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**Academy for Educational Development
Save the Children Federation, USA**

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PROJECT SUMMARY

Project Title: Expansion of Excellence Centers in Nicaragua with an Emphasis on the APA Methodology (EXCELENCIA)

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Associates: Academy for Educational Development (AED)
Save the Children Federation USA

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ACRONYMS

AED	Academy for Educational Development
AIR	American Institutes for Research
APA	Learn, Practice, Apply (Aprendo, Practico, Aplico)
BASE	Basic Education and Training Program
COP	Chief of Party
CTO	Cognizant Technical Officer
EQUIP	Education Quality Improvement Program
EXCELENCIA	Expansion of Excellence Centers in Nicaragua with Emphasis on the APA Methodology
MECD	Ministry of Education, Culture and Sports
PRONICASS	Nicaraguan Program for Social Sector Support
SO	Strategic Objective
USAID	United States Agency for International Development

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

After presenting its work plan for 2006, EXCELENCIA began its expansion plan and the selection of the NGO for the subcontract in the two Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast.

In Result 1, “Expansion of the Network of Schools of Excelencia that Apply the APA Methodology”, facilitators of EXCELENCIA started the implementation of an expansion plan, in close coordination with the departmental, municipal and local authorities of MECD. In this quarter, work has been focused mostly to assess and reinforce the former mentor school of BASE Project and their satellites, to identify which of those satellites EXCELENCIA can promote to mentor school during this current year. Through this assessment, EXCELENCIA facilitators found a very good disposition in the mentor schools for continuing working actively as part of the project’s network. As part of the expansion strategy, EXCELENCIA held several training events at the central level for principals, pedagogical advisors and teachers which were later replicated in the regions and with teachers at the schools level. During this quarter, 482 participants attended workshops of EXCELENCIA in Managua and 213 attended workshops in the regions. As a result, 1202 teachers received training at the schools level during this period.

In Result 2, “New Basic Education, Competencies-Based Curriculum, Including Intercultural Bilingual Education Validated and Incorporated to the National Education System”, EXCELENCIA distributed the educational materials for the second quarter of the school year for their validation in the sample of 150 schools of the Pacific Coast. In addition, EXCELENCIA started the production of the materials for the third quarter of the school year. EXCELENCIA and MECD agreed in a common methodology for validation, and AIR approved the needed budget for finishing the process as planned.

In Result 3, “A Quality Control of the APA Method Based on Systematic Evaluation and Research Studies”, EXCELENCIA presented its Monitoring and Evaluation Plan to USAID and started the first of the series of studies agreed with MECD and USAID: “What makes a mentor school successful”. With support of consultants, the EXCELENCIA evaluation team selected the sample of schools for the study, prepared the instruments for gathering information from schools, and identified and hired the interviewers who will pre-test those instruments as part of their training. Under this result, EXCELENCIA has helped MECD in cleaning up the database of schools, which EXCELENCIA will use for all the monitoring and evaluation activities over the years of the project.

After being officially launched, EXCELENCIA prepared its Communication Plan, by identifying its different audiences and formulating specific strategies to speak to each audience. EXCELENCIA National Committee was officially created and had its first meeting, discussing with the Minister of Education the policies for improving quality of the teaching-learning process at the schools level.

EXCELENCIA developed a request for national NGOs present their proposals for executing the activities in the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast (RAAN and RAAS). NGOs were asked to present their Letters of Interest. The 11 NGOs which presented their letters received the Terms of Reference for presenting their proposals. EXCELENCIA formulated the procedures for analyzing and selecting the proposals, and formed a Selection Committee with representatives of the project, MECD, the Autonomous Regions, and USAID. Two NGOs, ALISTAR and FADCANIC presented proposal, and the Selection Committee selected FADCANIC as the winner to work in both Autonomous Regions.

Project staff prepared drafts of Administrative and Financial Manuals integrating the national policies, USAID regulations, and policies and procedures of the partners organizations. Home office staff are reviewing the draft manuals for final approval.

PROJECT DESCRIPTION

The main objective of EXCELENCIA is to support, at a national level, an improved educational model that promotes active learning with community participation and the introduction of a new competency-based curriculum that incorporates the particular educational needs of the indigenous and ethnic communities. These activities directly relate to USAID's Strategic Objective No. 3 in Nicaragua: To invest in the people a healthier and better-educated population; in particular with Intermediate Outcome 3.2: to increase and improve opportunities for elementary education.

EXCELENCIA is an integrated program that combines AED's experience in APA's methodology with AIR's execution of research studies and the Save the Children expertise in educational transition. EXCELENCIA's activities are carried out according to three primary outcomes:

- Result 1: To implement the active learning model with community participation in 2000 new schools and incorporate Centers of Excellence.
- Result 2: To develop and validate educational materials that use the competency based methodology in a way that those materials, at the national level, are ready to be used.
- Result 3: To carry out longitudinal studies and other research to evaluate the project's impact and to conduct field studies to determine the effective channels to improve the transition towards elementary and of the elementary schools.

Outcome 1	Outcome 2	Outcome 3
Strengthen the capacity and experience of the MECD team at a central, school, and community level	Design and validate educational materials for the new competency-based curriculum Train faculty in how to use the new educational materials for validation	Conduct longitudinal studies, elementary transition study, and transition from elementary to secondary study

GOALS AND ACCOMPLISHMENTS FOR THE QUARTER

GOALS PER RESULT	APRIL	MAY	JUNE	STATUS
Result 1: Expanded Centers of Excellence Schools Network Applying the APA Methodology throughout Nicaragua				
1.2.4: Apply IBE methodology in the Atlantic Coast				NGO selected; contract in progress
1.3.3: Hold advisors and principals training workshops				473 regional advisors and principals trained
1.3.4: Hold regional leadership meetings				In process
1.3.5: Hold technical and principals meetings				80 regional technicians trained
1.3.6: Hold teachers' training in mentor schools				1,202 teachers trained
1.3.7: Conduct site visits				302 visits by facilitators and pedagogical advisors
1.3.8: Conduct school exchanges				In process
1.3.9: Assemble/deliver complementary schools resources				Materials purchased; ready to be distributed
1.4: Develop and implement communication plan				Communication plan developed; project officially launched.
1.5: Develop transition to primary strategy				In process. Save conducting assessment
Result 2: New Curriculum for Basic Education Based on Competencies, Including Adaptation to IBE Needs, Is Validated and Incorporated into the National Education System				
2.1: Adapt, validate and evaluate materials				Validation plan approved
2.2: Revise materials				
Result 3: Improved Quality Control of APA Methodology Based Upon Applied Research and Investigation				
3.1: Conduct longitudinal studies				In process; study planned and starting
Monitoring & Evaluation				
4.1: Revise current results				List of mentor schools revised and evaluated
4.2: Conduct performance monitoring				In process
4.3: Establish baseline/monitoring data collection and processing				School database revised and improved

PROGRAM ACTIVITIES

Result 1. Expansion of the network of EXCELENCIA schools that apply the APA methodology

Project promotion

EXCELENCIA held a project launching event on April 4th at the mentor school, Gran Ducado de Luxemburgo. The Minister of Education and the American Ambassador presided over the event, in which the EXCELENCIA National Committee was formally confirmed and took its oath. The event also highlighted the inauguration of the first operational resource center planned for 2006

MECD, under the General Directorate of Education, confirmed the EXCELENCIA technical team. This team will be the focal point of the coordination between the project and the MECD. EXCELENCIA held a series of meetings with the different directorates of the MECD to establish and reinforce coordination links. One of the main results of this coordination has been the integrated effort in planning and implementing the strategy for validating the new education materials for the competencies based curriculum.

EXCELENCIA developed the project Communication Plan and Strategy. The plan identifies the different audiences of the project and defines a particular communication goal, strategy and mean for each of them. EXCELENCIA produced a promotional pamphlet (3,000 copies) for explaining its objectives, methodology and main areas of action.

Expansion

Facilitators completed their plan for 2006 and began implementing it in their assigned regions. The expansion strategy consists of a series of visits to schools, and coordination with local authorities of the MECD at central, regional and local levels.

During this quarter, the eight facilitators of EXCELENCIA visited 170 schools in their regions and held 85 local meetings attended by a total of 510 local authorities and teachers.

The departmental pedagogical advisors of MECD made 20 visits to the same number of schools, and the municipal pedagogical advisors made 112 visits in the same period.

Training

As one of the main instruments for the expansion of APA method, the training strategy of EXCELENCIA is based on “training of trainers” sessions at the central level, replicated later at the departmental, municipal and school levels. This training covers the different representatives of the education system: departmental and municipal education advisors, regional and departmental delegates from the MECD, school principals, teachers, parents and students.

On April 25, 2006, 16 departmental advisors, 100 municipal advisors, 8 technicians in primary education, and 10 facilitators (a total of 134 participants) attended a workshop in Managua to learn about EXCELENCIA, its objectives and to plan common strategies for the expansion of the APA methodology to new schools. As a result of the

workshop, participants designed a work plan for the mentor schools for year 2006 and gave promised their support to the implementation of this plan.

On April 26 - 27, EXCELENCIA organized a workshop in Managua for principals of the current mentor schools. One hundred and six school principals, 8 technicians of primary school and 10 facilitators (for a total of 124 participants) attended the workshop and planned how to reinforce the mentoring role of their schools and their support to their satellite schools. One of the challenges accepted by the principals was to graduate select satellite schools into mentor schools.

On May 17 - 18, EXCELENCIA held a training workshop for authorities of the 63 new schools that will become mentors during 2006. Sixty-three principals and 3 deputy principals of these schools attended the workshop with 26 departmental delegates of the MECD, 47 pedagogical advisors, and 3 teachers (for a total of 144 participants). In this workshop, attendants were training in the APA methodology and the requirements for becoming a mentor school.

On May 18 - 19, 80 regional technicians of the MECD received training about how to teach writing and reading in the two first education grades. The training focused on these two grades in support of MECD polity to pay more attention to the quality of education of these two first school grades. Expanding the training given during May 18 – a 19, EXCELENCIA held 17 regional workshops headed by facilitators during the week of May 22 and 26 in 16 departments throughout the country. In these workshops, facilitators worked with municipal education advisors and school principals of mentor schools, in planning the training for teachers of first and second grade and in educational methods for writing and reading. A total of 213 advisors and school principals of mentor schools were trained in these 17 regional workshops.

Throughout this reporting period, a total of 1202 teachers of first and second grades received training during the month of June in 38 schools of 38 municipalities in seven departments of the country.

Intercultural Bilingual Education

EXCELENCIA requested local NGOs present proposals for the implementation of the project's activities in the two Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast, under the framework of the Intercultural Bilingual Education. An advertisement was put in the two main local newspapers

The project prepared the terms of reference and the competition manual, and formed a Selection Committee with representatives of the MECD and project's technicians. Eleven NGOs presented their letters of interest and received the terms of reference for the competition. Only two of the eleven NGOs presented proposals. The proposals were reviewed, analyzed, and evaluated by the Selection Committee. The Committee selected the proposal presented by FADCANIC to work in both Autonomous Regions. EXCELENCIA asked FADCANIC for a best and final proposal with revised budget. Home office is in the process of negotiating the terms of the subcontract with FADCANIC, and activities are planned to start in the Coast during next quarter.

Result 2: New elementary, competency based curriculum that includes intercultural bilingual education, validated and incorporated to the national education system

One of the goals of EXCELENCIA for the current year is to produce and validate the educational materials for the new competencies based curriculum. At the end of this year, EXCELENCIA will give to MECD the new educational materials validated and ready for their reproduction and distribution. For accomplishing this task, EXCELENCIA hired a team of specialists for regular and multi-grade programs. They are producing materials for students and teachers, covering the different subjects and contents of the new curriculum.

In order to develop the validation of the materials, EXCELENCIA agreed with MECD to sample of 200 schools, 50 of them corresponding to the Autonomous Regions of the Atlantic Coast where the future materials for intercultural bilingual education will be validated. These schools received the materials for the first quarter of the school year, while the team of specialists continued producing the materials for the second quarter, following a well planned schedule.

MECD and EXCELENCIA technicians agreed upon the methodology for validating the materials, and the project approved the funds for its implementation.

During the period of this quarterly report, EXCELENCIA printed materials for the second quarter and distributed the materials to the sample of schools, while the specialists produced the following:

- For regular programs: Materials of the second quarter for 1st, 2nd and 3rd grades for the subjects of Language and Literature, Math, Social Studies, Geography, Sciences of Life and Environment, and Communication, for a total of 18 guides for teachers and 18 work books for students.
- For multi-grade programs: Materials for Math in 1st, 4th, 5th and 6th grades; Language and Literature for 4th, 5th and 6th grade, and Sciences and Environment for 4th, 5th and 6th grades.

During the period of this quarterly report, EXCELENCIA printed and distributed for validation:

- 27,810 copies of students' workbooks and 5,400 guides for teachers of regular schools.
- 6,349 copies of students' workbooks and 755 guides for teachers of multi-grade schools.

Result 3. Quality control of the APA methodology, based on the systematic evaluation and research studies.

EXCELENCIA presented for consideration to USAID the Monitoring and Evaluation Plan, formulated in coordination with MECD. This plan includes:

- The project indicators, based upon USAID indicators
- The goals to be reached by the project, annual and final
- The mechanism for collecting information from the schools
- The formats to get the information from the schools

The plan for the first study “What makes a mentor school successful” was finished by a team of home office short-term consultants and the field office. The research team decided upon the sample, and designed instruments for collecting information.

Melba Castillo, head of the evaluation component, visited Honduras in an observation travel to the SAT and EDUCATODOS programs for non-formal secondary school. These experiences will serve to EXCELENCIA for analyzing methods to be applied in Nicaragua for transition education to secondary school.

EXCELENCIA has helped MECD in improving their database of schools, and has developed coordination mechanisms with the directorates of policies and evaluation for continuous collaboration.

The transitions to primary research team finished the first draft of the research on the transition education from pre-school to primary school. The research team attended one national and one regional seminar to get information at the Central American level on good practices in transition education. Due the existing lack of information about this subject in Nicaragua, the research team is designing a register of practices on transition education at national level and is inviting several institutions to share their information, experiences and results in the implementation of these practices. Those practices selected as “model practices” will be presented in a Forum on Model Practices in Transition Education, to be held in next October. As part of its work, the team in charge of the transition study made several field visit to Chinandega, to look at model practices, and is introducing the subject in the training to the pedagogical advisors of MECD.

ADMINISTRATION

In support of the communications component, EXCELENCIA also developed a project logo. Consulting all project technical and administrative staff, including home office partners, EXCELENCIA selected a logo which with the USAID logo will be placed on all project documents. The EXCELENCIA logo will be in lieu of all other organizational logos (AIR, AED, and Save the Children). In order to strengthen project identity and raise the profile of USAID, EXCELENCIA proposes using only two logos on project documents: the USAID logo accompanied by the developed EXCELENCIA logo. Where applicable, EXCELENCIA will also place the MECD logo on documents. EXCELENCIA hopes to receive approval from the USAID/Nicaragua for this proposal.

SUCCESS STORY: PARENTAL INVOLVEMENT

The students in the General Tomás Martínez School in Corinto, Nicaragua, never miss a day of school. Whether a teacher is ill or is absent, there is always a parent from the Parents' Committee who will fill the gap and donate their time as a substitute teacher.

In schools following EXCELENCIA's educational methodology, it is common to see parents in the classrooms. Parents play an active role: helping teachers supervise theme groups, donating their time after school, and tutoring students.

Mrs. Lidia Medina Bonilla, president of the Parents' Committee, is very aware of the important role parents play in their children's education: *"As parents, we've seen the need to get involved in school management and help our children get a quality education...For example, we helped build a platform in front of the school, to avoid flooding when it rains."*

The contributions these parents make are well received by the school administration. Mrs. Elia Mairena Baca, the school's director, encourages parent participation, *"We have a policy of informing the parents about all the school's plans, projects and needs, and encourage them to participate in all the decisions having to do with their children's education. The parents have responded very well to the school's call and are coming around to help. For example, they've taken it upon themselves to look for sponsors among the local private businesses for each grade. These sponsors donate educational materials and make other contributions to the school."*

The General Tomás Martínez School is not alone. Parents also make a positive contribution in the San Caralampio School, located off the highway to Nandaime. Staffed with only 3 teachers for 125 students, the General Tomás Martínez School depends upon parent participation. Each day, mothers and fathers arrive at the school to help assist teachers supervise students and prepare school materials. Parents provide material support as well. Mrs. Jamileth Obando, president of the Parents' Committee explains, *"Our school receives help from the Ministry with some food. We complement [this food] with our own resources so the children have breakfast and lunch. Mothers rotate each day to help prepare the meals."*

To encourage parent participation EXCELENCIA, held a gathering for Chinandega's school department where parents, directors and leaders discussed the importance of parents' participation in governing the schools, and ensuring the best education possible.

The results of the parents' participation in the school are evident. According to Mrs. Medina, *"The students don't drop out like they did before; the retention rates have gone up, together with those of promotion to higher grades and the number of students who complete primary school. In addition, the results of the school performance tests show that our students are learning more."* That's precisely what the parents want and is why they're willing to support their schools. With their contribution, these objectives are unquestionably being assured.