



ADVANCING PARENT-PROFESSIONAL LEADERSHIP IN EDUCATION (A.P.P.L.E.) PROJECT— PRELIMINARY FINDINGS FROM A MODEL DEMONSTRATION PROJECT

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ABOUT THE A.P.P.L.E. INSTITUTE

- A 3-day parent leadership development seminar based on the premise that parent-professional collaboration improves child outcomes.
- Teams, consisting of 1 special education (SPED) staff and 4-5 parents who are members of Special Education Parent Advisory Councils (PACs).
- Massachusetts state law requires PACs to exist in every school district to advise them on special education matters.
- Training focuses on diversity, reciprocal outreach, facilitation and communication methods, and personal leadership styles.

ABOUT THE STUDY

- The Federation contracted with the ICI to lead the research component of the A.P.P.L.E. Project; the purpose is to determine the project's impact on parents' leadership skills and on how they work with the local school district.
- Research staff use a non-randomized control design with an untreated control group:
 1. Surveys of parents (baseline, 2-4 and 6-8 months after the Institute)
 2. Interviews with parents (8 months after project enrollment)
 3. Interviews with SPED staff (before the Institute, 2-3 and 6-8 months later)
- The intervention group participates in the A.P.P.L.E. Institute; the control group participates as the new intervention group the following year
- Implementation of the 5 year project started in Jan. 2006

ABOUT THE PARTICIPANTS

- A total of 79 parents participated in the Project: Year 1 (14 intervention group/ 23 control group), Year 2 (20/ 22), and Year 3 (18/ 20). Parents were recruited from PACs in 20 local school districts.
- Participants were predominantly white, non-Hispanic, and female, with an average age of 45. Only a few participants were single parents.
- Parents had a generally high level of education, with 63% of intervention parents and 70% of control parents having at least 4 years of college or more. Most parents had medium to high annual household incomes.
- The majority of children of participating parents were male (intervention group: 77% and control group: 79%). Children ranged in age from 6 to 16 (at the time of enrollment), with the average age being 12.
- The largest percent of children had developmental disabilities (intervention group: 41% and control group: 32%). 33% of the intervention group children had multiple disabilities compared to 42% of the control group.
- Less than half of the children were in regular classrooms (intervention group: 44% and control group: 42%); a few children were in separate classrooms only. Most children were in grades 1 to 6.

SURVEY FINDINGS

CROSS- GROUP COMPARISON: INTERVENTION AND CONTROL GROUP

Measures	Intervention parents (n=40) (in %)	Control parents (n=61) (in %)
6-8 months after the Institute, parents ...		
Considered themselves as "active" PAC members. *	93	75
Reported feeling "really part of their PAC."*	73	39
Considered themselves as leaders.*	75	53
Felt that as a parent leader they were making an impact at the school district level.	51	38
Felt that they were reaching out to non-PAC parents.*	87	62
Felt proud to be a PAC member.*	78	58
Thought their PAC was <i>effective [ineffective]</i> in getting important things accomplished in their school district.	58 [30]	49 [16]
Thought their PAC and the school district collaborated <i>well [poorly]</i> * on important issues.	48 [38]	38 [28]

* The findings are statistically significant at the 10% level.

COMMENTS FROM INTERVENTION GROUP PARENTS 6-8 MONTHS AFTER THE A.P.P.L.E. INSTITUTE

We are so much better organized since APPLE! It's my goal to recruit more members, build awareness and let folks know of all the support we have to offer.

Our PAC is very committed to achieving the vision we found during our participation at the APPLE Project. The parents involved have tried to address what we feel is the biggest impediment toward collaboration and that is lack of trust.

We have had both some steps forwards and backwards re: the trust issue with our administration. There are varying degrees of desire to work on the trust issues as opposed to some of the other goals from the meeting.

The PAC is still just beginning. I feel that I will need to work with the school district to get the meeting started [and] then go from there. The Special Ed Director is for the PAC and is very supportive.

SPED STAFF INTERVIEW FINDINGS

APPLE PROJECT IMPACT ON SPED-PAC RELATIONSHIPS

- More open communication between SPED staff and PAC parents.
- SPED staff and PAC parents gained a better understanding of each other's roles and responsibilities, resulting in more realistic expectations.
- Some PACs became more independent and less reliant on SPED staff to implement their goals and strategies and used their SPED staff more strategically.
- Some SPED staff became more of a liaison between the PAC and the school administration as opposed to "hand holding" the PAC in achieving its mission and goals.

PARENT INTERVIEW FINDINGS

PARENT LEADERSHIP

- Most parents were PAC members and held PAC positions
- Most parents had some leadership experience and felt that the acquired skills were transferable
- Being a parent leader also required a new/ different set of skills and confidence
- Parents' descriptions of a leader held many similarities

"A good leader, I think, would be someone who has great listening skills, someone who can think outside the box, someone who doesn't quit answering a question. [A good leader is] someone who takes the time to process what the concern is, look at different avenues that might help with the concern. A good leader. A great listener. A great communicator."

—INTERVENTION PARENT

CHALLENGES TO PAC LEADERSHIP

- Separating the personal from the public: Parents' emotions often act as a barrier to leadership.

"When I go in as an advocate for team meetings, I'm fine, but when I go in for my son, my stomach hurts, I have a headache, I'm exhausted, it's very different."

—INTERVENTION PARENT

- Confidentiality/ self-identification issues. Parents would not often want to self-identify as a parent of a student with special needs.

"I think there's this confidentiality piece [which] is pretty big ... I haven't quite figured it out, but I think that there are a lot of people who do not want to be open in public...so it's hard to lead a group that doesn't want to be identified."

—CONTROL PARENT

- Working with school districts and dealing with "school politics."

"I'm dealing with politics every day now. I don't want [our PAC] to be a political organization and I think that's what we've become, so we need a political spokesperson."

—INTERVENTION PARENT

- PAC specific issues included: not having a clear mission or vision, lacking of a formal structure or consistency, and issues recruiting and maintaining PAC members and increasing PAC member diversity.

APPLE PROJECT IMPACT AT THE PARENT LEVEL

- Parents became better listeners and more patient in group meetings.
- Parents felt more encouraged, inspired, and empowered to make change in their PAC/ school district.
- Parents gained a better understanding of SPED staff's roles and responsibilities as well as SPED staff expectations.
- Parents gained a better understanding of diversity.
- Parents connected with other parents and shared experiences both good and bad.

APPLE PROJECT IMPACT AT THE PAC LEVEL

- The project created a friendlier, more supportive atmosphere in PAC meetings.
- APPLE helped PAC members to better understand each other and their individual strengths.
- PACs were able to organize themselves more effectively.
- The Project raised PAC member' awareness of diversity.
- Parents learned about other PACs and their issues as well as effective strategies.
- APPLE improved PAC and SPED Staff communication efforts.