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## Lessons Learned: Building a Better Laboratory School

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# Lessons Learned: Building a Better Laboratory School

## **Cover Page Footnote**

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## History of Laboratory Schools in the United States

In 1894 John Dewey started the progressive education movement and opened the University of Chicago Laboratory School. The purpose of this school was to develop theories of child development and education. During this same time period, agencies such as the Child Study Association were developed to explore child growth and development. These parallel interests dovetailed in the 1920s when private beneficiaries (such as the Rockefeller Foundation) partnered with universities to develop a number of child development laboratory programs on university campuses. Housed generally in Psychology or Home Economics Departments, the purpose of these laboratory schools was to conduct research, service and training related to children and families (Barbour, 2003; Gilbert, 1999; McBride & Lee, 1995; Townley & Zeece, 1991). This tripartite mission continues to drive university-based child development laboratory programs today.

## Why Laboratory Schools are Important

Laboratory schools fulfill a 3-part mission (Clawson, 2003; Horm-Wingerd & Cohen, 1991; McBride & Hicks, 1998; McBride & Lee, 1995; Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003; Townley & Zeece, 1991). One, laboratory schools facilitate research endeavors designed to learn more about how children grow and develop and how they should best be educated. Two, laboratory schools provide exemplary educational facilities for young children while educating college students about child development and early childhood education. Third, laboratory schools serve the early childhood professional community in the form of training, educational presentations, membership on advisory boards, etc.

These roles, together and individually, have made important contributions to the wellbeing of children and families. Research in the field (at university-based child development laboratory schools) has led to significant findings that have shaped the fields of child development and early childhood education. For example, Walter Mischel's delay of gratification research, Albert Bandura's experiments involving the nature of observational learning, and John Flavell's studies of children's cognitive abilities (including metacognition and theory of the mind) were all conducted at Stanford University's Bing Nursery School (<http://www.stanford.edu/dept/bingschool/research.html>).

Additionally, laboratory school programs provide a needed teaching service to students seeking degrees in the field. Research has shown that students who observe children's development and have the opportunity to at least briefly interact with children in a supervised setting, in conjunction with their coursework, are better able to link conceptual information with application. Also, when students are given opportunities to observe and interact they increase their

knowledge of child development, have better interactions with children and adults, and have increased interest in the field (Bowers, 2000; Clawson, 1999; Clawson, 2003; Horm-Wingerd, Warford, & Penhallow, 1999; Knudsen & Berghout, 1999).

Finally, with regard to service to the early childhood community, research has shown that when early childhood teachers and administrators participate in professional development and training they are more effective programmatically and with children. For instance, when caregivers attend training workshops in the community or at professional meetings, their global classroom quality increases, they tend to interact more sensitively with the children in their care, and children's scores in a variety of developmental domains improve (Burchinal, Cryer, & Clifford, 2002; Clarke-Stewart, Vandell, Burchinal, O'Brien, & McCartney, 2002). Therefore, when child development laboratory schools promote such opportunities and make research and best practice accessible to early childhood professionals, they are in effect increasing the quality of early childhood programs throughout the wider community.

### Components of Successful Laboratory Schools

In 2005 I opened a small laboratory school on my campus. The goal was to provide exemplary care while simultaneously meeting the historic tripartite mission of laboratory schools. To accomplish this, and create a program that would be sustainable over time, I visited laboratory schools throughout the country and spoke with their staff about best practice and sustainability. These visits were fueled by the belief that laboratory schools which have stood the test of time, and are still in operation today, have much wisdom to impart about what it takes to thrive in today's climate. These observations, along with extensive reading about successful laboratory school programs, formed the basis for a list of components of successful laboratory schools (Barbour, 2003; Brown & Freeman, 2003; Clawson, 2003; Elicker, Barbour, McBride, Groves, Horm, & Stremmel, 2008; McBride, 1996; McBride & Baumgartner, 2003; McBride & Lee, 1995; Stremmel, Hill, & Fu, 2003; Wright, 2003; Townley & Zeece, 1991).

1. *Provide a clear mission* that is clearly accessible and understandable to members of the community and campus. Have a plan for meeting the mission and a means for documenting accomplishments.
2. *Define the curricular program* by implementing a clear philosophy and curriculum, based on theory and research, which is apparent to all involved in the program.
3. *Secure various streams of funding* through fundraising, grants, and development opportunities. Work to secure university support.

4. *Build relationships through networking* with key players and potential advocates. Such networking can lead to fiscal support as well as non-monetary resources.
5. *Balance the historical tripartite mission* by aligning teaching, research, and service within a particular philosophical or curricular approach by providing opportunities for students and staff to increase their knowledge and skills (teaching), having clear policies and procedures for research and providing information to the community at-large and exemplary early childhood services as a showcase (service).
6. *Develop links with academic programs on campus* by aligning curriculum with college coursework to maximize student learning experiences. These links need to be deliberate, intentional, and maintained for the laboratory school to have salience in the institution.
7. *Provide adequate, well furnished space* that is conducive to meeting the tripartite mission.
8. *Consider leadership carefully* by employing adequate staff who can effectively lead and carefully consider the roles and responsibilities of each leadership position.

#### The Infant/Toddler Laboratory School

As a faculty member, the opportunity to provide an exemplary program that served the historic tripartite mission was appealing and seemed a good way to strengthen the educational program at my university. To this end the Infant/Toddler lab school was created using start up money from the university President's office and space identified in a new building being constructed on campus. Our Laboratory School serves infants and toddlers between the ages of 6 to 36 months in a full-day program. Families using the school generally have some sort of affiliation with the university and children are diverse in terms of economic, ethnic, language, and cultural backgrounds.

The laboratory school falls under the umbrella of a university institute dedicated to the health and well being of children and families and has a relationship with the campus TRIO Program and the campus preschool program (run by Student Services). The two classroom laboratory school is primarily staffed with college students studying human development who work part time and who do not receive benefits.

The laboratory school receives funding from a variety of sources. Building support is provided by the university. Program support comes from parent fees, a Department of Education CCAMPIS (Child Care Access Means Parents in Schools) grant, the California Department of Social Services CCAP

program (Child Care Assistance Program), the university's Instructionally Related Programs fund, and the institute described previously.

The laboratory school utilizes a relationship-based care approach in which children are paired with a primary caregiver who plans for their personal needs. In terms of curriculum, the laboratory school utilizes an emergent curriculum approach in which children's interests and developmental achievements are used as the building blocks for creating learning opportunities.

### Major Accomplishments to Date

Since opening the Laboratory School has accomplished much. We end every year in the black (albeit just barely), provide exemplary service to children and families, obtained NAEYC accreditation, and offer practicum and internship experiences that allow students the opportunity to gain valuable educational experiences.

One way that the Lab School provides exemplary service is through the use of primary caregiving. Although the Lab School employs primarily part-time staff, children and staff are scheduled to create "pools" of teachers and children. From these pools, primary caregiving assignments are made by evaluating connections between teachers and children. Primary caregivers then utilize an emergent curriculum by creating individualized caregiving routines and activity plans for their primary children based on current interests and developmental needs. As children engage in these routines and activities, teachers take notes and pictures to document learning, plan for upcoming routines and activities, and highlight for parents and other staff learning in process. Families are encouraged to participate in this process and are invited to come share their family traditions and engage in routines and activities with their children.

These practices are built on elements of practice touted by the Program for Infant Toddler Caregivers (PITC). PITC encourages relationship-based caregiving that focuses, in part, on primary care, small groups, continuity, individualized care, and cultural responsiveness. Our first director was a PITC trainer and she strove to incorporate PITC practices into the Lab School.

In an effort to recognize our efforts to provide high quality care and further our accomplishments, the Lab School sought NAEYC accreditation. Luckily we were supported in this process by our CCAMPIS grant. Utilizing the financial support offered via this grant we were able to hire a part-time student to help us put together the extensive documentation required to participate in this process. Even with this extra help it took 2 years of preparation to be ready for the candidacy portion of the process. I am very proud of the fact that we have served and educated upwards of 350 students since 2005. Students utilizing the Lab School for practicum and observation experiences write in their reflective

journals (part of their course requirements) about the wonderful things they learn at the Lab and about how knowledgeable and caring staff are with the children and families. Our dedication to high quality interactions with children, families and the university was validated by our self evaluation and the accrediting team visitors and we were accredited in June 2009.

### Using Lessons Learned to Build the Best Laboratory School Possible

Although the Lab School has achieved much in a short period of time, there is still much to do. For example, in terms of the historic tripartite mission, the Laboratory School has primarily focused on the teaching portion of the mission. We educate both children and university students, but have not focused on community outreach or research. This is where lessons learned can be useful. The Laboratory School doesn't need to work alone in figuring out how to expand and meet additional facets of the tripartite mission, it can look to laboratory schools who have come before for guidance. What are components of success vital to laboratory schools that have stood the test of time? How can these components of success be implemented at this laboratory school? To answer these questions I examined what the Laboratory School has achieved to date and what still needs to be accomplished, using what I learned from my field observations and reading.

1. *Provide a clear mission statement* that addresses the tripartite mission - while we do have a clear mission we need to implement the full mission statement (not just teaching).
2. *Define the curricular program* - we currently meet this component by using relationship-based caregiving and primary caregivers and an emergent curriculum.
3. *Secure various streams of funding* - The Lab School receives funding from a variety of on- and off-campus sources but we need to engage in more grant and funding procurement, seek development from families and look into charging fees for practicum students.
4. *Build relationships through networking* - the Lab School does have close ties with an academic department, relationships with the campus preschool and TRIO program, and is a member of the National Coalition for Campus Children's Centers. In the future we need to increase signage on the building indicating our presence, court students and researchers from other campus programs and seek membership in the National Organization of Child Development Laboratory Schools.
5. *Balance the historic tripartite mission* - the Lab School provides students with observation, practicum, and internship opportunities, has one full-time, benefitted head teacher in the toddler room and assesses practicum

students using the lab quarterly as part of their course grade. Future goals include developing research policies/procedures, creating a research brochure that can link us with other campus departments, conducting a developmental screen on all children, hiring another full-time head teacher, marketing a training program used by the lab school to increase teacher/child interactions, and developing and implementing an outreach program.

6. *Develop links with academic programs on campus* - the Lab School has a faculty supervisor who is a member of the Human Development program on campus and a director who occasionally teaches departmental courses, but we need to ensure continuity between college courses taught and the curriculum implemented at the Lab School.
7. *Provide adequate, well furnished space* - the Lab School does have an observation booth with sound and video capability but needs to provide an effective sound system & writing surfaces in the observation booth.
8. *Consider leadership carefully* - this is an area of great need. The Lab School needs to create an advisory board made up of laboratory school staff, parents, interested faculty, and relevant community leaders and assign tasks that need to be completed to achieve the tripartite mission.

#### Next Steps: Using Lessons Learned from Yesterday and Today

The beauty of looking to laboratory schools that have stood the test of time is that lessons that have taken them years to learn can be applied immediately. Much of the trial and error inherent in creating a childcare program can be reduced or eliminated by looking to those who have come before (and have succeeded in their endeavors). It is useful to look at the components of success likely to ensure survival and approximate those as closely as possible in one's own program. I am excited and anxious to begin the process of implementing the lessons I have learned from the laboratory schools I visited and read about. Their successes and achievements constitute the fabric of our field and much of what they have done can be woven into the fabric of future programs. Hopefully these lessons learned will indeed build a better laboratory school.

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