

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

INTRODUCTION

School in the Park (SITP) is an innovative program that provides inner-city elementary students the opportunity to attend several museums and other cultural institutions in San Diego's Balboa Park, each for up to three weeks during the school year. Following an impact evaluation of the program on these institutions' educational capacities, Price Charities, the sole funder of this program, commissioned NP Strategies¹ to better understand how school teachers relate to the program. Specifically, the objectives of this assessment and report are to:

1. Identify stakeholders' (teachers, principals, program administrators) understanding of SITP's objectives and determine the extent of alignment among groups.
2. Measure these stakeholders' satisfaction with the program.
3. Assess the fit between the program's objectives and those driving decisions and performance at the two elementary schools.
4. Use this information to identify and prioritize ways to increase overall impact by increasing stakeholder buy-in, simplifying when possible and investing where necessary.

These objectives were achieved first through a series of interviews with key principals and teachers at Rosa Parks and Hamilton Elementary Schools and, second, through a detailed survey administered to all teachers who participate in the program.

PRIMARY FINDINGS

The primary finding of this report is that stakeholder satisfaction with School in the Park is extraordinarily high. Only one out of 38 teachers expressed dissatisfaction with the program; the remainder would gladly have their own children participate in SITP. While much of the study was focused on understanding the ways in which SITP can improve, this finding should not be forgotten or underestimated.

While nearly all teachers perceive SITP to be effective at achieving its objectives, there is some disagreement about the exact nature of those objectives. Only 21 percent of respondents chose SITP's stated goal of broadening students' horizons as the program's primary objective. The majority believe the program complements school-based learning, while an additional 21 percent say the primary objective is to improve academic performance. The question of explicit versus implicit objectives is one that underlies many of the recommendations of this report. As such, the report's top recommendation is to carefully consider the primary goals of School in the Park, with an effort to link strategic objectives with program emphases.

¹ NP Strategies is a nonprofit organization that provides management consulting, strategic planning and program evaluation services to nonprofit organizations in the San Diego, California region (visit www.npstrategies.org).

In addition to overall satisfaction, the analysis sought to understand the ways in which a variety of issues contributed to or detracted from the effectiveness of and buy-in to School in the Park. As this study focuses primarily on the perceptions of teachers, findings should be understood in that context and not as measurements of actual impact or efficiency. The following issues are grouped according to priority level, a combination of teachers' rankings and NP Strategies' considerations of the potential costs and impact of recommended changes.

OPPORTUNITIES FOR IMPROVEMENT

Top Priorities

- **Instructional Quality** – It is highly recommended that efforts be undertaken to improve the quality of the education instructors at participating institutions. These instructors are widely judged to be experts in their fields and highly engaged in SITP; 94 percent of school teachers believe the institutions' instructors are at least competent in teaching children. However, 36 percent of teachers believe that the instructors need professional development for teaching children with special needs (including English Language Learners).
- **Subject Scope and Overlap** – Many topics addressed by School in the Park institutions are also touched on by teachers in the normal school schedule. Approximately 60 percent of all respondents would like SITP to assume responsibility for at least portions of some academic subjects, though the rationale for this stance varies.
- **Teacher-Instructor Collaboration** – Nearly two-thirds (63 percent) of teachers are involved in morning teaching less than twenty percent of the time. However, a similar number would be willing to assume greater responsibilities in the morning. The intensity of collaboration is undetermined and should follow clarification of SITP's objectives.
- **Accountability While in the Park** – Lines of accountability are blurred when teachers leave the school campus and attend School in the Park—56 percent of teachers believe that Susan Wachowiak, SITP's director, is responsible for them while in the Park; 23 percent believe their principal retains responsibility. These and other roles and responsibilities should be clarified and communicated, especially to increase school administrators' comfort with the program.

Medium Priority

- **Incorporation of Curriculum Standards** – Many stakeholders have seen and appreciate significant improvements in the linkage between state curriculum standards and SITP's instructional content. Given the continued pressure to 'cover' all prescribed standards, this remains a top priority for teachers. Perhaps most useful, however, would be a comprehensive analysis of the ways in which Balboa Park's unique resources could be targeted to specific units of inquiry, rather than linking standards after-the-fact.

Low Priorities

- **Afternoon Activities** – In contrast to the expectations of the program’s administrators, most teachers have limited desire to use afternoons in the Park to build on the morning’s instruction and explore the museums’ resources. Instead, teachers feel significant pressure to ‘catch up’ math and literacy instruction. Thus, there is little desire for SITP to increase or improve the prescribed afternoon activities while classrooms are visiting Balboa Park.
- **Total Time Commitment** – Despite voices of dissent to the contrary, most (57 percent) teachers believe there is no need to adjust the amount of time students spend in the park (an average of 25 percent of the school year). While changing students’ and teachers’ total time commitment may be considered as an integral part of a deeper strategic analysis aligning objectives with program focus, teachers’ perceptions alone do not warrant significant changes in this area.
- **Logistics and Lost Time** – While many discussed the difficulties of transporting entire classrooms to and from the Park each day, there is little consensus about whether or not to make such arrangements more flexible. More importantly, this issue should follow discussions about the preferred focus of afternoon activities.
- **Accommodating Schools’ Curriculum Schedules** – One of the impediments to the academic impact of SITP is the fact that each classroom visits a given museum at a different time during the year, thus limiting the integration of the institution’s content into the class’s curriculum. Though a potential way to improve impact, this would prove quite complex and is not a top concern for most teachers.

OVERALL RECOMMENDATIONS

Satisfaction with School in the Park is overwhelmingly high. And while there are a few voices of dissent in key positions that should be carefully considered moving forward, overall stakeholder buy-in is extraordinarily strong and presents little impediment for the program’s long-term impact and efficiency. Of course there are always opportunities for improvement. Several such areas were identified, with special focus on issues such as improving the quality of instruction provided by affiliated institutions, increasing collaboration between school teachers and institutions’ instructors, and clarifying areas of accountability while teachers and students are in the Park. A key finding of the assessment is that specific recommendations in these areas largely depend on the program’s core objectives. Orienting SITP to prioritize students’ increased exposure, for example, relative to improved academic performance will require fewer significant modifications; in fact, with this objective reductions in the intensity of the program may be appropriate. The opposite is true if SITP expressly desires to improve academic achievement. Thus, additional attention to the definition of the program’s objectives and alignment between these and the program’s focus is highly recommended. While not necessarily required by the levels of stakeholder satisfaction, such improvement efforts would likely yield significant additional improvements in understanding, buy-in, efficiency and impact well into the future.