



Case Study #5: AVANCE-Houston's Partnership with the Houston Independent School District

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AVANCE-Houston offers Early Head Start, Head Start, and other family services. This case study describes their partnership with the Houston Independent School District to follow AVANCE children through the early elementary grades to better understand children's school achievement, which has informed AVANCE-Houston's continuous quality improvement plans. It illustrates some of the key steps needed to link data over time between two organizations. This case study highlights an example of linking data that involves merging two separate datasets into a single data file.

AVANCE Inc., founded in 1973, is a nonprofit organization that seeks to “strengthen families in at-risk communities through effective child and family education.”¹ AVANCE-Houston Inc. (AVANCE), a chapter of AVANCE Inc., was established in 1988 and offers the Parent Child Education Program (PCEP), Head Start and Early Head Start services, and support programs in adult education, healthy marriage, fatherhood, and computer literacy for families whose children participate in their early education programs. AVANCE-Houston serves approximately 2,200 Head Start and Early Head Start children in the northwest region of Harris County, Texas.

To achieve their mission, AVANCE has cultivated a strong data culture and developed program improvement strategies based on the interpretation of data. In addition to using their own data, they also link² their data with data from other organizations to strengthen their program. The AVANCE data culture is largely supported by the strong partnerships they

¹ To learn more about AVANCE- Houston, please go to: <http://www.avancehouston.org/>

² In this resource, data are considered linked when information from two or more separate data systems or databases are shared, connected, combined, or merged. These data systems or databases may be housed in the same program or in multiple programs or agencies. Linking can occur in various ways ranging from simple, (e.g., sharing a spreadsheet) to more complex (e.g., merging two databases into a single file), to very complex (e.g., fully integrating data across multiple agencies). However, all linked data have the potential to provide useful information to support ECE program improvement.

have fostered with local health organizations, businesses, colleges and universities, school districts, and other nonprofit community organizations. In 2009, AVANCE and the Houston Independent School District (HISD) were interested in working together to answer joint questions of interest. HISD, AVANCE, and three other Head Start grantees in Texas partnered to conduct a 10-year longitudinal study to examine the school performance of students who participated in Head Start. Some of these programs are located in HISD schools and others are community-based Head Start programs. For the study, HISD's Department of Research and Accountability tracks Head Start children from the four participating grantees once they enter the school district. The study is currently in its fourth year. Although HISD has partnered with additional Head Start grantees for the project, this case study focuses specifically on the partnership between AVANCE and HISD and highlights the steps that AVANCE has taken to build their relationship with HISD as a research partner. It also outlines some of the ways that AVANCE has used information gleaned from the linked data that HISD has provided.

Building On the Partnership between AVANCE and the Houston Independent School District

AVANCE and HISD worked together before they began the longitudinal study. For example, the district provided space within their schools for AVANCE to hold their Parent-Child Education Program, which provides parenting classes and early childhood education for families and their young children birth to age three. The relationships established by this previous collaboration made it easier for AVANCE and HISD staff to work together on the longitudinal study. It was AVANCE's hope that the longitudinal study and partnership with HISD would help them determine how their children are performing in public school, identify areas in which children's skills could be strengthened, and target strategies for improving their program.

Partnering on the longitudinal study was also easier because both agencies have data savvy staff³ to help with the project. HISD's Department of Research and Accountability provides expertise, information, and analysis to local, state, and federal entities on student, program, and district data.⁴ AVANCE staff members use data internally for program improvement purposes and have been enthusiastic about this opportunity to partner with the district. Similar to HISD, AVANCE also has staff members with backgrounds in research and analysis who manage data-related tasks. Additionally, AVANCE currently employs a former staff member of HISD's Department of Research and Accountability, which has further strengthened the partnership between the two organizations.

Proposal for the Longitudinal Study of AVANCE

When AVANCE and HISD decided to collaborate on a longitudinal study in 2009, HISD's Department of Research and Accountability asked them to submit a proposal for the project to describe AVANCE's particular questions of interest. The proposal outlined AVANCE's goal for the study, questions of interest and possible hypotheses, as well as information about methods, data analysis procedures, and the project's importance. AVANCE submitted the formal proposal to HISD's Department of Research and Accountability in August of 2010. AVANCE was interested in asking questions such as:

- How do the kindergarten math and literacy skills of children who attended AVANCE compare to the math and literacy skills of other economically disadvantaged children?
- How do the third grade math and reading skills of children who attended AVANCE compare to the math and reading skills of other economically disadvantaged children?

In September of 2010, the HISD's Department of Research and Accountability approved AVANCE's proposal, and the two organizations jointly developed the study methodology.

³ Data savvy staff can include: (1) those without extensive technical knowledge but who understand why data are important and that it can be beneficial to link data, and (2) those with greater technical knowledge who can both do some data work on their own and also act as liaisons with data experts for the more sophisticated data-related work.

⁴ To learn more about the Houston Independent School District's Department of Research and Accountability, please go to: <http://www.houstonisd.org/Page/32998>

Linking Data with the Houston Independent School District

Establishing the Memorandum of Understanding

Before the two organizations began sharing data with each other, they worked together to develop a memorandum of understanding (MOU) outlining the roles and responsibilities of the parties involved, plans for data use, data privacy and confidentiality measures, and guidelines for report submission.⁵ As outlined in the MOU, AVANCE is responsible for “providing students’ personal identifying information to facilitate data collection” and must follow HISD’s guidelines regarding the protection of human subjects and confidentiality of data. The MOU indicates that HISD’s Department of Research and Accountability is responsible for monitoring the study to “ensure compliance to ethical conduct guidelines established by the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services, the Office for Human Research Protection (OHRP) as well as the disclosure of student records outlined in the Family Educational Rights and Privacy Act (FERPA).” These procedures help ensure that the rights of children and families are protected in this collaborative research project. The MOU also briefly describes how the data will be reported. For example, the document states that “data will only be reported in statistical summaries.”⁶ The MOU established specific guidelines for both AVANCE and HISD’s Department of Research and Accountability to follow throughout the study.



Parental Consent

As indicated in the MOU, AVANCE is responsible for collecting signed consent from parents or guardians. In AVANCE’s Head Start enrollment application, parents are able to check a box giving AVANCE permission to “share child’s records with the school district” and to allow HISD to “share child’s school District and State Test Scores with AVANCE (grades K, 3rd, 5th, 8th) for longitudinal study.”⁷ Almost all parents of children enrolled in AVANCE’s Head Start program have given permission for AVANCE to share child-level information with the school district for the study.

Exchanging Data

In order to track information about AVANCE students in the school district, AVANCE provides the Department of Research and Accountability a list of children who were in the program. HISD creates a unique identifier for each child on the list. The children served by AVANCE in an HISD school already have a unique identifier that was assigned to them by HISD when they first enrolled in the program. For children served in community-based AVANCE sites, AVANCE provides personal identification information so that HISD can assign a unique identifier once those children enter kindergarten. The unique identifier allows HISD to track reading and math scores for AVANCE children at kindergarten, 3rd, 5th, and 8th grades.

In addition to personal identification information, AVANCE provides HISD the following information: number of years in Head Start, home language, parent level of education, household income, and teacher’s level of education. The current analyses for the study do not address all of these data elements; however the team hopes to be able to work on additional analyses in the future. For the children whose parents provided consent, AVANCE staff members upload data in an Excel spreadsheet to a flash drive or CD-ROM and hand deliver it to the HISD Department of Research and Accountability.

⁵ For more information about developing a Memorandum of Agreement or data sharing agreement, please refer to another resource in this project, *Data Direction 4: Building a Data Sharing Partnership with Other Organizations*.

⁶ Houston Independent School District. (2010). *Memorandum of Understanding*. Houston, TX.

⁷ AVANCE-Houston, Inc. (2015). *AVANCE – Houston Early Head Start/Head Start Enrollment Application: Section XI: Family Partnership Agreement and Consent Form*. Houston, TX.

Using Linked Data for Continuous Quality Improvement

After HISD's Department of Research and Accountability analyzes the linked data, their team sends AVANCE a report that summarizes the data. AVANCE uses the HISD summary reports, along with data they collect about classroom quality (i.e., Classroom Assessment Scoring System⁸ and Infant/Toddler Environmental Rating Scale-R)⁹ and children's skills (i.e., Teaching Strategies GOLD¹⁰) to guide their discussions about how best to support continuous quality improvement.



When AVANCE receives HISD reports each year, staff members work with the Board of Director's Program and Strategic Planning Committees to review the reports along with their own data on classroom quality and children's skills. These reviewers also take into account feedback from key stakeholders such as teachers, parents, community partners, and administrators. This information is collected through summits specifically geared towards obtaining feedback about the state of children's education, case management systems, and performance in the various programs. At a parent summit, for example, parents requested more information about accessing social and transition services for their children. As a result of this feedback, committee members recommended that staff provide parents with materials that will increase parent awareness of high performing schools within their districts.

The staff and board use all of this information to identify challenges and possible strategies for program improvement. For example, findings from the December 2014 HISD longitudinal study report suggested that kindergarten literacy scores for AVANCE's students were lower than the mean scores for economically disadvantaged children in the Houston Independent School District.¹¹ In addition, more recent data on the 2015 kindergarten literacy scores for AVANCE children showed a similar pattern of relatively low literacy skills in kindergarten. Based on these two years of data, AVANCE staff have decided to make literacy skills a priority, and they have included this in their 2016 Strategic Plan Priorities. In order to improve literacy skills, AVANCE is planning to review their curriculum and tailor teacher professional development and training to support children's literacy development.

Next Steps and Sustaining the Partnership with HISD for Continuous Quality Improvement

AVANCE is interested in learning more about specific factors that contribute to performance differences. As a next step, AVANCE would like to continue the partnership with HISD to determine the program characteristics and combination of services that are related to sustained academic gains through 3rd grade. For example, AVANCE is interested in following their Head Start children whose families participated in the Parent-Child Education Program to better understand whether the children in these families perform better in school compared to children whose families did not participate in the PCEP.

⁸ Pianta, R. C., La Paro, K., & Hamre, B. (2004). *Classroom Assessment Scoring System: Pre-Kindergarten*. Charlottesville, VA: University of Virginia Center for Advanced Study of Teaching and Learning.

⁹ Harms, T., Cryer, D., & Clifford, R. M. (2006). *Infant/Toddler Environment Rating Scale: Revised Edition*. Chapel Hill, NC: Frank Porter Graham Child Development Institute.

¹⁰ Heroman, C., Burts, D. C., Berke, K., & Bickart, T. S. (2010). *Teaching Strategies GOLD® objectives for development and learning*. Bethesda, MD: Teaching Strategies, LLC.

¹¹ Houston Independent School District. (2014). *Prekindergarten Education Program: Academic Performance Comparison of Head Start Programs, 2013-2014*. Houston, TX.

Summary

The longitudinal tracking study has facilitated an even stronger partnership between AVANCE and the Houston Independent School District. The partnership and subsequent study have provided a unique opportunity to use linked data to inform continuous quality improvement in AVANCE's Head Start programs. They are in the process of planning how to use the information to inform possible program changes, particularly as they receive additional data on children. AVANCE hopes that their partnership with the district and collaborative work on the longitudinal study will continue to help them improve their services to support low-income children and their families.

Acknowledgments

Child Trends is grateful for the financial support of the *Building Capacity to Use Linked Early Childhood Administrative Data* project, provided by the Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation, in partnership with the Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation, in the U.S. Department of Health and Human Services. The goal of the project is to help early care and education programs build their capacity to link and use linked administrative data for program improvement and research purposes.

We would like to thank the federal staff who provided importance guidance throughout this project: Lindsey Hutchison and Kimberly Burgess, Office of the Assistant Secretary for Planning and Evaluation; Christine Fortunato, Office of Planning, Research and Evaluation; and Theresa Rowley, Office of Head Start.

We also appreciate the contributions of the project's expert panel, whose members dedicated time and provided advice to strengthen the resources developed as part of this project. Expert panel members include: Leigh Bolick, South Carolina Department of Social Services; Craig Detweiler, Georgia Department of Early Care and Learning; Emmalie Dropkin, National Head Start Association; John Fantuzzo, Penn Child Research Center, University of Pennsylvania; Vanessa Rich, Chicago Department of Family and Support Services; and Amanda Schwartz, National Center on Health, Amanda Schwartz Consulting.

We extend a special thank you to the early care and education program staff who provided examples of using linked data, explained the opportunities and challenges in linking data, described how they linked data and how it helped inform continuous quality improvement, and talked with us about their programs' data practices.

Suggested citation: Abrams, J., Maxwell, K. L., & Epstein, D. (2016). *Case study 5: AVANCE-Houston's partnership with the Houston Independent School District*. Report #2016-26. Bethesda, MD: Child Trends.

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