

## EVALUATING THE BEACON LEARNING CENTER

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The Beacon Learning Center (BLC) began operation in 1998 with resources coming from the Bay District Schools Office and resources from the Florida State Department of Education. Though the resources they had in 1998 and 1999 were sizably less than what they have now, an infrastructure, political positioning and valuing within the District Schools Office evolved in these formative years. In July 2000, the BLC received a five-year \$10,000,000 Technology Innovation Challenge Grant (TICG) from the United States Department of Education to further its goals. When they were awarded the TICG in 2000, the staff of the BLC utilized their existent infrastructure and drew on the reputation it already had established to make sizeable progress during year one.

### PROJECT GOAL 1: DEVELOP LESSON PLANS AND UNITS

The first objective during year one was to have 700 lesson plans online for mathematics, language arts, social studies, and science in grades K-12. As of April 9, 2001 there are 1066 lesson plans in the subjects named above as well as in physical education and music. What we found is that these lesson plans go through a rigorous validation process and each lesson plan is aligned with Florida's Sunshine State Standards (SSS). The validation process ensures that each lesson: integrates Florida's SSS, explains how to assess achievement toward selected standards and when available includes an easy-to-use rubric that clearly delineates expectations of performance levels providing clear goals for teachers and students. Florida's SSS are very comprehensive in that each subject is partitioned into strands. Each strand has a variety of standards. Each standard is broken down to learner levels (e.g., K-2, 3-5) and each level has specific benchmarks. Ensuring that each lesson targets a specific SSS is very attractive for teachers as is the BLC website's facility for searching lesson plans by standards.

Lesson plans have been developed by teachers in the classroom or by teachers that work full-time for the BLC. Subsequently the lessons vary across subjects, grade levels, standards, and benchmarks. A more concerted effort is now occurring to develop units, a composite of two weeks instruction centered around a theme or topic. The project had set the goal of 25 units to be developed by the BLC staff before the end of year one. At present there have been 12 units posted. Developing interrelated lessons, web lessons, and appropriate assessments is complex, and the BLC is not only internally validating these, but is piloting these units in the classroom and obtaining comprehensive reviews from teachers to ensure the worth of the units. The BLC now realizes their expectation in terms of numbers was higher than what they could actually create in terms of the product's quality.

### PROJECT GOAL 2: PROVIDE STAFF DEVELOPMENT

The objective this year was to provide staff development to 120 teachers.

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This training focused on curriculum development utilizing a curriculum, assessment, and instruction design. Thirty of the 120 would receive training as validators and 15 would receive training as web lesson developers. At least 150 teachers have been trained with 100 as validators and 21 teachers as web lesson developers.

Our assessment of staff development is that it is a vital part of the growth of the Beacon Learning Center. The two vital foci throughout the next four years is increasing the numbers of lesson plans and unit plans on the web and doing this in a quality way. With only a few (8) curriculum developers and validators on staff at the BLC, continuing to meet the targeted goals of lesson plans and units in years 2-5 will be hard to accomplish without a steady stream of new developers and validators. This we believe to be a critical link in ensuring the steady progress of the grant. More effort should focus on finding and keeping good quality teachers to assist in this project.

### PROJECT GOAL 3: PROVIDE ONLINE STAFF DEVELOPMENT RESOURCES

The main objective under this goal is to develop at least 15 online staff modules. To date there is one module on the use of the Beacon website that is currently in a piloting phase through a University of Central Florida distance-learning course, and 14 modules in some phase of development. There is one complete and two under development for developing quality assessments and there are four technology integration modules under development including: Website review, software evaluation, Tips for Integrating Technology, and a SiteMaker tutorial. Modules under revision include: a Florida Accomplished Practices interactive module, a module of Connections (a Florida Department of Education/Pasco County Initiative on curricular alignment and standards-based planning) and three modules for ESOL strategies. Broward County has contributed Thinking Skills and Learning Strategies modules for at-risk students.

These modules are planned to be interactive resources that teachers can utilize to improve their teaching. During year two, we will evaluate the use of the modules and their effectiveness.

### OTHER FINDINGS

In working closely with the staff of the BLC, we observed incongruities between staff members and the administration. For example, we were told by curriculum developers that their perceptions were that administrators expected them to work quietly at their computers and not be engaged in collaboration with their colleagues. The administrators stated that collaboration was a key element in producing quality curriculum products. Differences such as these caused us to utilize The Readiness for Organizational Learning and Evaluation Instrument (ROLE) constructed by Preskill and Torres (2000) to determine the overall climate of the BLC. The instrument allowed us to determine administrators and staff's perceptions and beliefs in six areas: culture, leadership, systems and structure, communication, teams, and evaluation. Due to space considerations, we briefly focus on the two areas of Leadership and Systems & Structures. Survey results indicated a sharp difference between the administrators and the curriculum developers in Leadership (4.83, 2.98) and Systems & Structures (4.11

& 3.01). For example, in leadership, administrators strongly agreed that they took on the role of facilitating employees learning while curriculum developers tended to disagree. In Systems & Structures, all administrators strongly agreed that workspaces were designed to allow for easy and frequent communication with each other. Curriculum developers tended to disagree with this statement.

After results were shared with the BLC director, it was decided to have an all-day retreat to discuss the results of the survey. The survey data were combined and shared with the administration and all staff members. Preliminary remarks were made by the director that established a tenor of openness and candidness. The administrators and staff were partitioned into 3 groups and discussion was facilitated by the coauthors of this paper. Results of the meeting were very positive as administrators better understood the needs of the staff and the staff better understood the needs of the leadership. For example, curriculum developers now have a sense of empowerment, realizing that communication is valued in producing the quality lesson plans. Administrators also realized they are seen as ones that “tell” information to the group. Changes have taken place to allow more interaction between staff and administrators.

We have learned that for an organization to maximize its effectiveness, communication is key. We affirm the administration’s position of the importance of conducting the survey and of the ensuing discussion that took place. Although there are risks for doing this, the outcome of the meeting initially seems to be very beneficial to the climate of the project.

One other major finding is that the products of the BLC have received rave reviews and the dissemination of the project, which was to be a major objective in year 5, is exploding at an alarming rate. Most counties in Florida know of the BLC products. Many are now seeking additional information of using the material and having their teachers submit lessons. The administrators have gone to leaders in the legislature seeking additional funds to hire staff developers in different regions of the state to train curriculum developers and validators. Interest from other states is beginning to increase. The administration is now having to deal with these external issues and this has caused the staff to not have the administration attention it once had. To meet the demand, it is imperative that the BLC increase staff and administration to meet the growing need.

#### CONCLUSIONS

From our evaluation, we have learned that having an infrastructure in place, that is qualified people who are already organized, is of great value when a grant is awarded. The school district’s support was based on a foundation of the work that had already taken place so they could genuinely support the proposal and easily make the transition of finding adequate space and adding personnel to ensure the project’s success. Overall, the project is progressing well. The quality of the lesson plans, with the rigorous validation are the BLC’s greatest strength. Continuing challenges for the BLC are growth, funding, and infrastructure.

#### REFERENCES

Preskill, H., & Torres, R. T. (1999). Evaluative Inquiry for Learning in Organizations. Thousand Oaks, CA: Sage.

**Cover Sheet**

**EVALUATING THE BEACON LEARNING CENTER**

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