the James Irvine foundation
Expanding Opportunity for the People of California

INSIGHT BRIEF

Lessons learned from the CORAL initiative

What Matters, What Works

Advancing Achievement After School

P/PV *Public/Private Ventures*

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The evaluation of The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative provides important guidance for after-school program designers, practitioners and funders. It also has relevance to public policymakers. Based on lessons from the initiative and its evaluation, this report underscores the potential of after-school programs in the ongoing drive to advance children's academic achievement. More specifically, it shines a light on what matters most for programs that strive to promote academic success — namely, program quality and youth engagement. It also suggests what works by linking these program attributes to academic benefits.

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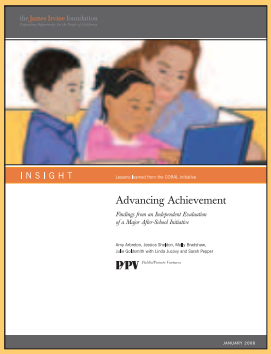

This Insight Brief is based on the full report, *Advancing Achievement: Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative* by Amy Arbreton, Jessica Sheldon, Molly Bradshaw and Julie Goldsmith with Linda Jucovy and Sarah Pepper (available at www.irvine.org or www.ppv.org).

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Foreword

The role of after-school programming is in transition. In the past, after-school programs provided mainly homework help and fulfilled a childcare need for parents. Increasingly, private and public funders and other stakeholders view the after-school hours as an important time to improve student achievement and to complement learning within a school setting. This change in what we have come to expect of after-school programming demands that we learn and share what works — and what doesn't — as we aim to improve student achievement. That is the focus of this report.

In support of our mission to expand opportunity for Californians and to advance their educational and economic prospects, The James Irvine Foundation launched in 1999 the largest program initiative in its history: Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL), an eight-year, $58 million effort to improve the educational performance of low-achieving students in five California cities.

During the school years from 2004 to 2006, the Foundation engaged Public/Private Ventures (P/PV) to evaluate the CORAL initiative. P/PV is a national nonprofit organization whose mission is to improve the effectiveness of social policies, programs and community initiatives, especially as they affect youth and young adults. P/PV served as a key independent partner in helping to reorient the focus of CORAL after a midcourse assessment revealed disappointing student outcomes. The firm also brought a rigor and discipline in implementing these changes, helping to pave the way for the initiative's eventual successes, including achievement of measured gains in reading levels by participants receiving consistent, quality literacy programming after school. Along the way, P/PV documented CORAL outcomes, lessons learned and promising strategies for boosting student achievement through after-school programming.

Presented in summary here, findings from the CORAL experience offer new insight for those who strive to advance, fund, design and implement effective after-school programs. We remain committed to identifying ways to share these findings and lessons broadly to ensure the success and advancement of this important work.

James E. Canales
President and Chief Executive Officer
The James Irvine Foundation

THE IMPORTANCE AND EVOLUTION OF

After-School Programming

After-school programs can and should provide developmentally appropriate opportunities for youth. They should offer participants safety, structure and connection to supportive adults, as well as exposure to new and diverse experiences. And they should create positive, healthy opportunities for youth to grow. These statements reflect the stance of many stakeholders, including parents, policymakers and educators.[1]

For after-school programs of this nature, funding levels have grown during the last decade. Simultaneously, stakeholders have intensified their focus on utilizing the after-school hours to help improve children's academic success.[2] But by the early 2000s, several evaluations of the largest-scale programs began to suggest that at least one of after-school programming's major goals — supporting academic gains — might be beyond its reach.[3] The evaluations also highlighted two critical issues that could be impeding more positive results. First, many after-school programs attempted to achieve academic gains only by providing homework help or through inconsistent or poorly implemented academically oriented activities.[4] Second, many of the children enrolled were not participating with enough frequency for the programs to be expected to influence their achievement.[5]

Additional research has suggested that children's engagement in after-school programs — as indicated by, for example, their sense of belonging to and interest in the programs — may be an important contributor to the programs' influence on their achievement and behaviors. The issues of quality, participation and engagement are fast gaining the attention of funders and researchers who share an interest in the effectiveness of after-school programs.[6]

CORAL's Contribution to the After-School Field

At the initiative's midpoint, concerns regarding the direction and impact of CORAL led Irvine to hire Public/Private Ventures (P/PV), to design a rigorous midcourse evaluation. CORAL was launched in 1999; evaluation conducted from that point until 2003 revealed disappointing student outcomes. This prompted a shift to more focused literacy programming and a strong emphasis on quality. A second phase of evaluation, conducted by P/PV during the 2004 to 2006 school years, offered a timely opportunity to explore the effectiveness of an after-school initiative featuring a targeted approach to literacy programming within a broad array of activities intended to engage children in the after-school hours. The evaluation measured the quality of CORAL's program activities, participation, engagement and outcomes to better understand how these elements work together to make a positive difference in the lives of children — further developing the knowledge base on key topics of interest to the after-school field.

COMMUNITIES ORGANIZING RESOURCES TO ADVANCE LEARNING (CORAL)

The James Irvine Foundation launched the eight-year CORAL after-school initiative in 1999 with the goal of helping to improve the academic achievement of children in the lowest-performing schools in five California cities: Fresno, Long Beach, Pasadena, Sacramento and San Jose.

Once fully operational, this large-scale initiative served approximately 5,000 children each year — more than half of whom were designated as English learners and many of whom came from low-income families — across over 30 school- and community-based sites. Most of the youth were of elementary-school age, primarily first- to fifth-graders, with a small proportion in middle-school grades. The Foundation provided implementation support in all of the cities, with the objective of funding the initiative for five to six years in each site. In total, the Foundation committed over $58 million to CORAL, making it the most significant and ambitious initiative undertaken by Irvine.

Following disappointing outcomes identified through a midpoint review, CORAL focused the wide breadth of programs offered at its sites on literacy activities and boosted program quality through a rigorous process of continuous improvement and staff development. These changes led to pronounced gains in achievement for a range of students.

The children involved in CORAL represented great diversity in their ethnicity and language proficiency and also, to some degree, in their performance at school. This diversity adds dimension to an examination of the role that after-school programs can play in the lives of different subgroups of youth and, in particular, English learners — a topic often missing in after-school research.

CORAL offers several key lessons to those with a stake in the success of after-school programs. Chief among the lessons are that after-school programs can, indeed, help promote student academic achievement, and that success requires targeted investment, stakeholder commitments, focused academic support, quality programming, and a process of continual improvement to attain and maintain high levels of quality.

Summary: Findings and Implications

The results of CORAL's evaluation are informative for program designers, funders, researchers and policymakers interested in making after-school programs as effective as possible for children. Summarized here in brief, key initiative findings and implications for programs, research and policy are described in greater depth within the body of this Insight Brief and comprehensively within the full report on *Advancing Achievement: Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative*.

Findings

1. Children's reading success was strongly related to literacy programming quality
2. Higher levels of engagement were related to positive changes in children's attitudes toward reading as well as attitudes and behaviors in school
3. English learners and children far behind in reading each showed similar gains when compared to their CORAL peers
4. The quality of literacy programming was increased relatively quickly
5. It is possible to attain high levels of youth participation and engagement
6. Parents and youth participants reported high satisfaction with the CORAL after-school programs
7. Costs for providing a combined academic and enrichment program were similar to those of other after-school programs

Implications

- The high rates of participation and literacy gains achieved were likely the product of a combined program of quality literacy instruction, enrichment activities and homework help
- Increasing the quality of a targeted literacy component is possible but requires focused effort
- The fact that English learners achieved academic gains in equal measure to other program participants deserves particular attention
- The accumulation of results from this evaluation is promising but not conclusive

Fine-Tuning CORAL's Approach for Greater Results

The initial CORAL philosophy reflected best practices in the fields of youth development programming and community initiatives, including an emphasis on consistent staffing to help promote positive adult-youth relationships, and policies and practices to promote regular and ongoing youth participation. All CORAL cities shared the goal of improving youth academic achievement, but the initiative had broad guidelines for implementation during its early years. As a result, the approach and content of the CORAL after-school programs varied greatly across the state. While the sites typically provided youth with some mix of homework help and enrichment activities, the actual programming focus was diverse — ranging from primarily a science-based enrichment curriculum, to mostly homework help, to a focus on art and cultural experiences.

A midpoint study of CORAL suggested that the initiative's city directors were struggling with serious implementation issues. Participant numbers fell short of agreed-upon goals, and the cost per participant was more than double what was widely considered reasonable. The study also indicated that with few exceptions the programming — which, aside from homework help, consisted almost entirely of enrichment activities — was of relatively low quality.[7]

In response to these concerns about quality, participation and cost — and to the accumulating evidence that after-school programming focused primarily on enrichment and homework help does not have an impact on academic achievement — Irvine determined to intensify CORAL's educational focus. P/PV was asked to assist in this work and to evaluate its results.[8]

To reduce variability among sites and increase the likelihood that the initiative as a whole would achieve its intended goals, in Fall 2004 CORAL adopted a much more targeted approach for its academic component: Literacy programming would be implemented three to four days a week,

By the Numbers: CORAL Participant Snapshot

During the 2004–2005 school year, total CORAL enrollment statewide was 5,321, ranging from 585 to 2,081 across the five cities. Most youth served were elementary-school aged and came from varied backgrounds and cultures. The highest percentage were Latino/a (about 68 percent), followed by African American and Asian American youth. More than half (53 percent) of CORAL children were designated English learners, and 89 percent were recipients of free or reduced-price lunch. Their scores on the California Standards Test-English Language Arts (CST-ELA), from Spring 2004, show that only a small portion (16 percent) met or exceeded the grade-level proficiency standards for reading. Of the sample of children explored in most depth in this evaluation, 50 percent were reading two or more grades below level, and an additional 20 percent were reading one grade below level.

for 60 to 90 minutes each day, and focus on concrete strategies for helping children far behind in reading skills improve. Through this programming, youth had the opportunity to participate in the core strategies of balanced literacy, which reflected current, research-based best practices for developing competent readers.

While the programs shifted to a balanced literacy focus, they continued to expose children to enrichment opportunities that would engage them in the after-school hours. In most CORAL cities, participating children were also given time for homework help in the remaining portion of each day's programming.

As in previous years, the children were generally divided into groups based on grade level. Each group comprised between 12 and 20 children led by one or two staff members, called team leaders, who supervised the children and were also typically responsible for planning and leading literacy activities.

The P/PV evaluation of the CORAL initiative has generated several publications, all of which are described on page 19. *Launching Literacy in After-School Programs* is an interim report based on data collected in the first year (2004–2005) after the shift to literacy programming. The report describes the CORAL cities' successes and challenges in implementing the literacy component and examines the relationship between quality programming and children's gains in reading during that first year.[9]

What Matters, What Works is an Insight Brief based on research and practical lessons learned from the entire CORAL initiative extending from 1999 to 2007, including the initiative's midcourse correction. The brief focuses on changes in program quality from the first to the second year of literacy implementation following the midcourse correction, the extent of the children's participation and engagement in CORAL, and the relationship of each — quality, participation and engagement — to positive changes in children's reading performance and attitudes. The brief also discusses the costs of CORAL, including the cost of the investments in quality in terms of staffing, training, program monitoring, and books for independent reading.

Balanced Literacy Strategies

- Read alouds — staff read to children from works of fiction and nonfiction that can be completed in 10 or 15 minutes and from chapter books covered over the course of several days.
- Book discussions — staff members lead children in talking about the story that has just been read.
- Writing activities — children write about topics they have just discussed, or they create their own stories.
- Vocabulary activities — children review or learn new words.
- Skill-development activities — children practice particular literacy skills, such as letter sounds or spelling.
- Independent reading — children spend time reading books of their choice at levels where they can read fluently and with high comprehension.

CORAL Initiative Timeline

Start up and redirection

1996/1997
Board seeks to address lagging K-12 academic performance

1998
Pasadena test site chosen

1999
Board approves CORAL; staff chooses four new sites

2001
CORAL is a full-fledged initiative

2003
Phase I evaluation reveals low ratings

Expanded research on after-school programs undercuts some original assumptions

Foundation leadership changes: board members, executive and program staff

More than half of CORAL's planned budget is spent

Midcourse evaluation and redirection

Literacy focus and results

2004
Literacy programming focus is introduced

Quality is addressed through continuous improvement cycle

2004/2005
Children exposed to quality implementation have reading gains of .45 grade levels; others have gains of .26 grade levels

2005/2006
Entire CORAL study sample of children has reading gains of .44 grade levels

Methods and Relevance

The findings presented in this Insight Brief are drawn from data collected from multiple sources between Fall 2004 and Summer 2006:

- Enrollment, attendance, activity and participation data from each CORAL city's Management Information System (MIS)
- Observations of programming
- Scores from the California Standards Test-English Language Arts administered in the Springs of 2004, 2005 and 2006
- Surveys of students and parents
- Individualized reading assessments
- Interviews with program and partner agency staff
- A cost survey of CORAL cities

The evaluation focused on a subset of four to five sites in each of the five CORAL cities and a sample of the sites' children in the third and fourth grades during Fall 2004. These children were then followed into the fourth and fifth grades in the second year of the study. Extensive observations of on-the-ground programming were also conducted within these intensive research sites and grade levels. In order to help researchers assess change, parents completed surveys in the Spring of 2006, and children completed surveys as well as individualized reading assessments at multiple points in time.

The data collection strategy permits the linking of these data to describe important patterns and relationships between the quality of literacy activities, participation, engagement and outcomes. The results of this study are, in this way, informative for program designers, funders, researchers and policymakers interested in making after-school programs as effective as possible for children. The children involved in CORAL represented great diversity in their ethnicity and language proficiency and also, to some degree, in their performance at school. This diversity adds dimension to an examination of the role that after-school programs can play in the lives of different subgroups of youth and, in particular, English learners — a topic often missing in after-school research.[10]

Key Findings

1 CHILDREN'S READING SUCCESS WAS STRONGLY RELATED TO LITERACY PROGRAMMING QUALITY.

CORAL participants showed greater gains in grade-level reading and performed better on standardized tests when they were exposed to more consistent and higher-quality literacy activities.

Children exposed to quality implementation gained .45 grade-levels; others gained .26 grade-levels.

Results from the evaluation's first year indicated greater gains over five months on the individualized reading assessment (.45 grade-levels in reading) for children exposed to consistent implementation of the balanced literacy strategies and higher-quality implementation of those strategies. In contrast, those children exposed to inconsistent or low-quality implementation of the literacy strategies gained .26 grade-levels in reading.

In the second year of the evaluation, when almost all of the groups had improved and were consistently using the literacy strategies, the average reading gain for all children in the sample (based on the individualized reading assessment) was .44 grade levels — comparable to the average gain of .45 for children exposed to higher-quality classrooms during Year One. Also in Year Two, in groups where team leaders used stronger classroom practices (the instructor offered strong adult support, was skilled at group management, provided high-quality instruction and made connections between the children's lives and the books they were reading) in combination with more consistent and higher-quality implementation of the literacy strategies, children were more likely to have a positive outcome on the CST-ELA. A positive outcome was defined as moving from "far below basic" or "below basic" up to a higher level, or remaining "basic," "proficient" or "advanced" from one year to the next.

The evaluation design did not include a comparison group; therefore, it cannot be firmly concluded that the gains made by the CORAL youth are any different from what might be expected had they not taken part in the program. However, the finding that the quality and consistency with which CORAL instructors delivered the literacy programming are related to reading-level gains and improvement on the CST-ELA suggests that the program had some bearing on these gains.

2 HIGHER LEVELS OF ENGAGEMENT WERE RELATED TO POSITIVE CHANGES IN CHILDREN'S ATTITUDES TOWARD READING AS WELL AS ATTITUDES AND BEHAVIORS IN SCHOOL.

Children's engagement in CORAL, as measured by their sense of belonging, was an important contributor to changes in 10 of the 13 outcomes examined in the areas of reading attitudes as well as school attitudes and behaviors. That is, the stronger the children's sense of belonging to the program, the more likely they were to have a positive change in outcomes that included enjoyment of reading, liking and wanting to go to school, and time spent reading after school. (Children's levels of participation in CORAL were not related to changes in these outcomes.)

Positive changes included enjoyment of reading, liking and wanting to go to school, and time spent reading after school.

Because children's sense of belonging emerged as such a strong predictor of positive changes in outcomes, additional analyses were conducted to understand whether any of the observed program quality ratings (that is, the literacy strategies and classroom practices) might be associated with children developing a sense of belonging to the CORAL programs. But no such relationship was apparent. Additional analyses revealed that children's Fall 2004 perceptions of CORAL as a safe place with positive peer relationships (participants liked the other children there, got to know them well and had a lot of friends) were positively related to their sense of belonging to CORAL in Spring 2006.

3 ENGLISH LEARNERS AND CHILDREN FAR BEHIND IN READING EACH SHOWED SIMILAR GAINS WHEN COMPARED TO THEIR CORAL PEERS.

The findings were promising for the diverse children served by CORAL. The programs included a large number of English learners and children performing far behind in reading. Both of these subgroups showed similar gains when compared to their CORAL peers.

53 percent of participants studied were English learners; they gained as much as their English-proficient peers.

English learners are a rapidly growing population in California and throughout the United States. Slightly over half (53 percent) of the children in the CORAL study were identified as English learners, a greater proportion than documented in other studies of after-school programs.[11] Among CORAL youth exposed to the same level of participation and quality, English learners gained as much as their English-proficient peers.

Findings from this evaluation also demonstrate that an after-school program can benefit children who are far behind in reading. Children who began the CORAL program two or more grade levels behind based on the individualized reading assessments gained just as much as their higher-achieving counterparts over the same period of time.

Without a comparison group, it is difficult to place these findings in context. However, previous studies have suggested that children from low-income populations may fall further and further behind in grade-level reading between first and fourth grades. The CORAL experience offers promise in that the children who were most behind and those who were English learners kept pace in their gains.

4 THE QUALITY OF LITERACY PROGRAMMING WAS INCREASED RELATIVELY QUICKLY.

In Fall 2004, the CORAL program teams began the process of incorporating 60 to 90 minutes of literacy, three to four afternoons per week, into their existing array of enrichment and recreational activities. At the end of the first year of the evaluation, about one-third (36 percent) of the classrooms observed were reaching a moderate level of consistency and quality in implementation of the literacy program model. The CORAL city directors drew on information from the first-year evaluation, as well as lessons learned from their own experiences, as they developed approaches for improving the quality of their programming. Their efforts included having an effective literacy director in place who had appropriate training, skills and experience in literacy and the authority to monitor and coach. They also targeted trainings for team leaders, monitored and coached on a regular and ongoing basis, and focused on strengthening the independent reading component of the balanced literacy lessons.[12]

By the end of the second year of balanced literacy implementation, 88 percent of the observed classrooms had achieved at least a moderate level of quality in their literacy programming — up from just over one-third in the first year.

By the end of the second year of implementation, almost all (88 percent) of the groups observed had reached a moderate level of quality in literacy programming — up from just over one-third in the first year. This was a key achievement, as quality was found to be related to children's reading gains.

Intensifying Literacy Programming

Frequency

60–90 minutes
3–4 afternoons per week

Staff improvement

Effective literacy director
Targeted training for team leaders
Monitoring and coaching
Focus on independent reading

5 IT IS POSSIBLE TO ATTAIN HIGH LEVELS OF YOUTH PARTICIPATION AND ENGAGEMENT.

Children attended CORAL an average of 110.3 days over the 2005–2006 school year, or an average of 3.0 days per week (for an overarching average attendance rate of 73 percent of the days the program was open). Overall, 69.3 percent attended more than 75 days during the year.

CORAL attendance rates appear particularly strong when compared to other studies of after-school programs.

These attendance rates appear particularly strong when compared to other studies of after-school programs. A first-year evaluation of the 21st Century Community Learning Centers, for example, found that children attended an average of 58.3 days over the year, and only 16.9 percent attended more than 75 days of programming.[13] A review of 73 after-school programs found 11 programs with youth attendance ranging from 15 percent to 26 percent, and an additional three programs with attendance ranging between 26 and 50 percent.[14] The remaining programs did not have available attendance data.

Beyond rates of attendance, the findings suggest that children were highly engaged in CORAL. Positive adult-youth relationships and a strong sense of belonging to CORAL appear to be strengths of the program. Almost all children (97 percent) reported that there was at least one adult at CORAL who supported them and to whom they could talk, and 73 percent indicated that there were two or more such adults. More than 85 percent of children agreed that literacy staff paid attention to and cared about them. More generally, CORAL seemed to be a space where children felt comfortable and cared for. About 90 percent of children agreed that they felt safe at CORAL. Almost three-quarters of the children (71 percent) agreed that they felt a sense of belonging at CORAL.

Comparing Participation

CORAL	21st Century Community Learning Centers
110.3 days on average	58.3 days on average
69.3% attendance > 75 days	16.9% attendance > 75 days

6 PARENTS AND YOUTH PARTICIPANTS REPORTED HIGH SATISFACTION WITH THE CORAL AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS.

CORAL sites blended academics and enrichment activities through fun, dynamic programming in a way that was beneficial to children and met the needs of other constituents, including parents and schools. CORAL was designed to meet multiple needs: to help boost the academic achievement of children who were struggling to learn to read, to provide them with enriching experiences that they might not otherwise have access to, and to let them have fun.

Staff members identified the importance of making literacy programming fun for children.

Overwhelmingly, parents indicated that they enrolled their children in CORAL to help them do better in school; and according to reports from parents, the program was meeting that goal. Over 90 percent of parents (98 percent of those with children still enrolled and 91 percent of those with children no longer attending) indicated that CORAL helped their child do better in school.

Schools, under pressure to increase the academic standing of their students, were interested in after-school literacy programming, but program enrichment activities were also of particular importance to them because many of the schools lacked time during the school day or money in their budgets for activities such as art, music or dance. CORAL provided an array of literacy support, homework help, enrichment and physical education activities to meet these needs and interests.

Children responded relatively positively to the CORAL programming, with almost three-quarters saying they liked literacy activities, and close to 90 percent rating enrichment and physical activities that high. Interviews with staff members identified the importance they placed on making literacy programming fun for children. They did so by finding and reading books the children were interested in, having conversations about the books, and drawing connections between the stories read and the children's lives.

Signs of Satisfaction

- More than 90% of parents said CORAL helped their child do better in school
- Almost 75% of youth participants liked CORAL literacy activities
- 90% of youth participants liked CORAL physical activities and enrichment

7 COSTS FOR PROVIDING A COMBINED ACADEMIC AND ENRICHMENT PROGRAM WERE SIMILAR TO THOSE OF OTHER AFTER-SCHOOL PROGRAMS.

Results from a survey of staff in four of the CORAL cities[15] about costs associated with running the CORAL program suggest an average per diem per child cost of slightly under $20. This figure takes into account site-level costs along with administrative and oversight costs incurred by the cities' lead agencies. It also takes into account city-level (and, to a lesser extent, site-level) costs directly related to investments in providing quality literacy programming — including the expenses associated with hiring a literacy director, training team leaders, monitoring quality of instruction and obtaining an adequate number of books for independent reading.

Though similar to other large-scale programs, CORAL costs are greater than the cost per diem provided by public funding.

The costs of CORAL are in keeping with costs associated with several other large-scale after-school programs; however, they are greater than the cost per diem provided by public funding. For example, 21st Century funding provides approximately $1,000 per child per year, or $7 or $8 per day. California Proposition 49 funding, which has recently become available, offers $7.50 per day plus a required $2.50 match from individual programs.[16]

Beyond these site- and city-level costs, The James Irvine Foundation provided additional funding at the statewide level (for the CORAL initiative as a whole) that helped lay the groundwork for implementing a quality program in each city. A significant portion of the additional funding was used to develop a computerized management information system to enable the CORAL city leaders to track enrollment (demographic data), participation trends, and outcomes data — information that was critical in the program teams' ability to identify whom they were serving, where they were reaching goals for attendance, and the degree to which they were achieving other program goals. Developing this system in conjunction with city-level staff and training staff on use of the system initially cost between $20,000 and $25,000 per city. Initiative-level funding also included approximately $140,000 for technical assistance-related expenses during each of the first two years of implementing the literacy component, and $60,000 for each year of the evaluation for researchers' time to conduct observations of the literacy lessons on a regular basis and provide feedback to the sites.

CORAL Expenses

Cost per child per day: (includes city and site administrative costs, MIS implementation)	<$20
Statewide costs over two years: (includes technical assistance, observations and MIS development)	$500,000–$525,000

Four Implications for Programs, Research and Policy

The lessons learned through the CORAL evaluation hold important implications for the after-school field, including practitioners, those who research after-school programs with the goal of improving their quality and outcomes, and the policy community interested in the potential of after-school programs to provide children with enriching experiences and academic support as a supplement to the education they receive during the school day.

THE LITERACY GAINS ACHIEVED WERE LIKELY THE PRODUCT OF A COMBINED PROGRAM OF QUALITY LITERACY INSTRUCTION, ENRICHMENT ACTIVITIES AND HOMEWORK HELP.

While a comprehensive assessment of the quality of the non-literacy programming and its link to children's outcomes was beyond the scope of the CORAL evaluation, key stakeholders — including participating youth, their parents and school staff — viewed CORAL's enrichment programming as a source of strong appeal for engaging children in the program. And, children's engagement in CORAL was related to positive changes in their attitudes toward reading as well as their attitudes and behaviors in school.

At the same time, enrichment programming, while clearly a critical element of CORAL, continued to vary widely in each city during the timeframe of this evaluation. While some cities continued to use outside community-based organizations to plan and lead activities, others had their team leaders provide enrichment programming. In either circumstance, non-literacy programming did not receive the same type of monitoring and support as literacy programming, and its quality is less certain. As a result, program leaders within the CORAL cities acknowledged that they need to turn their attention to enrichment activities. Presumably, the same strategies that promoted higher-quality literacy programming (including training, monitoring and coaching) can be applied to enrichment programming as well.

Program teams interested in adopting the CORAL approach are advised to take similar care to ensure that the literacy programming is embedded in a broader context of enrichment programming.

INCREASING THE QUALITY OF A TARGETED LITERACY COMPONENT IS POSSIBLE BUT REQUIRES FOCUSED EFFORT.

Data drove the process for getting to this level of quality, and doing so quickly. Program administrators had access to data from observations and Year One evaluation findings that revealed a correlation between quality and outcomes, providing them with crucial direction for program improvement and the evidence necessary to convince key stakeholders (including parents and school administrators) of the importance of these changes.

By the second year of evaluation, all the cities had invested in factors that the first-year evaluation findings suggested led to better quality. Perhaps most crucially, the evaluation spotlighted in some cities the importance of the role played by the literacy director in providing initial and ongoing training to site staff on successful strategies for delivering literacy activities, for regular monitoring of on-the-ground programming, and for coaching of team leaders and site coordinators. CORAL directors in other cities used this information to more clearly define and strengthen the roles of their own literacy directors, to develop improved and targeted training, and to implement consistent program monitoring followed up with feedback and coaching. The evaluation also highlighted the importance of independent reading time and of having a large enough volume and variety of books for children to read. As a result, CORAL cities invested in more books for the children.

CORAL city directors built on this strategy of using data to help identify strengths and weaknesses of program implementation. By the second year of evaluation, program staff began to make the transition to generating their own observation data so they could continue to identify and address gaps in the consistency and quality of the literacy activities.

The data-related activities described above were resource intensive both in terms of dollars and staff time — but they led to stronger programming during the second year of implementation of literacy components.

Primary Uses of Evaluation Data by Program Administrators

- Convincing key stakeholders of quality-outcomes correlation
- Pinpointing areas of program improvement/investment
- Affirming staff roles and strengthening performance

THE FACT THAT ENGLISH LEARNERS ACHIEVED ACADEMIC GAINS IN EQUAL MEASURE TO OTHER PROGRAM PARTICIPANTS DESERVES PARTICULAR ATTENTION.

In the current environment of scarce resources for academic support, and the evolving demographic profile of the children in this country, these results take on added significance.

Since they started further behind in their English literacy skills, it is particularly noteworthy that English learners gained just as much as English-proficient youth through their participation in CORAL programming. Other after-school programs may consider ways to increase English learner access to their programs if they are not already encouraging these children to participate.

In considering this, however, it is important to remember that the findings from this study do not support the idea that the CORAL approach be directed exclusively at English learners. The CORAL classes comprised children with a mix of language backgrounds and achievement levels. While outside the scope of this study, it is likely that participants in the CORAL program may have benefited from experiencing programming with other children of diverse abilities and characteristics. It may, then, also be important to avoid using the CORAL approach as an overly targeted intervention, and instead consider its utility as an approach that benefits a wide variety of children.

THE ACCUMULATION OF RESULTS FROM THIS EVALUATION IS PROMISING BUT NOT CONCLUSIVE.

Future experimental design studies of programs that focus on this population of children, reach a moderate-to-high level of quality in implementing this type of literacy programming, and garner similarly high rates of participation and engagement would constitute an important addition to the body of knowledge about after-school program effectiveness.

The findings from this study suggest that quality and engagement are important for promoting positive outcomes across all subgroups of children. Higher-quality programming was consistently related to better reading performance outcomes, and children's sense of belonging was related to positive change on 10 of the 13 outcomes measured regarding attitudes toward reading, and attitudes as well as behaviors in school.

Because the study does not have a comparison group, it is possible that motivational factors related to children's involvement in or sense of belonging to CORAL may be linked to the positive gains documented. But despite the lack of a comparison group, the findings point to important associations worth exploring in more depth via future research.

Conclusion

The CORAL initiative's transition to a balanced literacy approach emerged amid a larger transition in the after-school field, in which practitioners and policymakers are re-evaluating the role of the after-school hours and becoming more attuned to the importance of quality programming and engagement among participants. Consequently, the evaluation of CORAL provides important guidance from a programmatic standpoint and from a public policy perspective. An understanding of the ways in which CORAL has engaged children in quality programming, and of the relationship between quality programming and academic outcomes, draws further attention to the potential role for after-school programs in the ongoing drive to improve children's academic achievement.

The CORAL Series: Lessons learned from an after-school programming initiative

Visit www.irvine.org or www.ppv.org to download these publications based on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL initiative.

Launching Literacy In After-School Programs
Early Lessons from the CORAL Initiative

Presents interim findings from CORAL, with a focus on reading gains for participating youth. Offers insights for after-school funders, researchers, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners regarding the key components of quality in literacy programming.

Midcourse Corrections to a Major Initiative
A Report on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL Experience

Reports circumstances and challenges related to midpoint change in the multiyear CORAL initiative. Informs grantmakers involved in major initiatives of the need to include midcourse assessment as a critical component in initiative design.

Advancing Achievement
Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative

Presents findings from independent research on CORAL. Demonstrates the relationship between high-quality literacy programming and academic gains. Informs the after-school field of the potential role of quality programs in the ongoing drive to improve academic achievement. Includes executive summary.

What Matters, What Works
Advancing Achievement After School

Highlights findings from independent research on CORAL. Informs those who seek to fund, design, implement and otherwise advance effective after-school programs.

Supporting Success
Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs

Examines strategies used to promote quality academic programming in CORAL. Makes the case for after-school funders, advocates, intermediary organizations and practitioners to support investment in continuous program improvement.

After-School Toolkit
Tips, Techniques and Templates for Improving Program Quality

Provides a practical, hands-on guide for implementing high-quality after-school literacy programming. Supplies program managers with tested tools and techniques employed in CORAL.

Gaining Ground
Supporting English Learners Through After-School Literacy Programming

Demonstrates a relationship between key CORAL approaches and the academic progress of English learners. Makes the case for action by policymakers and funders interested in boosting the achievement of this growing student population.

Endnotes

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[7] Kathleen Hebbeler, et al. *Implementation of Communities Organizing Resources to Advance Learning (CORAL) in 2002–03.* Palo Alto, CA: SRI International, October 2003.

[8] For a full description of the change in approach and the reasons behind it, see Gary Walker. *Midcourse Corrections to a Major Initiative: A Report on The James Irvine Foundation's CORAL Experience.* San Francisco, CA: The James Irvine Foundation, 2007.

[9] Amy J. A. Arbreton, Julie Goldsmith and Jessica Sheldon. *Launching Literacy in After-School Programs: Early Lessons from the CORAL Initiative.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2005.

[10] Durlak and Weissberg, 2007.

[11] This variable was not a consideration in the 73 studies reviewed by Durlak and Weissberg, and few other studies have considered how after-school programs serve this population of youth.

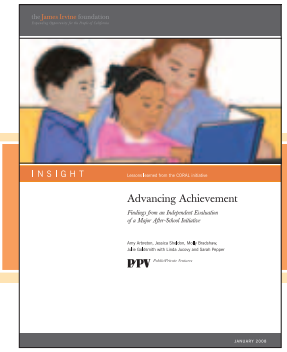
[12] A separate report based on learnings from the CORAL initiative focuses on the specific strategies that the CORAL cities used to promote higher-quality literacy programming. See Jessica Sheldon and Leigh Hopkins. *Supporting Success: Why and How to Improve Quality in After-School Programs.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2007. *Launching Literacy* also provides more detail on each of these implementation factors as they related to program quality in the first year of the initiative.

[13] U.S. Department of Education, Office of the Under Secretary. *When Schools Stay Open Late: The National Evaluation of the 21st Century Learning Centers Program, First Year Findings.* Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Education, 2002.

[14] Durlak and Weissberg, 2007. The programs in the review included drop-in programs and programs for older teens, which may account to some extent for the lower rates of attendance.

[15] At the time of the cost survey, one of the CORAL cities was undergoing a transition in staffing and structure, and was not in a position to participate in the cost analysis.

[16] For costs of other after-school programs, see Robert Halpern, Julie Spielberger and Sylvan Robb. *Evaluation of the MOST (Making the Most of Out-of-School Time) Initiative: Final Report and Summary of Findings.* Chicago: Chapin Hall Center for Children; Walker and Arbreton, 2004; and Jean Baldwin Grossman et al. *Multiple Choices After School: Findings from the Extended-Service Schools Initiative.* Philadelphia: Public/Private Ventures, 2002. For information on support offered by public funders, see "21st Century Community Learning Centers Providing Afterschool Supports to Communities Nationwide." *Afterschool Alliance.* Retrieved February 7, 2007, http://www.afterschoolalliance.org/21stcclc.pdf; and the California Department of Education description of CA Senate Bill 638, at http://www.cde.ca.gov/ls/ba/as/ases06fundingfaq.asp. Retrieved August 24, 2007.



For a list of references, download *Advancing Achievement: Findings from an Independent Evaluation of a Major After-School Initiative* from www.irvine.org or www.ppv.org.

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