

A DECADE OF RESULTS
The Impact of the LA's BEST
After School Enrichment Program
on Subsequent Student Achievement
and Performance

June 2000

A longitudinal study report and a synthesis of research begun in 1990 by the
UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation with support from
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“Would you like to see the poem I wrote after school?”

Six-year-old at the 1999 LA’s BEST Conference

There is little question that 21st century Americans are focused on the education of their children. Everyone argues the need for educational improvement. Policymakers continue the search for the magic formula to fix public education fast—new tests, different accountability options, incentives for teachers, or new curricular programs for children. But so far, there is little to suggest that these commonly used policy levers are working well. Furthermore, there is continuing and heightened concern for the well-being and educational attainment of children who have been historically poor performers in schools. These lower performing students often come from backgrounds where there may be neither discretionary time nor available expertise to assist them in meeting new, challenging educational goals. Researchers studying our changing society point out that across income levels, more and more adults in families are holding full-time jobs, and not surprisingly, supervision of children’s out-of-school time has become less and less a family matter. Television and computer games occupy growing proportions of students’ daily discretionary activities, cutting into, as might be expected, their time for and interest in homework and recreational reading.

The seriousness of this set of problems has been recognized by educators and parents. In fact, plenty of policy options have been proposed to address this set of complex problems. One strategy is intended to address comprehensively the problem of educational achievement and the increasing need for student supervision by creating and sustaining an after-school program for students. Instead of addressing only custodial care, this program, LA’s BEST, has been designed to provide activities to meet specific

educational, social, and motivational goals. This report summarizes the evaluation of the LA's BEST program.

A comprehensive intervention, LA's BEST was developed in the Los Angeles area by a community-based initiative. In operation for more than 12 years and overseen by the Mayor of Los Angeles, the Superintendent of the Los Angeles Unified School District, a Board of Directors and an Advisory Board, LA's BEST holds the following goals for K-5 students:

- A safe environment
- Enhanced opportunities through the integration of an educational support structure
- Educational enrichment activities to supplement and deepen the regular program
- Recreational activities
- Interpersonal skills and self-esteem development

In practice, LA's BEST students receive homework assistance, library activities, and a variety of other activities, provided in safe environments. Students are offered field trips, and the performing arts have been emphasized. LA's BEST students must enroll in the program (as opposed to a drop-in option) and are expected to participate on a regular basis. The program has expanded to 69 sites and is available from the end of the school day until 6 PM, Monday through Friday, at no cost to parents. Sites are selected based on educational needs: low achievement, low economic status of the community, and high gang or crime rates in the neighborhood.

Does It Work?

LA's BEST has aggressively sought evaluations for the two purposes: to improve the program using objectively analyzed results and to explore and justify impact to its financial and moral supporters in the broader community. A series of evaluation studies

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has been conducted by the UCLA Center for the Study of Evaluation (CSE) where a number of goals were addressed. In the past, these studies reported on the attitudes and beliefs of students, parents, and staff about program implementation, program benefits (such as safety), and suggestions for improvement, as well as student outcomes, such as grades, educational aspirations and follow-up studies of achievement. Clearly, there are differences in values about what aspects of such programs are most important to evaluate. Some policymakers reject any evaluation efforts that cannot be directly translated into gains on standardized test scores even though for most educational interventions, the reliance on test scores alone is of questionable value. For programs like LA's BEST, with a wide range of intellectual, interpersonal, and individual goals, there is a need to assure that evaluations are similarly broad in their conception, and that test scores, when they are used, are employed at an appropriate time, ideally after a program has had time to mature. LA's BEST has addressed the full range of the program through the commissioning of five earlier evaluations, emphasizing outcomes and processes in addition to achievement tests. Precipitous of these evaluations are summarized in the Appendix of this report.

This report addresses the impact of participating in LA's BEST over a number of years. The study looked at students who were in second through fifth grades during the 1993-1994 school year, following them from 1993-1994 through 1997-1998. Our strategy was twofold: to examine differences in outcomes attained by LA's BEST students, and to compare the LA's BEST students to their schoolmates who were not included in the program.

To study LA's BEST schools, we obtained information about students including ethnicity, gender, language proficiency status, eligibility for free/reduced lunch (the proxy for low income level), and disability status. In addition, we collected outcome data including achievement test scores (using either the *Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills*

[CTBS] or the more recently adopted *Stanford-9 Achievement Test* [SAT-9] in reading, mathematics, and language arts. The rate at which students were redesignated as fully proficient in English was also collected. We also obtained school absence rates, course-taking patterns, and rates of student mobility (moving between schools or out of the district).

To assess the impact of LA's BEST, we then looked at the number of years that a student had participated in the program and divided students into categories that reflected three levels of program involvement: high—more than 75% days present; medium—between 74% and 26% days present; or low—present in LA's BEST less than 25% of the time. Linear regression and path analysis were the statistical techniques used to examine the effects of program participation on the variables of interest.

Background Information

LA's BEST schools, like most schools in Los Angeles, serve predominantly Latino students who are economically disadvantaged. Because the study spans several years, student background information was selected from only one of the years of interest (1993-1994).

Table 1 provides a brief description of the characteristics of students who participated and did not participate in the LA's BEST program in 1993-1994. As seen in Table 1, LA's BEST participants included fewer Asian and Latino students than the non-participating students, more African American students and marginally more White students. The poverty rate for LA's BEST students was somewhat higher than for those who did not participate. LA's BEST attracted fewer students with limited English proficiency.

Table 1

Demographic Characteristics of LA's BEST and Non-LA's BEST Students in 1993-1994

Group	LA's BEST (N = 4312)	%	Non-LA's BEST (N = 15010)	%
Gender				
Girls	2187	50.7	7420	49.4
Boys	2125	49.3	7590	50.6
Ethnicity				
Asian	145	3.4	948	6.3
Black	856	19.9	1797	12.0
Hispanic	3180	73.7	11923	79.4
White	108	2.5	229	1.5
Other	23	.5	113	.8
Income				
Free/reduced lunch	3430	79.5	10584	70.5
Special Ed				
Special education	61	1.4	281	1.9
Language				
LEP	2528	58.6	10037	66.9
Non-LEP	1784	41.4	4973	33.1

Note. LEP = Limited English Proficient.

The evaluation question was relatively straightforward: Is there a difference in performance of LA's BEST students compared to those in the same school with no program participation? What factors influence the outcomes? Data are reported by considering students in cohorts for Grades 2, 3, 4, and 5 in school year 1993-1994 and tracing their performance through 1997-1998.

Data Sources

Data sources used for the study involved archival measures of achievement, reports of absences in middle school, transiency (percentage staying in the same school), redesignation as English language proficient, course-taking patterns, and intensity of

participation for LA's BEST students. Data on all variables but LA's BEST participation were obtained through the assistance of the Los Angeles Unified School District.¹

Achievement Measures

Standardized test scores were used as the measures of achievement with a particular emphasis on achievement following LA's BEST participation. There have been policy changes, at the district and state level, that have resulted in the administration of different achievement tests in different years. In 1996, the district changed its testing program from the Comprehensive Test of Basic Skills (CTBS) to the Stanford-9. In the spring of 1997, LAUSD administered the SAT-9, Form S. In spring 1998, the state mandated that all districts use the SAT-9, Form T.

Results

Our results show that there is good reason to believe that LA's BEST is meeting its tacit goal of increasing student performance, particularly when we look at students over time.² One set of findings pertains to only those who participated in the LA's BEST program. The analyses were based on differences among students in degree of participation.

Finding 1

- Following up students with long-term involvement in the LA's BEST program (at least 4 years), higher participation was significantly related to positive achievement on standardized tests of mathematics, reading, and language arts, when the influence of gender, ethnicity, income, and language status was controlled.

¹ CRESST thanks the Los Angeles Unified School District for its cooperation in providing access to its longitudinal data base.

² There is a separate technical appendix that reports data related to the findings in the Results section.

Finding 2

- For each of the four cohorts, starting follow-up from Grades 2, 3, 4 or 5, more program participation was related to better subsequent attendance, again, when the influence of gender, ethnicity, income, and language status was controlled.

Finding 3

- This finding integrates the first two. Using path analysis, our results show that higher levels of participation in LA's BEST led to better subsequent school attendance, which in turn related to higher academic achievement on standardized tests of mathematics, reading, and language arts.

Discussion of Results Related to Program Participation

The most obvious, practical interpretation is that the LA's BEST intervention must be defined in terms of the commitment made by students and parents to serious, long-term involvement with the LA's BEST program. Many years of hit-or-miss involvement are not sufficient to promote academic achievement. Neither, does it appear, is one good year. Day-in, day-out involvement is needed. Our inference is that LA's BEST promotes better attendance because its programs are intrinsically more motivating than other alternatives. Better school attendance results and the conjoint effect of being in regular school more frequently and in LA's BEST activities more often shows up on test scores. Together, they influence academic performance. The theoretical and empirical interpretation of this finding is simply that more time on a task (learning) results in higher levels of performance.

Our present data do not allow us to separate out the impact of LA's BEST from that of regular school, or to determine which of the panoply of LA's BEST activities are the most effective. However, the policy inference is clear: Make the programs attractive

and relevant to school, and children will attend. Attendance predicts performance. This is true even when there is the atypical turbulence found when different tests are introduced. LAUSD changed test companies or test forms three times in the period for which data were collected. Most evidence suggests that effects of interventions are often swamped by these changes, and as a result, impact is typically harder to detect. In addition, LAUSD has had four superintendents during the evaluated period, each of whom shifted agenda. In addition, the State of California has been engaged in changing their standards, their tests, their rules for treating students learning English, and other requirements, such as reducing class size. Many of these changes have been abrupt. The apparent resilience of the program effects in the light of this rapidly moving context suggests much promise.

The second set of evaluation findings compares data obtained from records of LA's BEST students with data for students at the same school who were not in the program.

Finding 4

- Language redesignation rates favored LA's BEST students when compared with non-LA's BEST students for the cohort analyzed (fourth grade, 1994-1995). Significant differences in favor of LA's BEST students were found for subsequent redesignation rates in Grades 6 and 8. No significant differences were found in comparing performance for Grades 5 and 7.

Finding 5

- Absence follow-up data for the fifth-grade cohort (1994-1995) showed that students who participated in LA's BEST had significantly fewer absences in Grades 6 and 7, although no differences were detected in Grades 8 and 9.

Finding 6

- Although in the initial year LA's BEST students began with statistically significant mathematics achievement scores lower than those of non-participants, in 1997-1998 those differences no longer existed.

**Discussion of Comparisons Between LA's BEST
and Non-LA's BEST Students in the Same Schools**

Although analyses between LA's BEST and non-LA's BEST students were done on only example groups rather than the full range of cohorts, we would expect similar findings with a more extensive analysis. The results suggest that important predictors of performance appear to be differentially affected by LA's BEST involvement. Language redesignation is a strong predictor of subsequent academic achievement in English. LA's BEST students began with a somewhat lower percentage of students in need of language skills, attributable most probably to the representation of English-speaking African American students in the program. The last finding, related to initial and subsequent differences of LA's BEST and non-LA's BEST students, could be interpreted as a "closing the gap" finding, although there is no scientific way to document "no difference" between groups. On a practical level, however, differences appear to be ameliorated, probably because of the stronger performance of the "high participation group."

Implications

From our perspective, it looks as if LA's BEST is a program that, when followed as a regular part of students' broad educational experience, results in statistically important differences in student outcomes. The fact that we can detect *any* change on standardized achievement measures in itself is notable, for most educational interventions are unable to show impact on measures not tightly tied to the curriculum, or on follow-up achievement after a particular program is over. On a practical level, LA's BEST needs to

focus its attention on increasing the attendance of enrolled students. It may be that high-level attenders do so because they and their parents are more highly motivated, and this interest transfers to achievement. But it is equally likely that coming to school and to the LA's BEST program regularly is the reason for good performance and persisting impact subsequent to leaving LA's BEST. The program can determine what features account for high levels of participation, for both students and activities, and seek to increase engagement.

Summary

The evaluation results, investigating cohorts of LA's BEST students over a long period of time, found achievement effects for the program for students who were the highest level participants. These students showed increased school attendance and increased standardized test scores. LA's BEST students also showed somewhat higher rates of redesignation to English proficient status when compared with schoolmates not in the program. Similar improvement was found for the sampled cohort on attendance.

With regard to this study, the evaluators recommend efforts be made to increase attendance in order to support students' long-term achievement. We also subscribe to the need for continued evaluation of processes and outcomes other than academic achievement, including attitudes toward program activities, the sense of safety felt by students and parents, the students' future academic aspirations, the development of special areas of expertise, and other predictors of success in school and in society.

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Appendix

Summary of Five Evaluations of LA's BEST

Summary of Five Evaluations of LA's BEST

This summary report highlights the significant findings of five previous evaluations of LA's BEST, completed by UCLA's Center for the Study of Evaluation (March 1, 1990; March 1, 1991; July 31, 1991; December 17, 1993; and Spring, 1995). The summary focuses on those findings that relate to the parts of the LA's BEST program that positively influenced the experiences of children.³ These findings are especially meaningful because they correspond so well with the stated goals and objectives of LA's BEST when it was created in 1988. Too often, evaluations end up measuring goals that, however important, do not match with the intended outcomes of the project being evaluated. That did not happen here.

When LA's BEST was created, it was intended to mute (at minimum) and compensate for (at best) the devastating consequences of poverty, namely the lack of stability and supervision too many children experienced as a result of impoverished conditions. The March 1, 1990 evaluation report describes this environment and its impact on neighborhood schools:

Hungry and tired children, lack of adequate supervision, the influences of drugs, gangs, and anti-social behavior from the surrounding environment, children in need of tutoring, second language instruction, or just a safe place to grow and develop are some of the realities that impinge on the teaching and learning environment of today's inner-city schools. (p. 1)

In was in response to these conditions that LA's BEST formulated goals to guide program activities in their sites, beginning with a focus on the safety of children (as stated in the March 31, 1990 and subsequent reports):

- Goal 1: To provide a safe environment for students through careful management and planning...;
- Goal 2: To provide enhanced educational opportunities by integrating an educational support structure into each student's schedule...;
- Goal 3: To provide educational enrichment activities to supplement the regular education program and to provide enticement to learning...;
- Goal 4: To provide recreational activities...; and
- Goal 5: To provide interpersonal skills and self-esteem development.... (pp. 6-7)

Each of the evaluations examined the extent to which the program was addressing and reaching these goals. The reports used the perceptions of the students, parents, staff members, and teachers in describing the reality and benefits of LA's BEST. Overall, the

³ This summary does not focus on what the evaluations reported about staff characteristics, needs, expectations.

evaluations were overwhelmingly positive. For example, this statement from the December 1993 report nicely summarizes a theme of all five evaluations.

The indications are that LA's BEST is serving an important function. Children are learning. They feel safer in the program than in their own neighborhood and perceive staff as caring about them. LA's BEST children report that they enjoy school more and give high ratings to the variety of experiences that the program offers, especially the field trips. Parents see positive changes in their children, feel less stress and worry concerning their children's exposure to illegal, unsafe, or otherwise dangerous activities, and voice interest in becoming more involved in the program's planning. Principals and Site-Coordinators rate staff preparedness and performance higher in the 1992-93 study than in the 1990-91 study. In regard to the program, principals, Site-Coordinators, and staff assign high ratings to key program components, particularly free play, recreational activities, homework assistance, safe physical environment, arts and performances, and opportunities to be creative. (p. 105)

Following are specific examples from the UCLA evaluations that elaborate on the six general findings that point to important achievements of the LA's BEST program.

1. Children felt safer after school. Likewise, parents felt their children were safer after school.

The importance of this finding is amplified by the concerns of parents about the care of their children when they are not in school. For example, the 1993 evaluation reported that without LA's BEST, children would most likely suffer from lack of adult supervision after school:

...a higher percentage of children and parents reported that in the absence of this year's LA's BEST program, children would be placed in a care situation that did not have adequate/reliable adult supervision. Twenty-three percent of parents, and 34% of children marked categories that did not include adequate adult supervision. One might hypothesize that current economic problems may have contributed to this rise in the percentage of children who would not have had adequate adult supervision if the LA's BEST program were not available. Because it is almost self-incriminating for parents and children to give this type of answer, it is highly probable that these are underestimates for the percentage of children who would have no adequate adult supervision in the absence of LA's BEST. (p. 52)

The after school supervision that LA's BEST provides and the resulting feelings of safety serve the important purpose of lessening children's stress as well as the stress of parents.

Children felt significantly less safe ($p < .001$) in the neighborhood than in either the program or at home. Generally, the reasons given revolved around the violence and harassment that they felt existed outside the school gates and/or outside the home. (July 31, 1991, p. 71)

As early as the March 1, 1990, three-quarters of the parents [surveyed] indicated that they worried significantly less about their children's safety and that they had more energy and that they had more energy in the evening since enrolling their children in the program. A clear majority also indicated that the program resulted in sizeable savings in their time. (March 1, 1990, p. 30)

Parents in the comparison sample reported a significantly higher savings ($p < .004$) in money, time, and stress/worry concerning their child's safety than did the LA's BEST parents. (Evaluation Report, July 31, 1991)

Similarly, parents report that their child(ren)'s participation has resulted in 'Somewhat Positive(ly)' to 'Very Positive(ly)' changes in the same areas...:ability to get along with others, grades on homework and tests, attitudes toward school, communication skills, and knowledge about specific subjects. (July 31, 1991, p. 56)

Across the board, parents and children alike found the safety of the afterschool program far superior to the safety within the neighborhood. Children and parents judged the after school program to be significantly safer ($p < .001$ for children's responses and $p < .001$ for the parents' responses) than the neighborhood. (December 17, 1993, p. 64)

2. *Children in LA's BEST liked school more and were more engaged in school.*

Enjoying and engaging in school has important consequences for sustaining interest in and commitment to schooling over time. The 1992-1994 report highlights the presumed importance of this, while acknowledging what follow up is necessary:

In its present form, this program serves to keep these after school children in the 'schooling game.' Might the program be preventing these children from going down or being lost? Can we speculate where these kids would be if they were not in the program? This prevention function needs further elaboration, addressing school-related behavior such as interest, motivation, persistence in school, and the expansion of learning. (p. xii)

It is acknowledged in several of the reports, however, that students' attitudes toward schooling have been positively influenced by their participation in LA's BEST. The following are responses from parents and classroom teachers attesting to this:

...[T]he majority of LA's BEST parents perceived 'somewhat positive' or 'very positive' changes in their children's behavior, attitudes, and academic achievement since participating in LA's BEST. Parents noticed most changes in

their children's happiness, their ability to get along with others and their confidence; they were least likely to notice changes in grades, though 71% of parents reported a positive change. (March 1, 1990, p. 32)

Regular classroom teachers also reported slightly more positive levels of achievement, behavior, and attitudes in their students who participate in the program compared to their *students* who were not in the program....Most noticeable are differences in attitudes and communication. (March 1, 1990, p. 36)

[A]...decrement in attendance is a pattern that is also reflected in classroom teachers' ratings comparing LA's BEST students with non-LA's BEST students. (March 1, 1990, p. 38)

This greater engagement in school is supported by children's own reports about changes in their attitude toward school:

Four-fifths of children (83%) also reported an increased liking of *regular* school since participating in the LA's BEST program, with over half indicating that they like school 'a lot more.' (July 31, 1991, p. 49)

The overall staff perception that the children are learning and growing in the daily program supports children's own ratings of changes in their liking of *regular* school. Additionally, the children's feelings about the homework component as well as their comments about learning new things and reading more suggest that children may be getting more out of their regular school experience. (July 31, 1991, p. 50)

Children also reported that they liked school more since they had been in the after school program: 77% of children marked that they 'like school more' (27%) or 'like school a lot more' (50%) since being in the after school program. Twenty-two percent indicated no change in their liking of school. This 'no change' category should not be interpreted as a negative, given that the majority of children reported earlier in this chapter that they liked school a lot to begin with. What comes across is that these children are doers and learners, and that they are hungry for learning experiences. This is a stark contrast to the standardized testing picture of these children. (December 17, 1993, p. 60)

As mentioned before, these improved attitudes toward school as confirmed in survey and interview results have consequence. The 1992-1994 Longitudinal Study notes that "such effects can result in significant later dividends. The positive student attitudes associated with the program and program students' greater trust of adults in their school environment, for example, may well help create students who later on in their adolescence find it easier to apply themselves academically, finish high school, and pursue higher education." (1992-94, p. x)

3. *Positive relationships between adults and children had been well established.*

While so much focus, especially today, is given to whether or not children's academic performance improves, it is more often a positive relationship with an adult that makes a significant difference in a child's life. Just notice how many magazines run stories about famous, successful people talking about their "mentors." In the end, it wasn't the grades they got that made the difference in their lives as much as the people who influenced them. At LA's BEST, the evaluations note, adult influence is positive and effective.

...Responses to questions about their interpersonal experiences suggest that many children generally feel a sense of belonging and acceptance in the after school program. Ninety-one percent of students described the program's grown-ups as helpful to them, 'a Little' (17%) or a 'Lot' (74%); 87% thought that the grown-ups cared about them, 'a Little' (13%) or 'a Lot' (74%); and 89% felt that these adults had high hopes for them, 'a Little' (13%) or 'a Lot' (76%). (March 1, 1990, p. 34)

A year later, in the 1991 report, virtually all children (98%) felt that LA's BEST grown-ups cared about them and had high hopes for their success, indicating an even stronger relationship with LA's BEST staff. This not only showed up in closed-ended questions, but was affirmed when children talked more openly and generally about LA's BEST:

In their responses to open-ended questions, children commonly spoke highly of their relationships with specific staff: That a specific staff member often talked to them, helped them with something, gave them a chance to help someone else or do something for the school or program, etc.

4. *Children in LA's BEST reported higher aspirations regarding finishing school and going to college.*

Not only did the evaluations show that children felt safer and more engaged in school *in the moment*, the evaluations also demonstrated the effect LA's BEST program was having on children's senses of their own futures.

Children's responses to a ...question [As you look to the future, what will probably be the highest grade level that your child will finish in school?] 6% of children thought that 12th grade would be the highest grade level completed; 27% thought four years of college would be the highest; and 49% felt that they would complete four or more years of education past a four-year college degree. Though the question had been created to net a clearer view of what parents and children saw as educational *realities*, *hope* was a constant ingredient in their responses to these questions, especially in parents' discussions. It was as if many of these parents, especially the Spanish-speaking parents, didn't or couldn't answer such a question without factoring in what they *hoped* would be. Over and over the

evaluation team heard this. Parents expressed high expectations for their children. (December 17, 1993, p. 51)

While the 1992-94 evaluation notes that “data on student attitudes do not have the same degree of inconsistency that the grade data do,” it’s important to keep in mind that interview results reinforced this “attitude” data. The report states:

Students who have participated in LA’s BEST have higher expectations of themselves and have greater motivation and enthusiasm for school. Such effects can result in significant later dividends. (p. 25)

5. *Students academically improve while they are involved in the LA’s BEST program.*

The aforementioned findings indirectly indicate a link between LA’s BEST and academic performance. The evaluations also attempted to discuss the linkage directly. For example:

In Table 21, the category of *average achievement*...which consists of the average of all letter grades that a student received in all areas of achievement (i.e., an average across grades in math, science, reading, etc.)...show[s] students performing better in school during the first 10 weeks of 1989 than in the same period in 1988. In view of the fact that the school performance of at risk students often decreases over time, these results appear promising. As [a] principal noted, if the program just helps these students to hold their own academically, it should be viewed as successful. (March 1, 1990, p. 38)

Further, while academic achievement results must be interpreted with caution, even the most conservative analyses of these data show that students participating in LA’s BEST either hold their own or close the gap with non-program students.⁴ (1992-94, p. x)

The evaluations also point to a correlation between length of participation to LA’s BEST and student achievement in school. The 1992-1994 report states that “by 1993, all participating students had at least two full years of LA’s BEST experience...[and overall, these figures present a picture of steadily increasing grades corresponding to steadily increasing levels of exposure to LA’s BEST programs. Again, although it was not possible to perform strong statistical tests of the relationship between years of program participation and grades, the patterns are intuitively striking and strongly suggestive of program effect. (1992-94, p. 15)

⁴ When these achievement data are discussed, the evaluators consistently make the point that the LA’s BEST students began with lower grades or lower test scores than the comparison students from their same schools.

6. *The enrichment activities of LA's BEST engender support from the children, teachers, and parents.*

Maybe one of the most important findings in all the evaluations was that students sincerely liked the program. They had fun. They wanted to keep coming to LA's BEST so they could continue to have fun. This is no small thing in these children's lives.

Children, on the whole, reported liking the LA's BEST program....Children gave the highest ratings to clubs, field trips, sports/games, and arts/crafts, though apparently not all programs [at that time] offered these activities... (March 1, 1990, p. 34)

Just as staff described enjoyment of their work in very positive terms, they also held positive perceptions concerning that which children experience in the program. The great majority (77%) of on-site staff described students as enthusiastic about the program; 80% thought students were 'eager to participate'; 90% indicated that students were 'happy'; and 89% described students as 'developing.' (March 1, 1990, p. 34)

Children in the LA's BEST program gave significantly higher ratings ($p < .03$) to their programs (defined as composite score for: feelings about the program, nutrition, homework, sports/games, library activities, arts/crafts, and music) than did comparison students. (March 1, 1990)

On-site Staff and Site-Coordinators provided another piece of information about children's attitudes toward the program. On-site Staff and Site-Coordinators were asked to describe the children's behavior, moods, and attitudes during the daily program. These perceptions of children's feelings and actions during the program were positive. Specifically, On-Site Staff and Site-Coordinators described children as 'Often' to 'Almost Always' eager to participate, happy, and growing/learning. Both groups of staff also described the children as 'Seldom' to 'Almost Never' unhappy and 'Seldom' to 'Sometimes' hard to control, tired, or bored. This depiction of children's attitudes, behavior, and moods fits with what children themselves had said about their experiences in the program. (July 31, 1991, p. 47)

Broadly speaking, the children preferred active as compared to passive types of activities, including intellectual activities. Sometimes the distinction between active and passive was not so clear, for instance, the choice between "Draw and do art" or "Go to a museum." The *going* part of the supposedly more passive choice ("Go to a museum") is probably active, especially for children who don't go out to many such places throughout the city. This nuance notwithstanding, in sum, Table 15 data show that LA's BEST children have definite preference for *doing* things. They prefer to read a story (81%), rather than be read to (19%); to make something (89%), rather than receive something made by someone else (11%); to learn to play a musical instrument (72%), rather than to listen to music (28%); to act in a play or drama (60%), rather than watch television (39%). Some

of the preferences clearly go against the stereotype of inner city, lower income, lower achieving youth as not interested in reading, frequently listening to 'ghetto blasters,' and watching television. (December 17, 1993, p. 45)

The enrichment part of LA's BEST comes through strongly in children's comments about what they are getting from the program: exposure to/training in computers, art, music, drill team, science fair, swimming, camping, video-making, field trips, etc., in addition to the basic enrichment program. (1992-94, p. 12)

On the average, staff do not describe the program as closely imitating regular school, even though academic supports and enrichment are key elements of the program as planned... Thus as seen by staff, there is overlap with regular school-like activities, but not duplication... Parents perceive the program as even less like school than do two staff groups [Site-Coordination and Staff]. (March 1, 1991)

In terms of the perceived strongest areas, free play time and recreational activities received the highest mean ratings. Next highest were homework assistance, safe physical environment, arts and performances, and opportunity to be creative. (December 17, 1993, p. 72)

The evaluations also suggest possible areas of expansion or improvement in LA's BEST program. For example:

LA's BEST seems to have [a] measurable ... positive impact on student grades. Program planners may want to ... increase this positive impact by placing more emphasis on the homework period, with greater focus on reading, studying, and individualized assistance... Participants in earlier evaluations have pointed out specific homework-related needs. Program parents in the study and in other evaluations have commonly asked for even more quality homework time; and program children clearly have indicated that they rely heavily on the program's homework period for help with school work. (Final Evaluation, 1995, p. xii)

What else needs to be considered? The absolute value of a supportive environment consists not only of grades but also of support and motivation. The after school program clearly provides a variety of positive supports that otherwise would be unavailable for many program families. The program offers a stimulating, safe environment that is a strong alternative to some of the negative influences and bare environments, which surround many of these children. Children are expanding their social supports to include teachers and school aides among their social resources for problem solving and are broadening their interests in hands-on learning of new activities. The enrichment part of LA's BEST comes through strongly in children's comments about what they are getting from the program: exposure to/training in computers, art, music, drill team, science fair, swimming, camping, videomaking, field trips, etc., in addition to the

basic enrichment program. Parents and children are pleased with and enthusiastic about the program. (1995, p. 12)

In conclusion, it's important to note that the achievements of the LA's BEST program, as reported in the UCLA evaluations, took place under economic conditions that have changed very little, and in some cases, have worsened. In the March, 1990, Report, children reported about their immediate environment:

"We have bars on the windows and bars on the doors."

"They keep me inside, they don't let anyone come in."

"My mother doesn't let us out if she's not home."

"Most of the time, I'm in the house." (p. 22)

The report notes that "overall, an estimated 85% of the children interviewed mentioned 'guns' or 'shootings' as common features in their immediate surroundings." Children expressed the following fears and threats:

"Too many gang bangers in our neighborhood and they shoot a lot."

"...they try to rob you, or kill you over your colors...They try to beat you up."

"...they always shoot and kill people."

"They shoot over there. Last time they shot a pregnant woman."

"The other month there was a lot of shooting."

"Sometimes when I'm outside with my friends, we feel that people might come and grab us." (p. 22)

Five years later, in Spring, 1995, an evaluation report states that "program and non-program children described similar levels of exposure to smoking, alcohol, other drugs, and gangs, and expressed a pervasive feeling that their neighborhoods were not safe places" (p. x).

Today, another five years later (May 2000), the bleak conditions of families and children in economically poor areas have intensified. Despite unprecedented national and state prosperity, those who are poor have become poorer. For example, affordable housing has decreased, requiring families to pay nearly \$8,000 a year for a two-bedroom apartment, when a family's annual income is below the poverty level of \$16,000. And these economically poor families are exactly the families whose children participate in LA's BEST. That the conditions of poverty described in the early evaluation reports have worsened, rather than improved, suggests that the rationale for LA's BEST and its

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programs are even more important and necessary today than they were twelve years ago, when LA's BEST was created.

And that leaves us then with the following questions: If the economic environments where these children live do not change, what can be done to continue making a difference in their lives? What can be done to keep these children safe, to keep them engaged in school, to keep them in contact with positive adult role models, to keep parents connected to schools and their children, to keep these children developing and growing in positive ways, to keep their academic achievement moving upward? According to these past evaluations, continuing to expand and develop the LA's BEST program is one answer.