

Local and National Implementation of the Families And Schools Together (FAST) Program

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Abstract

The Families and Schools Together (FAST) Program is a highly successful school-based family support program which helps schools build strong relationships with the families of children aged 6-9 who are experiencing behavioral or academic difficulties. This case study explores FAST implementation at the local level by considering how the program simultaneously addresses prevention and intervention, family strengthening and involvement, and interagency and home-school collaboration. Detail is provided about the structure and activities of the 8-week FAST program cycles and the 2-year follow-up program called FASTWORKS that maintains the parent network and the home-school connections developed during FAST. The six ways FAST builds the community of the school are explored. The research base of the program activities related to violence, substance abuse, school failure and delinquency prevention as well as play therapy, feelings exploration, communication and other aspects of family systems research is described. Longitudinal evaluation results documenting change in student behavior and performance, family closeness and parent involvement are

also presented. Examples are provided of how the Alliance for Children and Families utilizes core FAST components and incorporates learning and innovation, quality control, and staff and participant development to support local programs for reference by schools, communities and service agencies who seek to implement or replicate FAST or other school or community-based family involvement programs.

People shine, look different, blossom when they leave. Being there for each other, supporting each other, it's almost like a circle of love—that's what this long-term thing is all about. People getting to know each other and working together for themselves and their families and then working together for the community. (FAST participant)

What is Family and Schools Together (FAST)?

The Families and Schools Together (FAST) program was created by Dr. Lynn McDonald of Family Services of America (FSA). This program has been highly successful by focusing on comprehensive prevention/intervention, family involvement and strengthening, interagency collaboration, and home-school relationships. Like the parent quoted above, many others speak passionately about the impact the program has had on their lives. FAST is now operating successfully in over 500 schools in 33 states under the direction of Linda Wheeler of the Alliance for Children and Families (formerly FSA).

FAST is essentially an early intervention and parent involvement program aimed at strengthening families and children and reducing the likelihood of future difficulties (e.g., school failure, substance abuse, child abuse, and delinquency) via a prevention approach that requires interagency collaboration. During FAST, whole families gather weekly for eight weeks at the school site and participate in specific, fun, research-based activities. These sessions provide a structured, interactive, multi-family group experience aimed at empowering parents and building community among them. Each FAST activity and program component is derived from a specific research finding in family systems and child development. A two-year follow-up program called FASTWORKS follows the eight-week program. FASTWORKS seeks to promote the development of social capital by providing families with opportunities to participate in monthly family-centered activities designed by FAST parent graduates.

Data for this program description were collected over a two-year period

during 1998-99 and include FAST program, training, marketing materials, evaluation reports, observations of training sessions and FAST program sessions, interviews with principals, national and local staff, and focus group sessions with FAST participants including parents, school staff, mental health personnel, and substance abuse service providers.

What do evaluation results show about the FAST program?

Since its inception, FAST has had a strong national evaluation program. The evaluation examines variables that are highly correlated with the onset of problems such as school failure, violence, delinquency, or substance abuse. The Alliance for Children and Families conducts evaluations for each eight-week session as part of its national dissemination activities. The premises behind the Alliance's emphasis on evaluation are that it is important to demonstrate program impact on the lives of participants in a rigorous way and that the ability to do so separates excellent from mediocre programs.

Using a pre- and post-test format, four quantitative and one qualitative measure assess the impact of local programs in four areas: child behavior, family functioning, parent-school affiliation, and families' experience of the program and its impact. Twelve years of extensive evaluation of FAST program cycles in a variety of settings reveals a consistent pattern of positive outcomes. Parents consistently report improved interactions with children and feeling more appreciative of what teachers and staff need to do to provide a quality education for a child.

For example, one FAST parent from the Southwest explained, "My kids tell me what they do. Before, I never asked them. They used to keep things inside. Now they come and tell me things I never knew before. It's a big change." A grandmother who participated in the FAST San Antonio program was overjoyed with the change in her grandson. She described his transformation this way: "I couldn't take my grandson to the store because he would just take something, being really bad. At the end of FAST he went to the principal and said this is the last time you're gonna see me in your office. I found out about CYO from one of the other parents and put him in there. I got the name of where I had to go to put him in baseball. He's such a different child than a few months ago" (FAST participant, San Antonio, 1999). Other FAST graduates describe equally powerful effects:

They taught us how to communicate in FAST 'cause we do the charade cards and expressions. So sometimes when I'm mad, I want them to still approach me; I need to leave that line open to them. So sometimes when I'm like real angry, I gotta re-

member don't put on that face, calm down, and remember the facial expressions 'cause if I'm walking around like this I will not get approached.

My son lived with my mother. I started going to FAST on night three. He did not want to sit with me so I asked him to do special play with me and at first he was like 'do I have to' and I told him 'it's up to you'—and so he did. By the end he was right up next to me, getting my plate. A couple of months after he came to live with me. Before I just thought they needed somebody and I thought my mom could do it all. I never realized how important it was—you know, that what they wanted was me.

Beyond these testimonials, statistical results also show significant improvements in child's classroom and home behaviors, self-esteem, family closeness, parent involvement in school and reduction in social isolation. Sites receive a report that profiles the population served and compares the results of the program cycle with the national database. The Alliance also offers a Practice Profile instrument to local teams to assess the level of their agreement as a team about how well they are implementing FAST. All local evaluation results feed into the composite national longitudinal results that have shown significant and persistent positive impacts on the four areas assessed (Alliance, 1994).

Other research supports the dramatic effects of FAST. In a random assignment experimental study conducted in Middleton, Wisconsin in 1990, children in the FAST group showed significant improvements on scales measuring their sense of maternal acceptance, cognitive self-confidence, and peer acceptance. Children assigned to the control condition, in comparison, did not demonstrate significant improvements over the same period. (Harter & Pike, 1994) Schools, in their evaluations of FAST, report a shift in the assumptions of working with 'at risk' families, from ones that are remedial and problem-focused to ones that are learning-centered and optimistic. (Alliance, 1994)

Follow-up data suggest the children continue to improve, and some parents self-refer for counseling and substance abuse treatment, get jobs, go back to school, and attend community events. One mother from San Jose described how the program impacted her:

It's geared me to something I want to do—I want to work with families and schools. . . . I'm gonna start going to school. This is what I want to do, I'm content here. And mind you late in

my life, this is what's happened. And my second daughter, I tell her, 'Look, I'm gonna be doing this and this is the time I'm allowing myself to do it—so at the same token you should allow yourself, you know, your little goals in life and that's how you accomplish your longer ones.' That's what I've been able to come out of this program with.

Another FAST graduate attests to the program's role in helping her change her life and gain custody of her children:

My husband was telling the judge I was incompetent to have custody of the kids because I didn't work. I took all my FAST stuff to the judge—my certificate in the frame and the degree and the parent album with pictures of the girls doing their activities and all the things that they did in FAST and I told the judge I am committed to my daughters—I've been in this program for 2 months and these are the things we did. I gave the judge Luis' card (from FAST) and he called him 2 times. Then the judge told their father, you know your wife is not incompetent, and he gave me full custody of my daughters.

Long term evaluation indicates these gains hold and that the program also facilitates the development of families' connection with their community. As parents become empowered in their relations with their children's schools, many generalize that experience and become more involved in their community as a whole. As Mrs. Martinez explained, "We felt like prisoners in our neighborhood until we founded the association. The mayor wanted to meet me. Since then things have changed drastically. We have a community center from the women's group—we're all FAST graduates." The FAST evaluation strategy supports continuous learning for the Alliance as well as for local collaborative teams and is the main means of measuring performance of the FAST program on an ongoing basis.

How does the FAST program work for one family, one school, and one community team?

The Ramirez family of San Antonio got involved with FAST through eight-year old Joshua, the youngest of their five children. Before FAST Joshua never wanted to go to school. He was having difficulty reading, and his behavior was interfering with his learning. He was also acting out and fighting a lot at home. His parents admitted feeling frustrated due to their advanced age and to parenting challenges from their other children. Mr.

Ramirez was also abusing alcohol and often absent from the home. Mrs. Ramirez felt isolated from the other parents in her housing complex due to her limited English skills. The family did not know how to deal with the stress, anger, and school problems Joshua was experiencing.

When the Ramirez's neighbor, who was a recent FAST graduate, and the counselor from Joshua's school visited Mrs. Ramirez at home, she was surprised and very pleased. They explained the FAST program and invited the Ramirez family to attend as an opportunity to learn more about Joshua's education as well as to spend time as a family and with other families in a supportive and enjoyable environment. Recruiters visited the Ramirez family several times before signing them up. Mrs. Ramirez was relieved to know that dinner would be provided and there would be childcare and transportation for the nights when her husband was working. This assistance helped, but it was Joshua's enthusiasm that convinced her to sign up.

Mrs. Ramirez and the children timidly entered the cafeteria on the night of the first FAST meeting and sat down quickly at a table in the far corner waiting for the program to start. Mrs. Ramirez had been to Joshua's school only on a few unpleasant occasions when the principal called her in because of her son's behavior. She had only read the anger on the principal's face because there was no translator to bridge the language gap. Tonight, however, the neighbor who had visited her house and who was now working for FAST greeted her warmly in Spanish and introduced the Ramirez's to the other families.

As FAST unfolded week by week, Mrs. Ramirez and the children began to look forward to all the parts of the carefully structured program. Each week they proudly displayed the family flag that they had made together on the first night. The youngest children looked forward to the FAST song, and the middle children especially enjoyed the closing rain ritual when the group came together to celebrate the end of the session by simulating the sound of rain. Mrs. Ramirez became excited and deeply engaged by the FAST games of scribbles and feeling charades as she played with the children. As a result of the fifteen minutes of one-on-one special play with Joshua each session, she realized that somehow she didn't know Joshua very well. She appreciated the opportunity FAST provided for undivided attention with Joshua and the family unit.

As the children met new peers playing together during buddy time, Mrs. Ramirez was able to get to know the other FAST parents during parent self-help time. She met several parents who lived in her apartment complex and they talked with each other about solving problems with the plumbing in their building. During the third week, when Mrs. Ramirez felt comfortable talking with the school counselor, she found the courage to ask about the specifics of Joshua's academic difficulties.

The counselor suggested a meeting with the teacher. With her new neigh-

bor friend helping as translator, Mrs. Ramirez learned some specific ways she could help Joshua with his reading at home. Joshua anticipated eagerly the 15 minutes each day of special play between the parent(s) and the target child that was assigned as FAST homework. During this time, Mrs. Ramirez now made sure that they did the reading exercises suggested by Joshua's teacher together first and then the special play.

On the night when the Ramirez family cooked the meal, the children were able to convince their father to take off work to attend FAST. The parents felt honored to have their food served to them by the children. The Ramirez children made great sport out of the switch in roles. Besides it being their night to prepare dinner, the Ramirez children had another reason for wanting their father to attend this particular session. The substance abuse member of the collaborative team was scheduled to show a movie about the effects of alcohol abuse on the family and particularly a small boy Joshua's age. Mr. Ramirez watched in silence, and there was no discussion of the film in the family until the oldest son, Joaquin, said at the dinner table later in the week, "Dad, I don't have to be like that kid in the movie, do I?" And Mr. Ramirez replied, "No, Joaquin, you don't." Through the FAST substance abuse counselor, he arranged for treatment, and he has been sober for over a year.

The same day, Mrs. Garcia, a parent from a nearby school district who was visiting for the evening, explained to the Ramirez's that after graduating from the FAST program in her son's school she had been selected to become a trainer for a new FAST collaborative team in her district. In fact, Mrs. Garcia was on her way to the Alliance office in Milwaukee for the training. Mrs. Ramirez commented on how wonderful it was that FAST selected new staff members from among the graduates, and she thought to herself how much she would value such an opportunity.

Graduation was a joyful event. It was announced that even though the three-year state grant supporting FAST had run out, the district agreed to continue FAST. The principal attended, and when he spotted Mrs. Ramirez he approached her with a translator by his side. He said he had heard about the initiative she had taken in meeting with Joshua's teacher, and he congratulated her on the improvement in his behavior and work which the staff had observed. He apologized for not arranging for clear communication before. He emphasized that he foresaw nothing but good things ahead for Joshua and gave Mrs. Ramirez a hug. Another surprising thing happened at the graduation. After the ceremony, the school counselor asked Mrs. Ramirez if she would be interested in taking responsibility for contacting the other Spanish-speaking parents about participating in the FASTWORKS program. She was overjoyed to learn that training and a stipend were part of the offer.

Shortly after graduation, the participating families were asked to evaluate the program. Mrs. Ramirez had nothing but good news to report. Joshua was doing better in school and no longer wanted to stay home. He and his mother

were really enjoying special play, and his anger and acting out had lessened considerably. The family as a whole found ways to spend more time together, and the communication among family members had improved. Mr. Ramirez reinvested in his parenting and the children began to thrive under the new level of attention. Mrs. Ramirez was busy as part of the planning team for the FASTWORKS sessions. She also began meeting regularly with other tenants about building improvements and with Joshua's teacher regarding his progress.

How does the program profile of the Ramirez family illustrate the key components offered by the FAST program?

The story of the Ramirez family illustrates how the complex interplay of all the components of FAST, to be discussed here, work to ensure a positive FAST experience and important developmental changes among the families. Knowledge of the FAST vision, for example, provides insight into why Joshua and the Ramirez family were good candidates to participate in FAST; the family needs fit the change foci of the FAST vision. The behavioral change needs of the Ramirez family, which included school problems, substance abuse and social isolation, were all addressed in the FAST curriculum.

The recruitment strategy was effective for the Ramirez family and the incentives were important in facilitating their attendance, again showing the effectiveness of the FAST program design. FAST values such as respect for parents and building trusting relationships were also evident during both the recruitment phase and the program cycle. The family was impacted by other parts of the FAST curriculum, grounded by FAST's strong theoretical base, included the predictable rituals and relational activities such as scribbles, feeling charades, and special play. As a result of the emphasis on parent self-help, family closeness increased, the parent-teacher relationship improved, and Mrs. Ramirez's social isolation decreased.

The organizational culture stressing staff and participant development was in evidence as the neighbor became a certified trainer and Mrs. Ramirez joined the collaborative team for the next FAST cycle. The collaborative team structure fulfilled its mandate as Mr. Ramirez benefited from the substance abuse counseling which the mental health agency partner offered. FAST replication and sustainability protocols were followed with the continuation of another FAST cycle and FASTWORKS program and with district level institutionalization of the program. The evaluation process showed that Joshua was happier in school and that his behavior and school performance improved. Each component of the program, from goals to strategies for improvement, will be delineated in the section the follows.

The four goals of FAST and FASTWORKS

The programs have four driving goals:

1. Increase the child's feelings of affiliation toward the school and her/his family.
2. Increase parents' feelings of control over their home, child and life circumstances.
3. Increase positive and responsive interactions within the family and toward the child.
4. Increase support networks of families of high-risk students in relationship to the school.

These four goals contribute to the overall program objective of fostering feelings of affiliation, mutual respect, and reciprocity among the various players in the children's family, neighborhood, school, and community environments.

The FAST program begins with teacher identification of at-risk elementary school children at a particular school. Teachers assist the interagency team by identifying children as candidates for FAST participation. The screening process and selection criteria are developed at the school. School performance, attendance, personality, and behavioral factors are all considered in the screening models. Next, a FAST parent graduate and a school professional visit parents at home to invite the families of 10 to 15 of the identified children to participate voluntarily in a FAST cycle.

Program meetings follow a uniform agenda that includes carefully planned opening and closing routines, structured family activities, parent mutual-support time, and parent-child play therapy with the identified child. A training group called the FAST collaborative team leads the meetings; the team includes a parent, a school professional, a clinical social worker, and a substance abuse counselor. The lively and fun activities intended to build family unity include such things as eating a meal together, creating a family flag, singing, and exercises in communication and feelings identification. FAST is designed so that loving behaviors such as turn-taking and listening are constantly reinforced during program interactions. Parents also have opportunities to discuss their common interests and build an informal support network to help one another discover solutions for parenting and family concerns. School personnel support parents and share in activities, but parents take the leadership role.

FAST offers both intangible and tangible incentives to promote attendance. These include respect and social support, as well as transportation, a hot meal, and childcare for infants and toddlers. Each family wins a gift package

of needed items sometime during the eight-week program. The winning family is given cash to purchase food so they can prepare and host the hot meal for the following session. In celebration of the success of each family, a graduation ceremony is held, during which certificates are presented by the school principal.

The follow-up FASTWORKS program is structured as a series of monthly family-support meetings designed to maintain the active social network developed during FAST. A parent advisory council of graduates, with gradually decreasing staff assistance, runs FASTWORKS. Parent leaders receive a budget and plan recreational, school and community-related events in which up to 40 FAST families participate. New families continuously move into the FASTWORKS program as a result of the ongoing eight-week FAST cycles in each school. The interdependency created during the initial FAST experience increases the likelihood that graduates will participate in FASTWORKS. As a local association of parents with common experiences, FASTWORKS functions as a safety net to encourage previously isolated parents to become actively involved in school activities and to take more risks on behalf of their children's and their own development.

The research base: Six ways FAST and FASTWORKS build the community of the school

FAST and FASTWORKS are programs strongly grounded in academic knowledge of fields such as urban sociology, community development, and school reform. The program structures emerge from a belief that involved parents are the basis for powerful community-building in schools.

1. *FAST and FASTWORKS foster collaboration and begin with family and community strengths.* Urban community development specialist John McKnight (1995) has long proposed that successful community change efforts should start by identifying the strengths of the community and its members rather than starting with a list of problems. "Neighborhood programs that succeed," McKnight says, "tend to see a neighborhood as a place of potential opportunities to be drawn forth and strengthened, rather than a set of problems that need to be fixed from outside. In addition, most effective neighborhood development efforts bring together many organizations and constituencies. Increasingly, good development projects are seen as collaborative projects" (p.34). This idea is a basic premise of FAST and FASTWORKS.
2. *FAST and FASTWORKS are organized family support programs that provide or supplement needed informal social supports by conveying to participants that they are esteemed and valued, and part of a network*

of communication and mutual obligation. John Gardner (1991) describes how community-building activities such as FAST and FASTWORKS which are focused on rebuilding the social fabric of the neighborhood also “provide residents with the benefits of community,” which he defines as “security, a sense of identity and belonging, a framework of shared assumptions and values, a network of caring individuals, the experience of being needed and responding to need via increased social interaction and communication” (p.57). James Garbarino and D. Sherman (1980), experts in the social context of child neglect and abuse, believe that the increasing incidence of child abuse is directly related to the spread of “socially impoverished environments, denuded of enduring supportive relationships and the scarcity of people ‘free from drain’ who can afford to be supportive to neighbors because their own needs do not exceed their resources” (p. 193). These two complimentary programs intentionally seek to assist families to become involved in shaping their environment, to cushion them from the harmful effects of stress, and to help individuals function better as parents, friends, and citizens.

3. *The FAST and FASTWORKS programs model and encourage consistent, intentional, and ongoing parent-child interaction.* Ann Henderson (1987), parent involvement researcher, has documented the positive impact of parental involvement on the achievement motivation of students. Her research indicates that on average, American mothers spend less than half an hour a day talking, explaining, or reading with their children. Fathers spend less than 15 minutes. FAST addresses this issue directly through program activities such as special play.
4. *FAST and FASTWORKS encourage parents to have increased expectations for their children’s school performance.* The Baltimore Beginning School Study, a longitudinal study of family and school influences on elementary school outcomes, found that “parents expectations vary across family type, and when they are taken into account, differences in student achievement across family type can disappear.” Beginning School Study data show that a considerable portion of family structure effects are mediated by effects of parents’ psychological resources. Effects of parents’ expectations and the attitudes related to these expectations add to the effects of economic resources. Parents’ expectations co-vary with parental warmth and with a whole range of other psychological characteristics and specific actions that parents can take. Beginning School Study parents who expected their children to do well in school were “more likely than others to provide books and academic games, for example, or to read to the child, take the child to the library, and so on, regardless of socioeconomic background (Entwisle, D., Alexander, K. & Olson, L., 1997, p.118). Since FAST participant families tend to be low-income and of low parent education, building positive

expectations for school success is crucial to the prevention process.

5. *FAST and FASTWORKS contribute to school effectiveness by fostering close family-school relations as well as the development of an intentional school community.* In researching the climate of school learning environments, The Hispanic Policy Development Project (1984) reported that "interpersonal harmony" was the most striking characteristic of effective schools. Students reported that "it was the teachers and staff caring what they did with their lives that was most important," and observers noted that "caring had been institutionalized as a value in the school and not solely an accidental relationship between a teacher and a lucky student" (p.26). Educational historians David Tyack and Elisabeth Hansot (1984) found the one theme that runs through all the individual attributes of effective schools is that "principals, students, teachers and parents share a sense of community, a socially integrating sense of purpose that allows people to complete a sentence that begins, 'What we are proud of around here is...'" (p. 513). FAST activities create community through a step by step process that involves parents and school personnel.
6. *FAST and FASTWORKS activities and program components span the continuum of school-family-community involvement options.* Joyce Epstein (1995), in her research on school-family-community partnerships, has identified six important types of cooperation between families, schools, and other community organizations. Each of the six types of cooperation is represented in FAST and FASTWORKS. They include: parenting, communicating, volunteering, learning at home, decision-making, and community collaboration. A growing research base indicates a positive relationship between these types of family involvement and children's educational outcomes. Epstein describes the synergistic effects which result when the six forms of parent involvement programs are active simultaneously at one school, as is the case in FAST program schools:

They can improve school programs and school climate, provide family services and support, increase parent's skills and leadership, connect families with others in the school and in the community, and help teachers with their work. However, the main reason to create such partnerships is to help all youngsters succeed in school and in later life (p.701).

Vision

The FAST program vision is rooted in a set of core values and research-based program activities connected to clear theories of change for individuals and families. A basic point of non-profit development that has been highlighted previously is that non-profits focused on excellence via large-scale impact first need excellent programs to replicate. An important aspect of program excellence which FAST exemplifies is a strong, unifying vision articulated via core values and a philosophy-driven theory of change which have been translated into essential program elements and duplicated across program sites.

The following ten core values permeate every aspect of the FAST program curriculum:

1. Parents are the primary prevention agents for their children.
2. Families are central and critical to children's educational performance.
3. Stress and social isolation diminish parental effectiveness, and social support increases parental effectiveness.
4. Trusting relationships help families find and make good use of helpful resources.
5. Human service organizations should support and include parents to enhance the parent-child relationship rather than isolate parent from child.
6. Schools should be welcoming to all families.
7. Substance abuse keeps families from succeeding; prevention, intervention, and treatment of chemical dependency greatly increase a family's chances of success.
8. Collaboration across systems to address the needs of at-risk children is necessary and important.
9. Poverty, racism and sexism adversely affect child development.
10. All parents love their children and want a better life for them (Alliance, 1994, p.40).

These values may be summarized via the three overarching values of believing in and respecting parents, affirming and building upon the positive strengths and skills in each family, and NOT using an instructional or therapeutic approach. Furthermore, these values support the proven strategies for family support and effective prevention of delinquency, violence, and substance abuse.

FAST programs, for example, strive to create contexts of respectful and supportive relationships where the work of behavioral change toward the goal of increasing parent-child and family-school interactions can be accomplished. According to the National Education Association and sixty-six other

recent studies (Lewis & Henderson, 1997) the best predictor of a student's achievement in school is parental involvement. One of the most powerful theories of change driving the work of the FAST program, therefore, is that positive changes in parent-child-school involvement patterns and behaviors can result in increased school achievement for children.

All program activities within the eight-week FAST cycle have been carefully included in the FAST curriculum based upon change principles which support their efficacy, and based in child development, family stress, and family therapy research. A summary of these theories of change and their corresponding program activities targeting specific behaviors and interactions is provided in Table 1.

Attention to these theories of change and corresponding practices explains much about the "what" and "why" of the FAST program's approach to working with families and schools.

Training, Curriculum and Resource Development

The training protocol, curriculum, resource development, and social marketing in the FAST program model are each driven by the FAST vision, utilize state of the art resources, and are highly standardized and replicable. The Alliance's training protocol, curriculum and resource development, and social marketing strategy for FAST are all driven by the program's vision. The program values are represented, for example, in the student recruitment and implementation team-building aspects of the FAST curriculum, emphasizing processes that are collaborative and respectful of parents. The FAST theories of change are translated directly via the curriculum from research findings to the specific program components and activities. In addition, the resource development strategy, for which the Alliance for Children and Families provides technical assistance to the local sites, draws directly upon the prevention, family involvement and family support foci of the program design.

FAST Training Protocol and Curriculum

The Alliance's main channel for maintaining FAST program quality is through the extensive training and consultation provided to each replication site. Once the collaborative team is in place, the site team begins three months of training in order to become certified as a FAST site. This training process, which is critical for successful replication of FAST, is standardized and of the highest quality. Independent evaluators report that participants give the training exceptionally high ratings (Alliance, 1994). Phase I of the training is a two-day event during which teams are oriented to the content and values of

Table 1.

FAST research-based change principles	Corresponding activities
Parents are the most powerful influences on the self-concept of young children. Low self-esteem is a major substance abuse risk factor.	Undivided, one-on-one, non-directive attention from parent to child via special play (Kogan, 1978; Minuchin, 1986; Miller, 1984)
Difficulty discussing personal feelings is a substance abuse risk factor. Young children can learn to name and talk about their feelings.	Parent-child feeling identification game called feelings charade (Schedler & Block, 1990)
A chaotic home life is a substance abuse risk factor. Routine and structure can be learned.	Modeling of structured family interactions, foreshadowing events, establishing rules, setting consequences, and constant weekly routine throughout FAST sessions (Egeland, Breitenbucher & Rosenberg, 1980)
The best predictor of a student's achievement in school is parent involvement.	Bring parents and schools together as enthusiastic partners by providing opportunities for families and school personnel to experience repeated positive encounters with each other during FAST (Henderson, 1987)
When parents feel respected and supported, their self-sufficiency and self-esteem grow, they become better role models for their children concerning education, and lower their risk for abuse and neglect of children.	Aggressive recruitment of hard to reach families through home visits; FAST parent group activity and FASTWORKS participation; and parent leadership opportunities. Parent isolation addressed by opportunities for parents to relate to one another, the school, and the community via formal and informal social support networks (Hill, 1958; Wahler, 1983; Birch & Gussow, 1970; Belle, 1980; Werner & Smith, 1982)
At-risk youth should be reached before serious academic or behavioral difficulties begin. Children benefit when community agencies, schools and families cooperate and build friendly, trusting relationships.	FAST is a prevention strategy for families with children aged 4-9. Schools, parents, and community agencies collaborate as a non-hierarchical team to plan, carry out, and evaluate the FAST program (Birch & Gussow, 1970; Werner & Smith, 1982)
Children and family units benefit when the natural caring and strength within the family is supported and enhanced and family traditions, routines, and reciprocity are encouraged.	Whole family involvement with parents and siblings joining the at-risk child at FAST sessions, eating together and having fun as a family group—making a family flag, children serve meals to parents, special play, FAST song and closing circle (Minuchin, 1979; Dunst, Trivette & Deal, 1988)
Parenting skills are enhanced better via support for the development of positive coping and decision-making skills than through teaching about parenting.	Participation is voluntary; FAST empowers the parent as the primary prevention agent through encouragement, social networking, and through parent leadership of FAST activities (Barth, 1986)
Parental stress is reduced when family support sources are ongoing and long-term and when social isolation and dependence on professionals are reduced.	Participation in FAST promotes interdependence and enjoyment among 8-12 families and is followed by up to two years of continuing support via the FASTWORKS follow-up program (Hill, 1958; Whaler, 1983)

the program, learn about the project structure and process including recruitment and retention strategies, review the research base, and simulate an actual FAST session.

Phase II includes three on-site visits, as well as phone consultation by a trainer who observes, coaches, and provides feedback to the team during their first implementation of an eight-week FAST cycle. During these two phases, the trainer helps to individualize the program to local circumstances in areas such as staffing, partnerships, and parent recruitment. The certified trainer also problem-solves at each site and responds to locally unique parent, school, or community issues that arise as the implementation progresses. Phase III is a one-day event used for debriefing the first eight-week program and planning for FASTWORKS. A local candidate may also join the trainer certification process at this point for sites that want a trainer on their own staff for further expansion.

Built on a strong research base, the FAST curriculum has remained consistent since its development in 1988. Local teams are able to rely on the set agenda, which provides program structure and indicates the consistent order of weekly activities. Ongoing consultation and support services such as technical assistance manuals, training for replacement team members, and notification of advanced practice workshops are provided through the Alliance, which invests heavily in maintaining contact with sites throughout the FAST network.

The Alliance's organizational strength in the area of training includes the high quality of the curriculum, content, and process of the training sessions, as well as the quality of the trainers themselves. People, in the form of national and local certified trainers, are the most important organizational resource supporting the Alliance's excellent training and replication capacity. National trainers provide ongoing mentoring, supervision, and support to the local trainers as they develop their skills throughout the lengthy certification process. In turn, this intensive level of support is maintained to the local team by local trainers as they become certified.

Organizational Culture

The FAST organizational culture is focused on learning and on the motivation and development of co-workers and participants. By investing in people and communication systems as key resources to ensure long-term program support and ownership, the Alliance has created an organizational culture focused on staff and participant motivation and development. Parent graduates, for example, have opportunities to become team members and recruiters for later cycles as well as leaders of FASTWORKS activities. Collaborative team members have opportunities to become certified local and/or national trainers.

The organizational support structure for staff and participant development is found in the philosophy-driven vision and program design, in the structure of the training and replication process, in the organizational culture of learning, and in the feedback provided by the evaluation strategy. One premise underlying the staff support structure at the Alliance is that attention to staff and participant development should be infused into every aspect of the organization. In practice this means that the Alliance invests heavily in its human resources through identifying, training, promoting, and supporting both parent participant and staff leadership and input at all levels of the organization.

The Alliance is also committed to being a learning organization. Although one important strength of FAST is the core of unchanging essential elements incorporated into the program agenda, it is true that many other areas of the work of FAST before, during, and after the program cycle are open to further development and improvement. In order to accommodate this need for ongoing development, the Alliance has fostered an organizational culture focused on continuous learning.

Two of the premises which define a culture of learning are first, that learning organizations are intentionally thoughtful about their work, and secondly, they are willing to consider and embrace new directions and address needed improvements as identified by staff and participants at all levels. These premises translate into the need to develop the practices of continuous planning, action, and reflection throughout the organization, as well as formal and informal feedback loops and communication channels to process and disseminate reflections and feedback at appropriate levels of the organization (Letts, Ryan).

Program Cost, Resource Development, and Social Marketing

The cost to implement FAST can initially be relatively expensive. One school can expect to spend \$37,000 in direct costs for two eight-week cycles. However, unit costs go down considerably with more cycles and sites. School districts implementing six eight-week cycles in three different schools can expect to spend about \$113,000. Most of the expenses go toward paying highly trained personnel. General overhead, training, and evaluation are not typically included in the direct costs quoted here. These costs tend to vary widely depending on the agency and availability of local trainers and resources. Schools can save by developing in-kind collaborative arrangements with local agencies, since typically they are serving the same clientele.

Before FAST teams can receive training to begin implementation, they must secure program funding. The detailed start-up information and techni-

cal assistance which the Alliance provides includes assistance with accessing and thinking creatively about this funding, model proposals, a breakdown of staff requirements and program operation costs, and strategies for re-directing current allocations. This comprehensive assistance contributes to the consistency and predictability of securing funding across replication sites. Since 1993, the FAST Replication Center has helped local sites access over \$35 million dollars from local sources to support the program.

The collaborative team aspect of FAST provides a wider range of access to grant monies than if services were provided by a single group because collaborative partners can be matched with funders who have similar interests. Over 87% of FAST funding comes from local and state government in conjunction with substance abuse, violence prevention, family support, and education initiatives; over 80% of school sites absorb the program into their budgets at the end of state funding cycles. Six federal agencies that have identified FAST as an exemplary program also fund the operation of FAST within their funding streams.

Maintenance of the quality of the FAST program nationwide is largely accomplished via the Alliance's approach to training, curriculum, resource development, and social marketing as described above. One guiding premise, which drives the Alliance's practices in these areas, is that top program quality can be ensured through a combination of top quality material and human resources. High quality content, process, and materials for training and curriculum plus ongoing localized support via national and local trainers and national/local communication formats are together responsible for the Alliance's organizational strength in quality control.

FAST Replication and Sustainability

The replication and sustainability processes of the FAST program contribute to quality assurance throughout the FAST program network. Many aspects of FAST replication have been previously addressed in discussing the other components of organizational capacity. FAST sustainability at local sites requires continued funding, collaboration, and energy. The goal of all FAST programs is to become institutionalized over time into sustainable, community-owned programs. Sustainability of FAST programs requires attention to four characteristics of long-term service delivery. These include organizational readiness, collaborative vision, community ownership, and renewable support.

The sustainability planning for FAST programs actually starts at the beginning stage of program development. As potential collaborative team members meet for the initial assessment of their interest in FAST, a checklist for collaborative self-evaluation is administered. Potential collaborators are

encouraged to get the support of their boards, determine FAST compatibility with the missions of their organizations, and decide upon adequate staffing as aspects of organizational readiness to sustain FAST.

In the area of collaborative vision, team members make sure they understand each partner's strengths and capacities and define shared responsibilities. Together collaborative team members develop strategies for the program to stay visible, to develop relationships with opinion leaders, and to seek public endorsements as aspects of building community ownership. Additional strategies to redirect funds and pursue private funding and/or major funding sources for school-linked services ultimately begin to work toward renewable financial support for FAST. This careful attention to sustainability planning is found in the FAST resource development and technical assistance guides and is an important part of the Alliance's quality assurance capacity.

FAST Challenges and the Learning Culture

The following are examples of the types of challenges and suggestions for improvement which have emerged from various levels of the national organization and local sites, which the Alliance is currently processing in its attempt to be responsive to local needs:

1. New implementation of recently developed middle school and pre-school versions of FAST (from national to local sites in response to local need)
2. The need for strength-based evaluation instruments and a focus on asset building and resource assessment within the evaluation process and the FAST sessions (from local sites to national)
3. The need for strengthening the transition from the structured FAST program to the less structured FASTWORKS program, as well as improving the scope and effectiveness of FASTWORKS activities (from evaluation data)
4. How FAST collaborative teams can incorporate new partners such as community centers or HUD (from national to local sites in response to local need)
5. How to incorporate and disseminate parent suggestions such as having a different teacher attend each FAST session to get to know parents (from local site to national and other sites)
6. How to make the FAST program more appealing to teenage siblings and 5th grade participants (from local sites to national)
7. The pros and cons of keeping the same parent leadership from cycle to cycle (from local site to national and other sites)

8. How to tie improved performance on standardized tests to FAST participation (from one local site to whole FAST network)

As these examples illustrate, FAST challenges and innovations get exchanged in three directions—from the national to the local sites, from the local sites to the national for assistance, and from one local site to all other sites. An in-depth look at exchanges in two of these directions will provide a clearer sense of how the FAST culture of learning responds to program challenges and innovations.

A challenge from the national to the local sites based on evaluation feedback: FASTWORKS strengthening

Early evaluations of FASTWORKS programs which follow the eight-week FAST cycle indicated that the potential of the program to serve as an informal support network, a bridge toward greater parental involvement, and a potentially powerful grassroots organization was not being fully realized. In addition, parents were having difficulty maintaining momentum to complete the targeted two years of parent-led FASTWORKS activities. Once the Alliance became aware of these challenges, the national office acted on the feedback by utilizing the first author as an organizational development consultant from the Harvard Family Research Project to look at the problem under the technical assistance contract provided via the DeWitt Wallace Readers Digest Fund support for the national replication.

The consultant's recommendations included expansion of the Phase III FASTWORKS training and development of new training modules to include community organizing principles, theories, and techniques. Special emphasis was placed on leadership development and support and on the creation of effective FASTWORKS organizations, rooted in understanding of the concepts of power, taking action for community change, and seriously engaging with schools on behalf of increased student achievement. These emphases provide more direction and structure and a stronger philosophical base for the FASTWORKS program. The consultant's work also can bring more clarity to the nature of the school-FAST relationship as FASTWORKS organizations develop.

The school-FAST relationship in the strengthened FASTWORKS model aspires to move closer to what Swap (1993) describes as a partnership model of parent involvement. In the partnership model, the assumption is that the school's program is open to negotiation with parents with opportunity to involve community members in re-creating the program and mission, in challenging the school's hierarchical structure and in developing authentic connections between schools and communities. For Swap as well as for the enhanced FASTWORKS model, this implies "long-term commitments, mu-

tual respect, widespread involvement of families and educators in many levels of activities, and sharing of planning and decision-making responsibilities" (p. 47).

Based on these points, the enhanced FASTWORKS program aspires to completely revamp the traditional relationship between schools and parents. New FAST sites are currently participating in the enhanced Phase III training, and the new modules and program emphases are also being disseminated to existing sites.

Innovations from one local site to the national and other local sites based on local implementation experience: The case of FAST San Antonio

Another mode of transmission of new learning and innovation within FAST is from a local site back to the national office to be considered for adoption throughout the FAST network. FAST San Antonio is one of the largest and oldest FAST program sites. Through their experiences implementing FAST in 26 schools over a 10-year period, FAST San Antonio staff members have adapted several aspects of the program to local circumstances and conditions, including culture. Program aspects, which have been adapted by FAST San Antonio, include recruitment strategies, evaluation data collection, use of counseling, and creation of a FASTWORKS Fiesta event.

In an effort to contact the greatest number of eligible participants, FAST San Antonio deviates from the Alliance's recommendation of in-home recruitment to use some unorthodox methods of their own. These include having a FAST recruitment booth during school registration in September and approaching parents during school events such as the student bike rodeo or other well-attended events. To ensure as close to 100% completion of evaluation data as possible, FAST San Antonio has participants complete evaluations at the end of the final FAST session, rather than having them return for a separate session. FAST San Antonio also offers counseling on a more intensive basis than other FAST sites, indicating a different perspective on the role of the mental health partner in the collaborative team. Lastly, FAST San Antonio has created a very popular and well-attended annual Fiesta event that is jointly organized and sponsored by all the FASTWORKS programs in the city. Given the excellent long-term evaluation and participation results for the FAST San Antonio programs, the dilemma for the national office becomes to determine which, if any, of these program adaptations would be useful in other contexts and should be disseminated throughout the network or to selected sites with similar demographics.

Three lessons learned by the FAST San Antonio staff about working with parents

In the beginning of this case study, it was mentioned that the ultimate test of the effectiveness of organizational capacity for non-profits resides in the evidence of the social impact of the organization's work. In the case of the Alliance, the evidence must be seen in improvement and developmental change in the lives of FAST participants. Some of those compelling stories that highlight the real effects of the work were provided.

But at the same time that participants learn from the organization, the organization also learns from them. Gifted staff of the San Antonio FAST program have articulated important lessons which they have learned about working with parents which remind practitioners that even when all the right elements of good programming and organizational support are in place, it is often the question of human connection, of whether or not supportive relationships develop in the course of the program, which makes the difference between a positive change experience and merely attending a program. Here are some of their thoughts:

Luis: You know, we graduate 15 families and my question is, do they truly grasp the parent empowerment—really grasp it, not just that they come, you know, do their special play for eight weeks and let it go—but they continue to do that, continue to call each other up needing advice, continue coming to the follow-up programs because of the way the program touched them and put them in contact with each other, their kids and themselves and not because of anything we did or any one part of the program.

Valerie: The first thing that comes into my mind is that you have to believe in what you are doing, because if you're just doing this because we have to run a program, we've got this manual and we've got to use it—no, you have to believe in it, believe in the parents, that they are good parents and that they just need some connections to help develop their skills and their lifestyles. So I think that has to be number one, that you believe in them and you know why you are doing this. And you need to know who's around you and if they've got that good energy for what you're going to do together.

Luis: The biggest lesson I've learned is trust. When you do FAST you have to build trust between your parents, your

families, and yourself, 'cause you're not from their community, you're not at their school all the time—you have to build a trust from the moment you meet them to the moment you don't see them anymore for that night. It's all about trust. I trust you to come to this program and enjoy it and you trust me to have everything prepared for you to run the best program that I can.

Valerie: I'm gonna borrow from one of my parents. She told me it's never too late to learn something new—that's an important lesson. You might think you have it all together, then you come to the program and learn, hey, I could try this and it might work.

Fabiola: The parents are like, I thought you came here to tell us things. One parent said something like, my girls don't pay attention to me, and then she cried and she looked to me like I was gonna say, ok, you have to do this. At the beginning it was kind of tense, but after you get to know each other you talk, and it's like, do you have any ideas? I don't really know—I have kids the same ages and I don't know, but we talk together and we work on it.

Summary

In summary, one lesson from the work of the Alliance's replication of the FAST program is that organizational capacity works to support the effectiveness of excellent programs. Non-profits, therefore, should ensure that programs they are implementing and planning to replicate have a strong philosophy or research-based theory of change at their core, and that the link between the theory of change and program activities is clear and logical. Once these components of program design are in place, and once the vision of the work has been clearly articulated, agencies such as the Alliance are able to turn their attention to the organizational capacity needed to support the expansion and maintain the quality of programs. The clear philosophy and structure of FAST supercedes individual leadership and supports program implementation in spite of changes in personnel and other aspects of the organization.

The priority capacities of learning and innovation, quality assurance, measuring performance, and motivating and developing staff and participants, however, cannot be fully exercised without strong and effective corresponding organizational components in place to support these capacities. Learn-

ing and innovation, for example, are supported by the well-defined FAST vision whose research-based theories of change respond to new learning as well as by the strong organizational culture dedicated to self-reflection and integrating feedback from the field. Program quality assurance across the FAST network is ensured via the high-quality, standardized, and effective FAST program training and curriculum and consistent approaches to resource development, replication, and sustainability.

Measurement of Performance is supported via the National FAST evaluation program which ensures measurement of outcomes and collection of feedback data for local as well as national use. Staff and participant development and motivation are key emphases of the organizational culture and are further supported via the training program format and the program structure which emphasize promotion of parent leadership and increasing staff responsibility.

Linda Wheeler, the National FAST Director, rose to the top leadership position within FAST after serving first as a FAST team member and then as a regional and national trainer; her motivation stems from her background in social work. She summarizes her work of the past ten years this way: "My whole emphasis when I became a social worker was to work with children and families at the prevention level. In FAST, social work is about empowering parents, not just private practice. We're always preaching parent respect and empowerment. You do that through education and responsibility and leadership development. I don't work with families now but I certainly work with a lot of people who do. So I feel that I have an impact by doing whatever I can do to make sure that the programs we replicate are strong" (Personal Interview, July 2, 1999). This close and deliberate interplay between core organizational capacities and tasks and components of organizational structure capable of supporting those capacities places the Alliance at the cutting edge of organizational development for family involvement programs.

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