

**LA 4 Prekindergarten Evaluation
2005-06 SWOT RESULTS
(STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS)**

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LOUISIANA LA 4 PREKINDERGARTEN PROGRAM: STRENGTHS, WEAKNESSES, OPPORTUNITIES AND THREATS



The LA 4 prekindergarten program began in 2001 after the passage of Senate Bill 776. The purpose of the program is to serve four-year-old children not currently enrolled in publicly-funded prekindergarten classes. The LA 4 program was modeled after the Starting Points prekindergarten program which began in the 1992-1993 school year.

viewpoint of those professionals intimately involved in program implementation.

This report summarizes the results of an extensive qualitative analysis in which administrators and teachers were asked to provide valuable feedback regarding their experiences with the LA 4 program. Their perceptions were obtained through independently completed and confidential written surveys. Survey data were gathered and analyzed to illuminate areas of success those in need of attention from the

A standardized analytical tool named the SWOT survey is designed to capture an internal evaluation of the strengths and weaknesses of the LA 4 program, as well as an external survey of the opportunities and threats. The ultimate purpose is to gather subjective quality information from teachers and administrators to aid in program development.

In this survey, *strengths* were defined as things done well—the advantages. *Weaknesses* were defined as what could be improved—needs to be avoided. External strengths (economy, community support) were considered *opportunities*; outside obstacles were considered *threats* to the program.



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Background

In 2005-2006, prekindergarten intervention was provided by the LA 4/Starting Points programs for over 10,000 eligible children. The overwhelming growth and success of the program has led to inquiries regarding the characteristics that make Louisiana's preschool program so remarkable.

SWOT analysis has been used effectively in the past to develop the agenda and strategies that have moved the LA 4 program forward by identifying stakeholder concerns. Issues such as ensuring reliable funding, aligning curriculum, and reducing paperwork have been targeted and improvements have been made.

Over the past 5 years, administrators and teachers frequently cited characteristics such as the comprehensive curriculum, high standards regarding teacher training, and low student-to-teacher ratios as key elements to the program's positive outcomes.

While these elements continue to be regarded as essential, a more detailed analysis reveals that within these categories, there are perceived weaknesses/threats along with opportunities for program development.

The SWOT analysis provided in this report will examine the elements that were agreed upon by most respondents as strengths and then further probe the weaknesses, threats, and opportunities of each element.

Consequently, recommendations will be comprehensive and multilayered. This qualitative approach to inquiry allows for investigation into the program so that adjustments and improvements can be made and so that the positive outcomes will be sustainable.



In the report that follows, the strengths of the LA 4 program were categorized based on the overall number of respondents who considered these particular components to be key to the success of LA 4. Then, within each of these categories, weaknesses, threats, and opportunities were investigated in detail. The themes that emerged from this investigation included: Instruction, Program Guidelines, School Readiness, Funding, Inclusion, Social-Emotional Growth, Family Communication and Interaction, Assessment, Accountability, and Record Keeping. In the pages that follow, these categories are examined in order to take a comprehensive look at each component.

It should be noted that there seemed to be some confusion regarding the definition of the external components of the program (opportunities/threats). Respondents often repeated their replies to the strengths and weaknesses portion of the survey.

Instruction

Teachers and administrators agree that the LA 4 program's greatest strength lies in the area of instruction.



Instruction was identified as the main strength of the LA 4 program. Teachers and administrators believed that the developmentally appropriate program provided an excellent means for preparing students for kindergarten. Highly qualified teachers were effective at implementing the comprehensive program. However, some respondents viewed the evolving curriculum as a program weakness. They believed that the paperwork was cumbersome. They also suggested that student testing needed more consistency.

Teachers and administrators agreed that an increased focus on parental participation was an opportunity for program growth. Initiatives to increase the participation of minority populations were also recommended by many. Respondents suggested that improvement of playground facilities was needed if the comprehensive curriculum was to be properly implemented. It was believed by some respondents that the LA 4 program lacked a standard behavior policy and that this posed a threat to the program.

"One looks back with appreciation to the brilliant teachers, but with gratitude to those who touched our human feelings. The curriculum is so much necessary raw material, but warmth is a vital element for the growing plant and for the soul of the child."

-Carl Jung

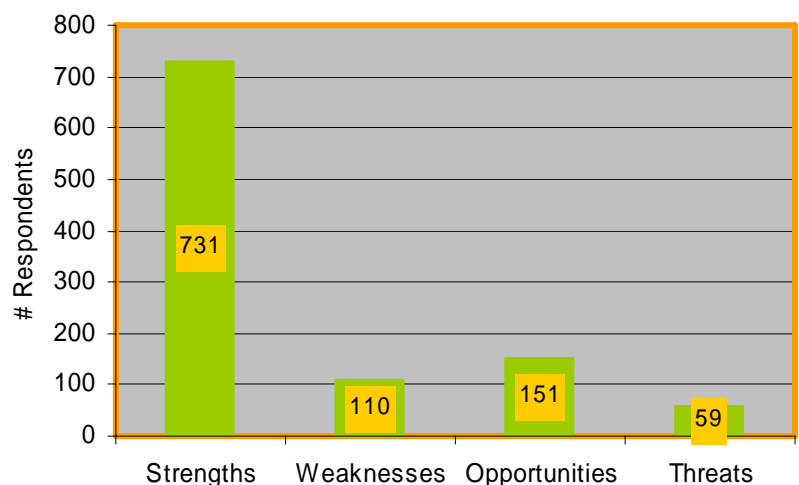
Instructional Strengths included: Louisiana's Comprehensive Curriculum, developmentally appropriate programming, literature component, readiness for kindergarten, qualified/compassionate teachers, and the use of palm pilots to reduce paperwork and increase technology in order to gain instructional time.

Instructional Weaknesses included: not enough instructional time, alignment of comprehensive curriculum between prekindergarten and kindergarten, not enough after-school enrichment, too much center time, and not enough technology included in the classroom.

Suggested Instructional Opportunities included: time to learn from other teachers, establishing a website with curriculum-based materials, including more multicultural materials, and establishment of an onsite technical consultant for palm pilot.

Instructional Threats included: non-mandatory attendance, lack of funding, lack of parental interest, and competition with Head Start and other early childhood programs.

Instruction





Program Guidelines

“A positive learning climate in a school for young children is a composite of many things. It is an attitude that respects children. It is a place where children receive guidance and encouragement from the responsible adults around them. It is an environment where children can experiment and try out new ideas without fear of failure. It is an atmosphere that builds children’s self-confidence so they dare to take risks. It is an environment that nurtures a love of learning.”

Carol Hillman, U.S. early childhood educa-

Program Guidelines were considered one of the key strengths of the LA 4 program. Specifically, respondents noted that the guidelines ensured a safe environment for learning, and that the availability of supplies facilitated instruction and learning. A large number of respondents believed the requirement of a certified teacher and the assistance of a paraprofessional in the classroom was a program asset.

However, weaknesses in the program included the quality of the playground equipment and the disrepair or lack of amenities of the facility.

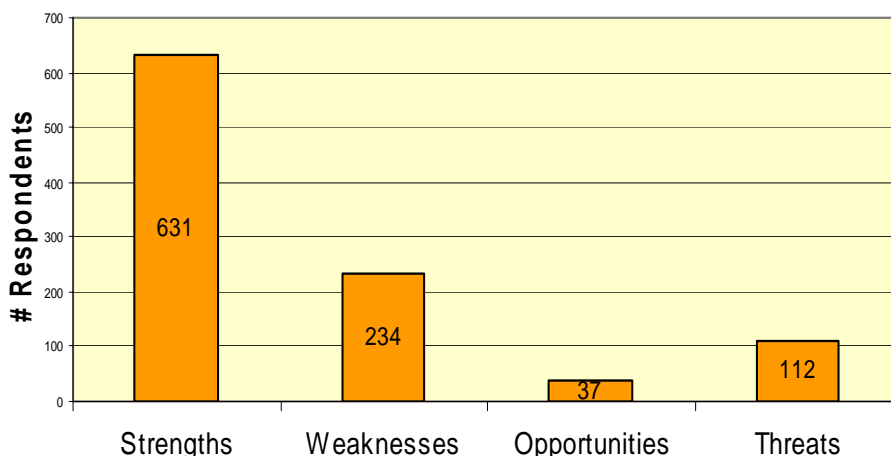
Respondents suggested that attempts to strengthen the bond between the teachers and paraprofessionals would be beneficial to the program. Additionally, strategies to encourage parent participation were viewed as key opportunities to improve the program.

Threats to the program included a perception of poor organization and decreased communication between entities. Once again, substandard playgrounds were considered a threat.

“The LA 4 program provides many opportunities for children to participate in developmentally appropriate activities. Louisiana’s Comprehensive Curriculum is a good resource tool for LA 4 educators”

—LA 4 teacher

Program Guidelines



Guideline strengths included: safety, abundance of supplies, certified teachers, and paraprofessional requirement.

Guideline weaknesses included: physical conditions of facility and playground.

Guideline opportunities included: parental assistance and early parental involvement.

Guideline threats included: playground status, organization, and competition from other childhood programs.



Maximizing School Readiness

In the words of the distinguished developmental psychologist Urie Bronfenbrenner... “in order to develop normally, a child requires progressively more complex joint activities with one or more adults who have an irrational emotional relationship with the child. “

“Curriculum is designed to help students be ready for kindergarten. The hands on learning, exposure to real life situations, and balance of listening and talking assist in school preparedness.”

—LA 4 Principal



Seventy-two administrators and one hundred six teachers reported that the LA 4 program facilitated the readiness of students to participate in school. They commented that the program promotes literacy which is associated with kindergarten success. Additionally, the early identification of at-risk children encourages readiness in children who otherwise would struggle academically.

However, not all respondents believed that the LA 4 program was successful at serving all children. They noted long waiting lists and that the “free/reduced lunch” requirements restrict services to some children. Some respondents indicated a gap in services for at-risk three-year-olds. Lack of transportation availability was also believed to affect program access for some children.



Social-Emotional Growth



Respondents noted that the LA 4 program facilitated social and emotional growth in participating children. Reported as contributing to this success were: qualified and compassionate teachers, appropriate teacher-to-student ratios that allow for individual attention, and the added assistance of a social worker. The structure and components of the program that encourage listening, healthy habits, and literacy were also listed as contributing to program success. Some respondents felt that added training for paraprofessionals would benefit the students. Other respondents suggested that additional support from social workers, resource teachers, and moderators would improve their ability to meet the social and emotional needs of their students. Inclusion of more special education teachers and speech-language pathologists was requested by LA 4 classroom teachers and administrators.

Family Communication and Interaction

“If kids come to us (educators/teachers) from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job easier. If they do not come to us from strong, healthy, functioning families, it makes our job more important.”

Barbara Colorose



Respondents acknowledged that involving caregivers was a key to the LA 4 program success. They frequently stated that the curriculum encouraged parental participation; however, many respondents felt that current efforts to involve family had been unsuccessful. Respondents believed that poor communication between teachers and caregivers was a threat to program success. Excellent suggestions included more opportunities to improve family interaction, participation, and involvement. Some respondents stated that information dissemination should be a gradual process. They believed that too much information had been given at once, potentially overwhelming parents. Evening and weekend meeting times were also suggested as a way to include working parents in their children’s education. Allowing parents better access to teachers by incorporating release time for telephone conferencing was also suggested as a way to unite teachers and caregivers.

Assessment and Accountability

Record Keeping

Respondents acknowledged the importance of accountability in the success of the LA 4 program. They agreed that the LA 4 program provided the framework to ensure that sufficient data was obtained to demonstrate the success of their work and document needed improvement. However, many respondents stated that the data collection process was at times inefficient and cumbersome. They suggested that streamlining this process would allow added time to be devoted to the children. Reportedly, repetitive paperwork was decreasing job satisfaction for some instructors. One hundred fifty respondents stated record keeping to be a weakness of the program.

A number of respondents had concerns with the ECERS-R evaluation process stating that some components of the assessment were beyond the teacher's control, such as the cafeteria and playground equipment.



Strengths: Excellent student outcomes are documented, increased student test scores are documented, feedback from evaluations are used to encourage change in needed areas, documentation allows for the public to see the outcomes of positive early childhood experiences.

Weaknesses: Too much paperwork, paperwork keeps changing, not enough time to complete all the paperwork, inconsistent testing data, not all children are pretested and posttested.

Opportunities: Reduce redundant paperwork, use technology for testing, use nonanecdotal forms of assessment.

Threats: Paperwork overwhelms teachers, teacher burnout.



Funding

Funding was noted as contributing to the success of the LA 4 program. Teachers and administrators appreciated their ability to access appropriate materials. However, some respondents indicated that supplies were ordered without the input of teachers, and others wrote that the ordering process was inefficient. While funding was considered abundant in some areas, spending was restricted so that the funds could not be allocated to construction on the playground or in classrooms/bathrooms. The opportunity to increase student experiences through allocation of funds for fieldtrips was identified as an area for program growth. Threats included the lack of a permanent funding base such as the Minimum Foundation Program (MFP), and the perception that funding was based on “soft monies.”



Inclusion

- Teachers and administrators reported that the inclusive component of the LA 4 program contributed to its success. However, because of the inclusion of children with special needs, such as those who are not “potty trained” and those who come from limited English proficient (LEP) families, teachers are presented with challenges in the classroom that they sometimes feel unprepared to manage.

“My friends, could we not be wise enough to come together to ‘own’ a portrait of what we would want for every child? Can we not see this as a matter of wise investment in their future and our own? Is it not basic American fairness that every child have a real chance to succeed? Can we not have the strength and compassion to embrace and include every child?”

David Lawrence Jr., president of The Early Childhood Initiative Foundation

Opportunities to expand the program by including three-year-olds was suggested. Also, some respondents were concerned about the inaccessibility of the LA 4 program for those who did not qualify financially but who would benefit from a quality preschool experience.

Recommendations

Based on the summary of the SWOT factors above, the Center for Child Development recommends that the Louisiana Department of Education consider the following:

- 1) Prior to future SWOT analysis, provide specific training comparing and contrasting what constitutes strengths/weaknesses versus opportunities/threats.
- 2) Reconsider funding restrictions for playground equipment, classroom storage, and out door facilities.
- 3) Provide a program-wide procedural guide for ordering supplies which includes a process of checks and balances at both the local and system level.
- 4) Analyze the current systems implemented for encouraging family involvement. Discontinue those that have been unsuccessful, and establish best practices for successful partner with parents.
- 5) Continue to streamline data collection measures. Ensure that all participants are aware of the purpose of each data collection tool and the importance that their input has on the success of the program, the students, and their families.
- 6) Investigate the current system of information dissemination at the school and system level to identify areas for improvement.
- 7) Continue collaborative efforts with ancillary services, especially dental and mental health, for cohesive and holistic service delivery.
- 8) Provide cooperative continuing education for both paraprofessionals and teachers to ensure mutual understanding of classroom goals, program philosophy, and organizational procedures.
- 9) Consider establishing a teachers' listserv as a discussion board for idea sharing.
- 10) Utilize longitudinal research for long-term goal planning.
- 11) Continue to advocate for universal access so that all children have an opportunity to participate in high quality preschool programs such as LA 4.

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