

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Learning Leaders, founded in 1956 as the New York City School Volunteer Program, has a long history of mobilizing and training adult volunteers to work with students in New York City public schools and is now among the largest programs in the nation fostering parent involvement in education. Over 11,500 people volunteered last year under the auspices of this organization; 71 percent of these volunteers are parents of public school children. Learning Leaders has taken parent involvement and volunteerism in public schools to scale, and offers a rare opportunity to assess the depth and breadth of the effects.

It is generally accepted that volunteer and parent involvement in children's education is valuable, and there is a large body of studies — the vast majority qualitative — concluding that such efforts are worthwhile. There is a dearth of rigorous research, however, that actually quantifies the effects of parent involvement. Moreover, there are countless program models fostering and supporting parent involvement and, accordingly, a vast range in how well they work. It can not be taken for granted that all such programs make a difference. The central question underlying this study is whether the Learning Leaders approach is effective.

While Learning Leaders had accumulated considerable testimony and anecdotes in support of its program, the organization sought a more comprehensive assessment of its impacts. Arete Corporation, a New York City-based evaluation, planning and management consulting firm, was engaged by Learning Leaders to conduct an independent in-depth evaluation of its model of parent involvement. This research was designed to measure, as well as possible, quantitative evidence of Learning Leaders' effects. The study, which was conducted between July 2001 and December 2002, collected data from a large sample of Learning Leaders: over 2,000 present and former volunteers, for example, responded to two surveys administered during the study, and a file of New York City Board of Education student records, matched to the Learning Leaders database and assembled for this research, contained almost 7,400 student records.

The researchers amassed a large body of evidence showing that the Learning Leaders approach to training parents to volunteer in schools makes a significant difference in their behavior at home with their own school-age children, that their children perform better, and that the program makes a difference in the schools in which there is a sizable presence of volunteers. The evaluators consider the findings, which are based on quantitative evidence (the majority of which is significant to the .01 level), to be very compelling. The researchers also believe that this evaluation breaks new ground in the depth and breadth of its analysis. Here are the major findings.

PARENT INVOLVEMENT BEHAVIORS AT HOME

- After serving as a Learning Leaders volunteer, parents spend on average 27 percent more time reading with their children and 22 percent more time helping their children with homework than they spent before becoming a volunteer.
- Buttressing the claims of Learning Leaders parents about increased time on tasks, the number of nights per week during which these parents read with their children is on average 8 percent more than the number of nights spent by a control group of parents; and Learning Leaders parents work with their children on homework 12 percent more.
- Parents overwhelmingly report positive changes in every one of 10 at-home activities and educationally supportive behaviors after serving as a Learning Leaders volunteer, such as providing books and learning materials, patience with children, confidence in skills and abilities, ensuring quiet time and space, and controlling time spent on TV and video games. On every activity, at least 60 percent of the Learning Leaders parents indicated significant changes, and on most items, 90 percent did.

STUDENT PERFORMANCE

The children of Learning Leaders perform better academically than their peers: they score higher on both English Language Arts (ELA) and Math tests, and they have better attendance. The scores of general education students in the Learning Leaders sample were compared to the scores of the general education population on the fourth grade New York State tests for ELA and Math in the three years from 1999-2001. Using a matched data file, prepared during this study, of 7,386 Board of Education students, the evaluators examined the academic records of New York City elementary school children who resided in a household with a Learning Leaders volunteer to assess whether this volunteering experience had any impact on the children's performance.

- In each of the three years from 1999 to 2001, between 11.8 and 14.7 percent more fourth grade students in the Learning Leaders student sample scored at or above grade level on the fourth grade *ELA* test than did general education students citywide.
- In each of the three years from 1999 to 2001, between 4.2 and 10.3 percent more fourth grade students in the Learning Leaders student sample scored at or above grade level on the fourth grade *Math* test than did general education students citywide.
- Over the five years from 1996 to 2001, attendance rates for elementary school students in the Learning Leaders sample averaged 93.4 percent, compared to the citywide average of 91.4 percent. These are significant figures: these students are absent 20% to 25% less than their peers. (If the higher attendance rate exhibited by children of Learning Leaders were emulated throughout the school system, New York

City would receive about \$56 million more annually in state aid; the New York State aid formula is driven by attendance.)

The above findings are notable because the socio-economic status (SES) profile of the children of Learning Leaders in the elementary grades is virtually identical to the characteristics of children in the school system as a whole. The findings suggest, therefore, that the higher level of performance is related to the changes in parental behavior noted above.

SCHOOL BENEFITS

Learning Leaders has a beneficial and profound effect on schools in which large numbers of parents serve as volunteers (herein defined as 20 volunteers or more).

Moreover, the schools with the largest numbers of Learning Leaders parents tend to be in very poor areas and have characteristics of less desirable schools.¹ In sum, these findings have two important dimensions: first, Learning Leaders volunteer in large numbers in these schools; and second, their presence makes a difference.

- The researchers compared the student suspension rates in schools with 20 or more volunteers for the 2000-2001 school year and the prior year to the rates in “similar schools.” Over two-thirds of the 43 schools in the Learning Leaders sample had lower rates of suspension than the comparison schools, translating into an average 21 percent and 26 percent fewer student suspensions in the two respective school years.
- More than twice the percentage of Learning Leaders parents get involved in Parents Associations (PA) and School Leadership Teams (SLT) than do control group parents. A third of these parents joined the PA after becoming a Learning Leader, and 55 percent subsequently joined the SLT. These are the two most important school-sponsored governance councils. In addition, the rates of volunteering by Learning Leaders on an array of school activities (e.g., assisting a teacher, helping in the library), while slightly **lower** than control group parents **before** they became Learning Leaders, more than **doubled after** they became Learning Leaders.
- Learning Leaders parents get more involved in their child’s school in additional ways that extend beyond their Learning Leaders commitment. For example, these parents have more frequent interactions with teachers and school administrators; 67 percent of the Learning Leaders volunteers reported that they talk with their child’s teacher at least once a week, compared to 46 percent of the control group parents.

¹ The NYC BOE, for data comparison purposes, has derived clusters of “similar” schools based on key demographic variables (such as percentages of special education students, English language learners, and free lunch eligibility). Overall, the sub-groups in which schools with high numbers of Learning Leaders are clustered have higher rates of suspensions, higher percentages of free lunch eligible students, and slightly lower attendance rates than the comparable citywide averages. Thus, the above-average percentages in Learning Leaders schools are especially noteworthy.

SPANISH-SPEAKING PARENTS

Whereas language barriers have often deterred parents from getting involved in schools, the contrary is the case with Spanish-speaking Learning Leaders.

- Not only do Hispanics constitute the largest single ethnic group among Learning Leaders volunteers, but also the percentage of total Hispanic parent volunteers is even greater than the equivalent Hispanic student percentage of the school system (over 42 percent of the parent volunteers vs. 38 percent of the students).
- As a group, Spanish-speaking parent volunteers report even larger increases than do English-speaking parent volunteers in the average amounts of time they spend reading with their children (an increase of 56 percent for Spanish speakers vs. 14 percent for English speakers) and helping with homework (39 percent increase vs. 11 percent). While the Spanish-speaking parent volunteers spent slightly less time than English-speaking parent volunteers on reading and homework prior to becoming Learning Leaders, the time spent post-Learning Leaders became approximately equal in both groups.

VOLUNTEER PERCEPTIONS

Parent volunteers have *very* positive feelings about Learning Leaders. Ninety-five percent of all survey respondents — including active and inactive Learning Leaders — said that being a Learning Leader was a *very positive* experience. Four percent more said *somewhat positive*, and the remaining one percent gave a neutral response. There were **no** negative responses. The parents are explicit in their views about the connection between this form of volunteering and the benefits to their own children. Parent enthusiasm about Learning Leaders, moreover, is manifest in the length of time that parents serve as volunteers: on average 3.7 years. Moreover, over half of them serve for three years or more, and a fifth for six years or more.

Some people may speculate that Learning Leaders successes are due to its tapping an exceptionally motivated group of parents. That may be so; however, it is notable that the number of parent volunteers has grown by 3,000 in the past five years alone and continues to grow. This steady growth in such high numbers suggests that the reservoir of motivated parents may be huge and that the Learning Leaders approach enables parents to act on a near-universal desire to become better supporters of their own children's education.

CONCLUSIONS & RECOMMENDATIONS

The overwhelming conclusion, based on the confluence of a wide variety of reinforcing variables, is that the Learning Leaders approach “works.” It is a major factor in bringing about positive change in parental behaviors, student

performance, and the quality of school environments. It has a demonstrable impact on higher student academic performance, a more orderly school atmosphere (exemplified by reduced student suspensions), and better parent-teacher communication. The evaluation findings also suggest that it is not simply volunteering itself but, more specifically, volunteering as a Learning Leader that leads to these benefits to public schools, parents and their children.

Although this research did not scrutinize the components of the Learning Leaders approach, the researchers speculate that a combination of elements — a hands-on training approach in a collegial atmosphere; camaraderie with other parents; confidence-building support from Learning Leaders staff; opportunities for continuous skill advancement; mostly bilingual staff, dual language materials, and translators; and concerted efforts to give recognition to volunteer efforts — are all important. Collectively, they create a welcoming environment and a supportive pathway for entry into schools. In other words, Learning Leaders may be unleashing parents' pent-up desire to get involved.

By nearly any measure, Learning Leaders is an inexpensive approach to school improvement. The annual cost of training and supporting a Learning Leader, currently \$298, is returned many fold in the dollar value of the time the volunteers spend in schools — as much as \$2,200 per year per volunteer, based on per hour rates promulgated by Independent Sector, a highly regarded national organization.

In addition, Learning Leaders' correlation with higher student attendance can be equated to a dollar value, in part because the New York State aid formula for education is tied to attendance, not enrollment. **If the two percentage points in higher attendance exhibited by Learning Leaders were emulated throughout the school system, based on the current state aid formula, New York City would receive \$56 million more annually.**

In view of the findings of this study, Learning Leaders should develop strategies to accelerate the growth of its cadre of volunteers. This report recommends a series of steps to build on the present program. Recommendations related to strengths include increasing the number of schools with high concentrations of parent volunteers, aggressively marketing the program to low performing schools, and disseminating evaluation findings to Hispanic/Latino and parent organizations. Recommendations regarding less well-developed areas include increasing services in middle schools and increasing engagement with selected under-represented groups, such as Asian-Americans.

Learning Leaders is unique in the nation in its combination of scale and intensity. We believe the findings of this research will be of value to other school systems around the country that want to increase parent involvement, and to other volunteer/parent involvement programs which are too small to be able to undertake in-depth assessments of their effects.

Learning Leaders Impact: Parent Volunteers Make The Difference
212-213-3370

At home in New York City, the fundamental changes now unfolding in the governance and administration of the New York City school system present an important opportunity both for Learning Leaders and the leadership of the new Department of Education, for whom school-based parent involvement is one of three top priorities. Learning Leaders throughout its 46-year history has worked in close collaboration with the New York City Board of Education. In view of the demonstrated impacts of Learning Leaders on higher student academic performance, a more orderly school atmosphere (exemplified by reduced student suspensions), and better parent-teacher communications — benefits which are at the heart of school improvement — every effort should be made to deepen and extend this partnership