools will also continue family nights or parent events in the next year.
- **Staff development.** Since many of the sites found the CSC conferences valuable for planning and reflection, a number of schools will model staff development after the Schools First Program. Four schools intend to promote staff development through teacher attendance at trainings, workshops, and conferences. One school staff member commented, *"The school has budgeted for staff development to allow a...variety of training activities, including alternative ways to reach out to families and the broader community."*

Attachment B contains Schools First survey results collected in spring 2004.

CONCLUSIONS

Overall, the Schools First program demonstrated success in reaching the goals of increasing student academic achievement in reading or math, and improving family support for strong education. This is especially noteworthy considering that the demographics of these 11 schools were comprised primarily of low income (60% to 95%) students of color (52% to 98%). Seven of the 11 schools, or 64 percent, achieved their **academic goals** within the three program years. Specifically, five schools achieved and exceeded their reading goal and two schools successfully achieved their math goal. Two of the four schools that did not meet their academic goal fell short of achieving their goal by three to five percent. The remaining other two schools missed their goal by 20 to 24 percent. All eleven schools met their **family goals** within the three years. Parent involvement increased in parent-teacher conferences and school events.

While the Schools First Initiative ends this year, lessons have been learned that are relevant for other school reform projects focused on improving academic performance and family involvement in urban schools. The evaluators suggest that CSC and Cargill explore ways to disseminate the learning from this program and build upon this program's successful model and fund other urban education reform initiatives that also include effective elements. Foremost is ensuring the critical elements identified by this evaluation are in place in future programming:

- Focus on a few priority goals;
- Provide regular time for planning and reflection;

- Link sites to needed resources, respond flexibly to school's unique needs;
- Leverage the CSC and Cargill visibility and credibility to advocate for school system changes; and
- Provide opportunities for schools to share effective instructional and family involvement practices.

Several challenges continue to persist for improving instruction and family involvement in urban schools. The evaluators offer the following recommendation to address those challenges:

- Explore ways to improve instruction for English language learners that also respect and build on the student's family's cultural practices;
- Advocate for changes in the education system that reduce student mobility and explore instructional practices that are effective with highly mobile students;
- Explore ways to leverage the leadership and instructional capacity of the participating teachers and principals to support their peers;
- Encourage program participants to continue sharing effective practices and support one another to sustain the enthusiasm and commitment;
- Foster linkages between schools and community organizations (i.e., churches, synagogues, mosques, civic groups, non-profit agencies) to find and retain classroom volunteers; and
- Share the evaluation results with schools.

Future program planners should consider the above lessons as well as ensure that school staff is given the opportunities to meet and reflect on implementation report findings. This will promote an environment of collaboration and evidenced-based educational improvement that will help to sustain project efforts.