

2016-17 Evaluation of AVANCE¹

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At-a-Glance

AVANCE – Dallas is a non-profit organization providing education, coaching, and tools to at-risk families. The primary goal of the program is to train parents to become the first teachers for their infant to three-year-old children. The program, currently housed in 42 classrooms in 18 elementary schools in Dallas Independent School District (Dallas ISD), strives to engage parents, inspire children, and build communities in at-risk neighborhoods. The AVANCE curriculum consists of 32 weeks of 4-hour classroom sessions during which parents attend instruction while children engage in educational and culturally- and age-appropriate activities focused on their social, emotional, cognitive, and physical development. Families also participated in approximately six monthly home visits per year during which an instructor engaged in educational play with families. In addition to parent/child education and home visitation, AVANCE offered weekly book clubs for families who were not enrolled in AVANCE as well as enrichment programs for parent graduates, including workplace English courses and a leadership academy.

The program budget for AVANCE was \$1,700,000 for program year 2016-17. Of this \$622,000 was from the United Way, \$400,000 was from Dallas ISD general operating funds, and \$678,000 was from other external funding sources such as foundations, corporations, and individuals.

Purpose of the Evaluation

This evaluation describes the AVANCE program as it was implemented in the Dallas ISD. This information was collected through interviews with the program director of AVANCE. This evaluation also reports data regarding participant characteristics, the percentage of children who met or exceeded age-appropriate benchmarks at the beginning and end of the 2016-17 academic year, key findings from a survey of parent involvement, and progress results from home visit checklists. All participant and assessment data were provided by the AVANCE program office.

What were the characteristics of the AVANCE program and participants?

Eligibility and recruitment. No cultural or financial requirements governed eligibility of families who participated in AVANCE. Most recruiting took place door-to-door in neighborhoods around campuses with high poverty rates. The lessons were taught in the language of the classroom.² The core AVANCE parenting program lasted one year, and parents were allowed to re-enroll in the program after three years in the event of a new child.³

Classroom sessions. Parents and children generally were separated during four-hour classroom sessions. Each of these hours typically had a different purpose. The first hour was dedicated to learning toy-making,⁴ and the second was dedicated to learning a parenting skill supporting social, cognitive, physical, or emotional child development. In the third hour, either visitors were invited to inform parents about available community resources or AVANCE instructors presented useful topics (e.g., nutrition, finances). In alternating weeks, the fourth hour was used either for volunteer leadership projects in schools or for parent/child literacy-related activities (e.g., storytelling, active listening).⁵

Children in classroom sessions were grouped into three age groups (birth to one-year-olds, two-year-olds to younger three-year-olds, and older three-year-olds to four-year-olds). Classrooms were separated into several learning centers, where children participated in self-directed activities per individualized, assessment-based plans.

Home visits. Parents and children participated together in six home visits per year. In these sessions, the home visitor engaged parents and children in educational play to encourage bonding. Sessions were recorded and videos were played for parents as the year progressed to show them how much interactions with their children had changed.

¹ Portions of this evaluation were adapted from Palladino (2016).

² AVANCE is primarily a Spanish-language program. The English program will be expanded once funds are secured.

³ A reason some parents would do this is to provide the experience for their children.

⁴ Participants made 17 toys during the course of the program with household materials or kits provided by AVANCE. The goal was to teach parents that they did not need to spend a lot of money to make toys that helped engage and educate their children. These toys also helped tie the parents' child development curriculum to

their children in the real world. For example, parents, with their children, made small storybooks out of used file folders and then read and shared these stories on topics related to the curriculum (e.g., feelings, shapes, colors). They also made culturally-correct dolls and pillows that were used for the same purpose.

⁵ Children were allowed to keep the books that they used in these joint sessions, and parents learned that they could use storytelling if they were uncomfortable reading. Sometimes these sessions involved performing skits or crafts to connect the book to real life experiences.

Personnel. As of February 2017, AVANCE employed 57 staff members (54 full-time and 3 part-time). These staff members included seven administrators/office staff and two coordinators presiding over four teams. Each team served five schools (one per day), and included a parent educator, a toy-making home visitor, a lead early childhood teacher, and at least three additional teachers.

Other AVANCE programs. After completing the one-year core program, parents could participate in one of three additional programs. The first was a 12-class leadership academy that instructed parents about volunteering in schools through development of personal skills (e.g., self-esteem) and leadership skills (e.g., teamwork, money management, people skills). In addition, AVANCE offered 90-minute weekly book clubs,⁶ workplace English language classes, and an opportunity to participate in a year of training to become home visitors who coach families on infant mental health or asthma management.⁷

Parents. Frequency analyses indicated that of the 760 parents enrolled in AVANCE this year, 468 (62%) resided within Dallas ISD. Of those, 418 (89%) graduated from the program. Parents were an average of 32.5 years old (range: 18 to 74). See Table 1 for a summary of demographics based on the parents who attended at least three courses and were counted as “committed.”

Table 1: Dallas ISD AVANCE Parent Characteristics

	<i>n</i>	%
Female	452	96.5
Hispanic/Latino	468	100.0
Married/Living with Spouse	314	67.1
Living in Apartment	172	36.8
Own home	151	32.2
Primary Home Language: Spanish	370	79.1
Homemaker	340	72.6
Primary Income Source: Job Wages	455	97.2
Family Annual Income under \$24,250	218	46.6

Source: AVANCE program office data files received on July 25, 2017.

Note: *N* = 468; Sample includes parents who resided in the Dallas ISD and who were committed to program in 2016-17.

Children. Frequency analyses indicated that AVANCE parents in the Dallas ISD participated with one (*n* = 392, 83.8%), two (*n* = 75, 16.0%) or three (*n* = 1, 0.2%) children, for a total of 545 child participants. These children were an average of 2.8 years old (range: 0 to

5), were 48.6 percent female (*n* = 242), and 94.5 percent Hispanic (*n* = 464). Most (*n* = 511, 93.8%) were born in the United States.

What changes in age-appropriate development occurred?

AVANCE staff members administered two assessments at both the beginning (pre-test) and the end of the academic year (post-test) to measure age-appropriate development. The *Ages and Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3)*⁸ were used for children ages zero to two, and the *School Readiness Survey (SRS)* was administered for children ages three and above.

Ages & Stages Questionnaires (ASQ-3)

Methodology. The ASQ-3 is a developmental and social-emotional screening instrument for children from birth to age six in five areas shown in Figure 1. AVANCE used this 30-item instrument to screen children from birth to two years. The ASQ-3 is dependent on a child's age in months.⁹ The AVANCE office provided individual-level raw ASQ-3 scores by item for each child. Items scored with a “Y” (Yes) or “S” (Sometimes) indicated the child was able to perform the task.¹⁰ The number of “Y” and “S” responses were counted as a percentage of the total number of responses for each of the development areas and overall.

Results. As shown in Figure 1, a higher percentage of AVANCE children performed at or above age-level on the ASQ-3 post-test than on the pre-test across all development areas and overall. The largest gain was observed in fine motor development (39%), followed by the personal social development (25%).

⁶ Book clubs also welcomed parents who had not graduated from AVANCE's core program.

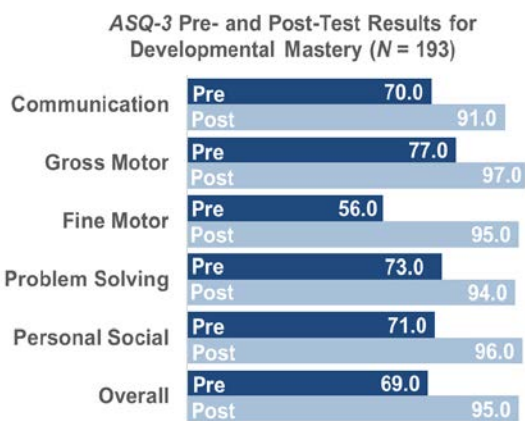
⁷ Availability of these programs each year is subject to funding.

⁸ For more information, see <http://www.agesandstages.com>.

⁹The program was unable to provide the algorithms for calculating scores at each age level or questionnaires or instructions written in English for the evaluator to develop a tool for calculating scores.

¹⁰ A child could also receive a “N” (No) or have no response for an item. No response items were not counted as part of the percentage computations. Raw score responses were provided in English.

Figure 1. Rate of Children Ages Zero to Two at or Above Age-Appropriate Development Level on ASQ-3



Source: AVANCE program office data files dated July 25, 2017.

Note: N = 193. Sample includes children of the parents who resided in Dallas ISD with matched pre- and post-test scores.

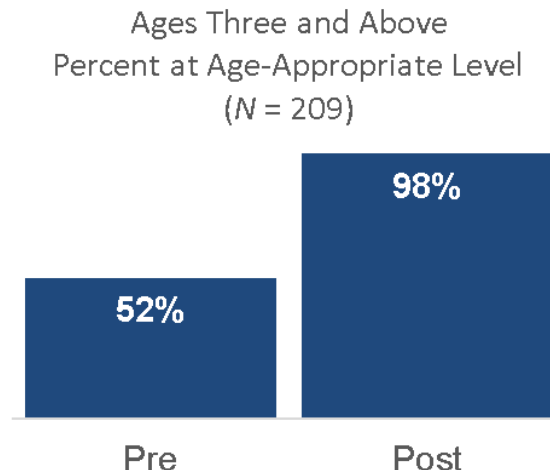
School Readiness Survey (SRS)

Methodology. The SRS is an informal tool developed by the AVANCE program that incorporated best practices from several validated developmental assessment instruments. It was administered to AVANCE children who were at least three years old. To complete this assessment, AVANCE staff members rated children on 40 skills as “mastered”, “making progress”, “needs help”. The skills were grouped into the following categories: listening, oral language development, early literacy, written expression, and cognitive development. AVANCE considered children at or above age level if they were rated as “mastered” or “making progress” on at least 75 percent of instrument items. This threshold was used for this evaluation for consistency.

The AVANCE office provided SRS data for 209 children of parents who were committed to the program. These children all had complete pre- and post-test results. Using these data, the evaluator calculated the percentage of scored items that were rated one or two. Percentages of at least 75 percent were flagged as at or above age level. Finally, the rate of children at an age-appropriate development level was calculated both for the pre- and post-test.

Results. As shown in Figure 2, a higher percentage of AVANCE children scored at age level on the SRS at post-test (98%) compared to pre-test (52%).

Figure 2: Rate of Children at or Above Age-Appropriate Development Level on the School Readiness Survey



Source: AVANCE program office data files dated July 25, 2017.

Note: Sample includes children of the parents who resided in Dallas ISD with matched pre- and post-test scores.

What were changes in parent involvement from the beginning to end of the year?

AVANCE Parent Inventory (API)

Methodology. The API is an inventory of questions that measured parenting knowledge and behavior. This instrument was administered both at the beginning and the end of the academic year to all AVANCE parents. This evaluation focused on the survey's behavioral questions. These questions asked the number of days per week or number of times per month the parent or child engaged in healthy behaviors and parent/child engagement activities.

Results. Compared to the pre-test, at post-test the average days per week parents engaged in activities with their children increased across the board, except for the average days per week the child consumed sugary drinks or sweets, which remained the same. The largest increases included the average number of days a parent read or showed pictures (3.3 days per week average increase) and counted using numbers with their children (2.8 days per week average increase).

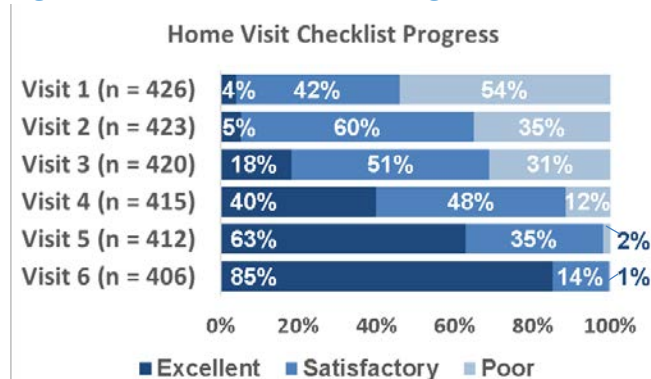
The average number of times parents engaged their children in a variety of activities per month increased across the board. The largest gains occurred in the average number of times a parent volunteered with an individual (4.9 times per month average increase) and the average number of times parents took their children to the library (3.9 times per month average increase).

Are home visits improving a mother's interactions throughout the program year?

Methodology. AVANCE staff members tracked home visits to observe a mother's interactions with her infant(s) aged one to nine months old and/or toddler(s) aged 10 months to four years old. Data were coded by an AVANCE staff member on a rating scale of "excellent", "satisfactory", or "poor".¹¹ The items were grouped into categories including a mother's positive attention, language stimulation, senses, demonstration, and mother's action and attitude. For each visit, item rating (excellent, satisfactory, and poor) frequencies were computed as a percentage of total ratings by visit. The infant and toddler checklists were consolidated for analysis.

Results. Staff members completed six home visits to each household for a total of 2,502 home visits between September 2016 to June 2017. As shown in Figure 3, the frequencies for the checklist items that were rated "excellent" increased from $n = 667$ (4%) responses to $n = 13,340$ (85%) from visit one to six. The largest increase in "excellent" ratings was observed between visit four and five.

Figure 3: Home Visit Checklist Progress



Source: AVANCE program data file dated July 25, 2017.

Note: The number shown is the percentage of each rating for all items by each visit.

Recommendations

- **Include AVANCE participation in evaluation of other major Dallas ISD early childhood programs.** Parents in the Dallas ISD have a wide variety of early childhood options available to their children (e.g., HIPPIY, Dallas ISD prekindergarten), and many children attend more than one program before enrolling in kindergarten. Thus, it is becoming more difficult to evaluate the efficacy of any one early childhood program exclusively, particularly with regard to long-term outcomes. Evaluators and program managers should consider

dosage of participation and review data structures and systems to support this goal.

- **Continued improvements in data integrity.** AVANCE enrollment is strong. Data management should seek more efficient methods beyond Excel spreadsheets. Key identifiers linking parent and child participants, locations, and exam IDs will allow the evaluator to filter and explore data structure, as required. In addition, working with Dallas ISD to create an AVANCE flag in the district's database will allow the district to perform long-term outcome analyses on former participants.

References

Palladino, D. K. (2016). Evaluation of AVANCE 2015-16. Dallas Independent School District.

An electronic copy of this report can be found at www.dallasisd.org/Page/888. For more information, please contact Program Evaluation at evaluation@dallasisd.org.

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¹¹ There are 39 items on the infant checklist for children aged zero to nine months old and 40 items on the toddler checklist for children aged 10 months to four years old.