



**LONG BEACH BLAST:
AN EVALUATION OF PROGRESS, 2003-2004**

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Introduction

Launched in September 2000, Long Beach BLAST (Better Learning After School Today) is a nonprofit organization with a mission to improve after school learning for at-risk children and youth through collaboration. Primary partners include the City of Long Beach, California State University Long Beach (CSULB), California State University Dominguez Hills (CSUDH), Long Beach City College (LBCC), Long Beach Unified School District (LBUSD) and youth-serving organizations including the YMCA, Willmore Urban Agency, and the Carmelitos Housing Development. All of BLAST's youth-serving partners offer safe, productive places for LBUSD students during the important hours immediately following their school day.

BLAST recruits, screens, trains, places and supports college student volunteers in positions with existing and new after school programs, where they work with at-risk K-12 students. The objective is to enhance the academic, social, and emotional growth of participating children by providing skilled and caring volunteers who engage those children in one-on-one or small group interactions. BLAST volunteers provide homework assistance and high-quality lesson plans in academic subjects such as language arts, math, science and social studies; literacy support (including reading and technology-based); and help with "enrichment" activities such as art, computers, sports and recreation. They also fulfill a meaningful function as role models and mentors; interaction with college volunteers opens the doors to the possibility of higher education for the K-12 students with whom they work.

BLAST evaluation results focus on survey responses from volunteers, participating children, after school program staff and teachers whose students participated. BLAST volunteers, participating children and classroom teachers completed surveys before and after their participation and after school program staff completed surveys after their children's participation.

With this evaluation, it is our intention to demonstrate the extent to which all BLAST participants benefited and to which BLAST's efforts were successful according to its mission. A description of the survey results for volunteers, participating children, site staff and classroom teachers follow.

PARTICIPANTS

BLAST served 26 sites throughout the Long Beach and Los Angeles area during academic year 2003-04, serving approximately 900-1,000 students. 547 total volunteers were placed (255 in Fall 2003 and 282 in Spring 2004). For the year, 541 volunteers completed their volunteer placements. The completion rate was an impressive 98.9%.

K-12 Students

The percentages of male and female students who completed surveys were consistent over the two semesters: approximately 50% female and 50% male. Based on pre-surveys, the ethnic composition of the mentors, ranked from greatest to smallest, are as follows: Latino (Fall 56%, Spring 55%), African American (Fall 21%, Spring 23%), Asian (Fall 13%, Spring 7%), White (Fall 5%, Spring 3%), and mixed/other participants (Fall 5%, Spring 12%).

Mentors

With regard to the ethnic composition of the mentors, percentages in rank order are as follows: Asian (Fall 34%, Spring 38%), White (Fall 26%, Spring 33%), Latino (Fall 18%, Spring 19%), African American (Fall 4%, Spring 7%) and mixed/other (Fall 9%, Spring 13%). Almost 99% of the mentors surveyed were participating from a college program and mentors' mean age was approximately 24 years. Almost 95% of the mentors who participated in the surveys attended CSULB.

RESULTS

K-12 Students

K-12 students who completed surveys improved their attitudes about their future, with more students believing they would graduate from high school after being mentored than before they participated in the program. Students' responses showed an increase from "no" and "maybe" to "yes" and "definitely yes" to questions about graduating high school and going to college. Students also responded that they are improving in math, reading, writing, completing their homework, making new friends, trying new things, and enjoying school more.

Virtually all participating K-12 students who completed surveys responded that it was "true" (either sort of or very) that their mentor explained things to them (98.4%), listened (96.1%), understood them (98.4%), gave good advice (97.6%) and made them feel special (97.6%). Very high percentages also responded that their mentors made them think about college (89.6%), helped them with math (96.1%), reading (90.5%), and writing (88.9%) and helped them understand or appreciate those who are different from themselves (85.7%).

Teachers

Table 7. Teacher responses regarding students' classroom performance.

Survey Item	Fall (N=70)			Spring (N=59)		
	Pre	Post	t _p value* ¹	Pre	Post	t _p value*
Classroom Accountability						
Finishes homework	3.97	4.06	0.747	3.56	3.83	1.87
Gets along with others	3.94	4.06	1.07	3.74	3.72	0.91
Gets angry	4.03	3.96	-0.672	3.76	3.67	0.68
Respects others	4.10	4.11	0.155	3.74	3.81	0.63
Expresses self-well	3.52	3.72	1.51	3.36	3.66	2.34*
Follow rules	3.91	4.00	0.903	3.53	3.71	1.43
Takes responsibility for actions	3.75	4.00	2.20*	3.52	3.67	1.24
Consistent behavior	4.13	4.16	0.275	3.81	3.88	0.63
Likes to try new things	3.75	3.84	0.760	3.67	3.78	0.83
Classroom Participation						
Follows directions	3.59	3.78	1.48	3.31	3.56	2.00*
Works independently	3.13	3.43	2.32*	2.90	3.41	4.02***
Works in groups	3.59	3.75	1.70	3.31	3.44	1.27
Communication skills	3.55	3.87	3.06**	3.52	3.72	1.63
Classroom Behavior						
Gets into trouble	4.09	3.96	1.84	3.72	3.55	-1.43
Attendance	4.35	4.41	0.469	4.17	4.31	1.21
Attention span	3.01	3.49	2.23*	2.80	3.14	2.38*
Grade level Performance						
Reading skills	2.22	2.54	2.78**	2.33	2.97	6.77***
Writing skills	2.00	2.47	4.33***	2.09	2.75	6.39***
Math skills	2.22	2.70	4.75***	2.63	3.12	3.92***
Classroom disposition						
Motivated	3.43	3.59	1.35	3.12	3.49	2.98**
Stays calm	3.86	3.96	0.540	3.78	3.98	1.83
Self Perception						
Has friends	4.04	4.26	2.56*	3.88	3.88	.000
Thinks highly of self	3.47	3.80	3.39***	3.39	3.70	3.24**

Table 7 shows responses from teachers regarding participating students' classroom performance. **Teachers** reported that students had significant, very significant, and even extremely significant improvements in their classroom accountability, classroom participation, classroom behavior and their academic performance, as measured by grade level performance. Teachers reported that students made extremely significant improvements in their reading skills, writing skills, and math skills after participation in the program for only one semester. Other significant improvements worth noting include students' self esteem, responsibility, motivation, respect for others, communication skills, self expression and ability to follow directions. Teacher rankings suggested that students improved significantly in all grade level performance survey items during their semester of participation in the mentoring program. Specifically, teacher survey data indicated that students significantly improved from "somewhat below grade level" to "at grade level" in reading, math, and writing.

¹ *p* value identifies the likelihood that a particular outcome may have occurred by chance. Significance indicates the finding is reliable and that it did not happen by chance. The asterisks in Table 7 indicate the level of significance, with .05 (one asterisk) representing significant, .01 (two asterisks) representing very significant, and .001 or smaller (three asterisks) representing extremely significant.

Mentors

Mentor survey participants believed they experienced significant, very significant and extremely significant benefits in the following areas: comfort tutoring children, enjoyment being with children and in meeting/working with people of diverse backgrounds. They also reported significant improvements on a variety of civic engagement criteria including concern about local community issues, mentors' perceived ability to positively impact local social problems, the importance of being involved in a program to improve the community and in finding time to contribute to the community.

Mentors also talked about a variety of topics with their students. When asked about the types of activities they engaged in with their mentees, the percentages of "yes" responses were as follows: spend time getting to know each other (97.4%); talk about college (81.6%), talk about work and different careers (72.6%); emphasize the importance of doing well in school (95.2%); emphasize the importance of graduating high school (81.6%); emphasize the importance of going to college (81.1%), talk about friendship (81.1%) and spend 30 minutes or more on academics each session (80.5%).

After School Program Staff

Overall, site staff responded that mentors had a very positive impact on their students. In terms of academic assistance provided, staff reported that mentors helped students "more than some" or "a lot" in academics, in general (Fall 88.4%, Spring 70.3%), math (Fall 96.1%, Spring 60%), reading (Fall 76.9%, Spring 61.1%), and writing (Fall 80.8%, Spring 58.2%). High percentages of staff also reported that their students learned "more than some" or "a lot" about college from their mentors (Fall 64%, Spring 80.4%).

Staff perceived mentors to be very comfortable with their students (Fall 100%, Spring 95%), that students had fun with their mentors (Fall 100%, Spring 84%), that students liked their mentors (Fall 100%, Spring 80%), and that students looked forward to school when their mentors were there (Fall 100%, Spring 95%).

In terms of the impact that BLAST mentors had on the after school programs where they were placed, high percentages of staff reported that mentors helped them or the program itself "more than some" or "a lot" (Fall 84%, Spring 77.8%).

Conclusions

The results of this evaluation clearly show that BLAST was successful in the academic year 2003-4 in meeting its mission to improve after school learning for at-risk children and youth through collaboration. Nearly 550 mentors served approximately 900-1,000 at-risk students at 26 after school program sites. BLAST collaborated with three institutions of higher education: California State University Long Beach, California State University Dominguez Hills and Long Beach City College. BLAST also collaborated with its K-12 partner, the Long Beach Unified School District. Finally, BLAST supported a wide range of after school program providers in addition to LBUSD, including the City of Long Beach, YMCA, Willmore Urban Agency, and the Carmelitos Housing Development.

BLAST's success in meeting its mission to improve learning after school is perhaps most clearly demonstrated by classroom teachers' observations of their students before and after their participation in the BLAST program. Teachers reported that participating students significantly improved in reading, math and writing, from "somewhat below grade level" to "at grade level." In addition, teacher surveys made clear that participating students made statistically significant improvements in measures of classroom accountability, classroom participation, classroom behavior, classroom disposition and self perception.

BLAST's goal to provide a positive experience for all participants is also amply supported by these 2003-04 evaluation results. There was consistency across groups in that participating students, mentors, teachers and after school program staff were overwhelmingly satisfied with their experience in the BLAST program. Participating students reported that they were more likely to finish high school and go to college after participation in the BLAST program. Mentors made statistically significant increases in their enjoyment of meeting people of diverse backgrounds and became more aware of and concerned about community issues. Both mentors and mentees reported that they made positive, pro-social bonds by working together. Finally, after school program staff indicated that not only did mentors help the children in the after school programs where they were placed, but also significantly helped the programs themselves.