

**CYPRESS HILLS DEVELOPMENT CORPORATION
AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAM SERVICES
EVALUATION REPORT**

June 1997

(EXCERPTED SECTIONS)

Summary of Observations and Discussions

It was evident from the site visits and conversations with staff that the children clearly enjoy the program, trust and feel comfortable with staff, and interact well with each other. Activities observed were lively, engaging, and educational in nature. Staff note that themes introduced during the year invite children to explore things that are new to them. Field trips expose them to places outside their immediate community. Most significant is the staff's obvious camaraderie, ability to work collaboratively with one another, and commitment to the young people's well being.

While the programs share a similar structure, their "cultures" are quite different. Each site takes on the "feel" of the school in which it is based. That is, the children and staff somewhat reflect either the rigidity or fluidity of their environments. Likewise, each site has a history that influences its programming: P.S. 65 and P.S. 290, which have been operating for ten and nine years respectively, are accustomed to the existing structure; the teachers at P.S. 7 are still experimenting with formats to identify that which best addresses the participants' academic needs.

Program development and implementation are guided by each site's educational philosophy and understanding of the overall program goals. Program planning appears to be informal (meetings are not more than a half-hour and are sometimes less) and more discussion-oriented (people "talk" about what they are going to do); there is not a set approach to curriculum development, nor does each site have a fully collaborative approach to planning. Program directors significantly influence the shape and direction of the planned activities, though it is not clear whether they have dual roles as administrator and teacher. This was particularly evident at P.S. 65 and P.S. 290, where it seems the directors mostly oversee the program.

It is evident, as well, that current planning focuses more on creating an activity but not on the steps involved in each activity, the materials they require, how they extend previous activities, or ways they build on children's interests. (This is not the case for all staff, especially the ESL teachers, who co-teach and therefore, must plan together.) It is difficult to determine how the activities are linked or how they are generated, though generally, they were teacher-directed.

All of the children are identified as bilingual, so emphasis is placed on exposing them to the English language, particularly in its verbal form. While literacy is an important element of the program, there appears to be few extended reading and writing opportunities. Children may read individually, for example, when they have completed their homework. There is no consistent time for children to read on by themselves or with peers. Likewise, while writing is often associated with a

particular activity, the children are not writing in an ongoing fashion (i.e., keeping journals or learning logs, maintaining writing portfolios, etc.). In the ESL classes, staff read aloud to children, but these literacy activities, based on conversations with staff, do not appear to always be directly linked to other program components. Though the program goals seek to involve children in the planning of activities, there is little evidence of learner-centered curriculum development. Likewise, it appears that while the activities are “fun,” there are structural elements that suggest they are not completely unlike the learning children do in school. This was particularly evident in the ESL classes where, for example, the lessons were completely teacher-directed with no or limited opportunities for children to work in small groups or discuss ideas with one another.

According to staff, their sites’ services have met CHDC’s after-school program goals. On an informal level, this is so. That is, the anecdotal feedback staff provide regarding the children’s progress indicates the children are engaged in varied learning activities, speaking more English, and feeling safe and nurtured in a fun environment. However, if CHDC’s stated goal is “to enhance young people’s academic achievement and commitment to their education,” then there needs to exist more structured academic programming and assessment tools that demonstrate children’s “educational, social, and recreational” achievement.

III. RECOMMENDATIONS

Questions to Consider

There is not a consistent philosophical and instructional vision for the program shared by the program staff, program directors, and Ms. _____. Each site and its staff present varied needs, concerns, and teaching and learning approaches. One site director is interested in implementing learner-directed, integrated, project-based curriculum that engages young people in cooperative learning opportunities; one site director is satisfied with the current structure but feels the need for more resources, such as funding for additional field trips; one site feels compelled to help their bilingual students focus on homework completion to ensure their academic success. There were mixed responses regarding assessment, including questions and concerns about the type of tools to be used, the work involved in observing and documenting children's progress, and what should be evaluated. There were variations in ways sites plan for learning activities and staff are involved in the planning process. There were also distinctions among staff perceptions about their relationship with program directors, their involvement in planning, and their interest in and commitment to program enhancement.

Based on the evaluator's conversations with staff and Ms. _____, we focused on three primary areas that staff should consider as they begin to re-envision their current program services. These areas--assessment, planning, and curriculum development--were outlined in question form to focus staff as they started to plan for next year:

1) How can the current program structure lend itself to the development of learning activities that:

- Are more learner-centered and build on young people's educational needs (specifically language skills)?
- Are better integrated and allow for ongoing reading and writing opportunities?
- Are not constricted by a prescribed schedule or calendar with specific time slots?
- Extend the language activities introduced in the ESL classes?
- Are unlike those the children experience in school?

2) How can children's academic, social, and emotional advancements be documented and assessed in ways that:

- Reflect more formally staff's qualitative and anecdotal observations of children's improvement?
- Guide the development of learning activities appropriate to the children's academic needs, strengths, and progress?

Direct the future planning and development of quality after-school programming? are not time-consuming and do not create an extreme amount of additional work?

3) In what ways can program planning be structured so that:

- Learning activities are planned with a clear and meaningful purpose, emerge from children's educational needs, strengths, and interests, and provide integrated teaching and learning approaches and opportunities?
- Planned activities are revisited and discussed to determine successes and challenges, and to consider ways to extend those elements from which children benefited most?
- All staff have opportunities to contribute to program development and develop skills in areas that may fall outside of their designated expertise?

Staff Suggestions and Evaluator's Recommendations

Preliminary conversation about next year's programming was a group process. At a final planning session of program directors and staff (only seven people attended this meeting, but each site was represented), we considered several ways to build on the programs' strengths, listing a variety of options under various headings, all relevant to current programming. These included assessment, structure, planning, activities/curriculum, materials/resources, language skills, and academics. It was agreed that changes would have to occur over time, with segments of the revised structure being implemented incrementally. Staff suggestions regarding key program issues and concerns are described below. These suggestions are followed by the evaluator's recommendation.

Assessment

While staff agreed there should be some type of assessment, there was no consensus on what tools should be used, what should be evaluated, and how the results would be used: is assessment being used to provide funders with information, to help children improve academically, to inform parents how their children are progressing, or to guide instruction? In addition to their academic performance and literacy development, there are other aspects of the children's educational and social growth that are measurable, such as their interactions with others and their verbal language skills. Staff offered the following to be considered as the planning process moves forward:

Measure "where the children are" at the start and at the end of the program, both academically and socially.

Questions to ponder: Is this a standardized assessment tool? Is it a tool that CHDC will devise to assess the specific needs of the children they serve? Will

this tool accurately measure the children's ongoing growth? How will information be gathered during the year to determine that the tool has accurately measured the children's growth?

Surveys

This seemed more related to what the children liked about the program and where they felt they had grown. This could be a useful approach if the children have opportunities during the year to document their learning. Likewise, it is not clear what type of survey could be developed to accurately reflect an entire year of growth, achievement, successes, etc.

Parent surveys

If these were to be used, parents would have to be significantly involved with their children's learning to determine the improvements they have made. Would CHDC guide this participation? And if so, how?

Journals

All staff seemed open to this type of assessment approach and agreed that there were a variety of journals children could use and to which teachers could respond.

Portfolios

One staff member recommended these, though he recognized the extensive amount of work connected with this approach. However, he agreed that portfolios influence how children learn and are taught, and demonstrate children's incremental progress over time.

Beginning and exit interviews

This could accompany other assessment tools, and could measure, in particular, improvement in children's language skills. Who would conduct these interviews and what would their focus be?

Observation

Several staff noted that observing and documenting children's interactions, uses of language, etc., would be the best way to record the anecdotal assessment they feel best highlights the programs' success. How would staff document this information? Would they keep journals? How would they use the information they've gathered? Would they have opportunities to discuss their findings with each other?

Recommendation

It is recommended that assessment tools inform, complement, and support instructional goals and methods. For example, if children are writing in the program or if they are involved in arts and crafts projects, then teachers and children should collect their work and carefully analyze it to determine how it changes over time. If children are keeping journals related to science, math, or other work they are doing, the journals should be used to describe change over time in areas such as language skills, critical thinking, and concept development. Site staff should observe and document the range of children's improvement currently offered as verbal anecdotes.

In addition to these being assessment strategies, this is also a form of staff development. Teachers learn a great deal about children's development by observing them and their work over time. As a result, they should eventually be able to create frameworks for developing children's cognitive, social, emotional, and other areas of growth.

Any type of assessment needs to be accompanied by regular opportunities for staff to discuss children's progress and needs. Staff should consider ways to include a review of children's work in their planning schedule. CHDC might also think about hiring a staff developer to introduce assessment methods and ways they could be used to strengthen children's learning and staff's teaching. It is also suggested that CHDC implement the same assessment processes at each program. Such uniformity enables staff to better share findings, discuss ways to adapt methods to their sites' particular needs, and learn together how to use the information for instructional purposes.

Curriculum Development

Ms. _____ seeks to better incorporate literacy into program activities, particularly in the ESL classes where children already do some reading and writing. Others seek to implement student-directed, cooperative learning opportunities; project-based learning that builds on existing themes; learning centers enabling children to select activities in which they would be engaged on a daily basis--these would include reading and writing, arts and crafts, homework, recreation, among others; more group work, such as children reading in small groups discussing and reviewing each other's writing, or developing projects and; curriculum that is better linked to what the children learn in school. Several suggested working from an existing curriculum that emphasizes a range of group-driven, student-centered learning strategies. It was noted that significant structural and staffing changes would have to occur to accommodate approaches eventually selected (i.e., additional staff to work with small groups of children, additional space, and more time for planning.)

Recommendation

The current theme-based approach to programming can easily extend into integrated, student-centered learning opportunities that build on children's experiences, interests, and prior knowledge. It is recommended that extended project-based curriculum be considered as a way to integrate various subject areas, involve children in the development and expansion of learning opportunities, engage children in structured group work, and invite them to observe and record their learning. This evaluator supports the suggestion staff offered--to introduce project-based learning opportunities once a week each month and then return to the original program format to provide the children with "familiar structure." This could be a productive way to experiment with this instructional approach, but it is hoped that the programs will permanently adopt this technique.

Reading and writing should be standard curriculum elements; staff should recognize that there is a variety of readings and writing ideas to be derived from carefully planned learning activities. For example, in keeping with the existing literacy programming, children can write books that can be read aloud to their peers. When on community walks, children can jot down their observations. Arts and crafts projects can be accompanied by poems or short stories.

Children's responses to these activities can assist staff in developing additional curriculum and in identifying children's academic strengths and needs. This information can also be obtained from journals, observing small groups and individual children, listening to children read, and children's collected writing--all elements of the assessment techniques described earlier and which can feed the development of appropriate learning activities.

Planning

Staff agreed that significant changes need to occur in their present planning process in order to address the proposed assessment and curriculum changes. There was agreement that more time would have to be allotted to planning--at least two afternoons a week--with some flexibility in meeting time. Staff expressed an interest in continued professional development opportunities that would facilitate their planning, helping them understand, for example, how to develop integrated, student-centered curriculum and generate extended literacy activities.

Recommendation

Thoughtful and collaborative planning is essential to the development of quality after-school programming. Sufficient time is needed for discussion and brainstorming, which are essential to the creation of meaningful learning opportunities. These activities or lesson plans should have a purpose, a list of

strategies, specific procedures, and ways to follow up. They should demonstrate clearly how children will be involved in the activities--will there be small groups, will they brainstorm ideas, etc.? Staff should also have time to discuss how children respond to activities, what was challenging, and how successful learning opportunities can be expanded upon.

Staff should discuss a consistent planning procedure that would be implemented at all three sites. One thought is to designate Friday afternoons for planning sessions at which all three sites would be present and that the literacy coordinator would facilitate. If planning is done twice a week, one day a week might alternate on-site, depending on staff availability; the other day would be constant and designated to a specific activity (preferably assessment and resultant planning). These planning sessions also serve as informal staff development opportunities during which the coordinator guides the planning with suggestions, resources, direction, etc. This ensures, as well, that all staff contribute equally to the planning process. As planning facilitator, the coordinator has the opportunity to identify and address staff needs, procure resources and materials needed for particular projects, and observe and document program growth over time.

Staff Development

There was consensus that staff development and/or training would be necessary during the year, particularly around issues of integrated curriculum development, assessment, process writing, and the like. It was agreed that such professional development could occur in-house--staff can design and conduct workshops on topics with which they are familiar--or with an outside consultant, depending on staff and program needs.

Recommendation

As the staff are really the front-line people responsible for carrying out the vision, it is vital that they share the program's vision and that their instructional strategies correspond appropriately.

Continuing professional development of the after-school programs is at the heart of helping staff develop and carry out this vision, making this program the best it can be. In this light, the evaluator recommends consistent, ongoing opportunities for all the staff, regardless of the amount of experience they have had, to continuously observe and assess the programs' students, goals, instructional methods and themselves, and engage in ongoing discussion that will help the staff to continuously develop and refine their instructional techniques, and develop appropriate learning and assessment tools to support and complement their methods. Staff development may be conducted by consultants or by staff interested in sharing successful instructional techniques with their colleagues.

CHDC may consider conducting intensive staff development prior to the start of the program, during which staff members can explore curriculum development, learner-centered approaches to teaching reading and writing, ways to use children's writing to create appropriate learning activities, literature logs and dialogue journals, among others. Staff would have opportunities to begin planning activities during this training period.

Planning and staff development would continue during the year. Strong programs have ongoing staff development components through which teachers have opportunities to reflect upon and discuss their program goals, instructional methods, and children's progress. The evaluator recommends that during the school year, the instructors meet weekly (one of the two planning days mentioned above). These meetings would not be administrative meetings, but meetings where teachers can plan together, share ideas, instructional strategies, and materials, develop assessment tools, and learn more about the children they teach. The exact format and topics for these meetings would be determined later, but they should be scheduled when the program's meeting dates are scheduled. (This may be the session that is held on Friday afternoons; staff should know that this is a program day just as the days they meet with children are program days.)