

**Evaluation of Illinois Action for Children's
Community Connections Caregiver Clusters Program**

Executive Summary

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Program Overview

This report details findings from an evaluation of the Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) Community Connections Caregiver Clusters (CCCC) program pilot that was conducted at two public elementary schools with Head Start classrooms in Chicago's North Lawndale community during the 2012-2013 school year. The purpose of the CCCC program was to enhance social networks and access to community resources and to increase involvement in early childhood programming among low-income parents and caregivers of young children. The focus on social capital building and school and community engagement among parents and caregivers was a strategy for improving school readiness outcomes for children given the strong evidence base for the positive relationship between parental well-being, parental involvement, and positive child outcomes.

The CCCC program consisted of 26 weekly seminars for parents and caregivers facilitated by an IAFC staff member with the assistance of several other IAFC staff and community agency personnel. Although initially targeted toward parents of children in Head Start, the groups were open to all parents in the school and neighborhood community and as a result, parents with children across the age span participated. Overall, a total of 59 parents or caregivers attended one or more group meetings across the two schools. Curriculum for the CCCC program was based on a variety of sources and consisted of three phases: Phase I focused on participants' individual and personal goals, Phase II focused on participant's goals for their children, and Phase III focused on participants' goals for their community.

Evaluation Design

The CCCC program evaluation included beginning and post-program focus groups and written surveys with participating parents and caregivers, in-person interviews with school staff and the program facilitator, and monthly observations of group sessions at each school. About two thirds of the 31 participants who attended the focus groups were parents of children in Head Start and the remaining were non-parental caregivers (grandmothers, aunts, uncles) or parents of older children. All participants identified as Black/African American. Most participants held a high school diploma or less. Nine staff members including principals, Head Start teachers, school counselors and school volunteers were interviewed.

The schools were located in a low-income neighborhood on Chicago's west side that is home to several social service agencies as well as the recipient of significant investment from a local community foundation. Yet despite these resources, the neighborhood continues to experience high levels of poverty, unemployment, and neighborhood violence.

Implementation Findings

The CCCC program success was shaped by several key program features including: The facilitator, collaboration with and support of the schools, flexible curriculum and participant input, predictable structure and intensive duration, outside speakers, celebrations, and field trips (see table 1). Challenges to implementation included participant prior experiences and trauma, lack of trust, lack of readiness to change, group management, logistics, and limited resources for sustainability beyond the school year.

Table 1: Key program features

Program feature	Description
The facilitator	Consistent person to lead weekly groups; Respectful and patient; Facilitates rather than teaches
Collaboration with and support of the school	Maintain open communication with principal and teachers and other staff about groups; share resources and information about parent needs with school staff as appropriate.
Flexible curriculum and participant input	Participants help to shape weekly agendas and content including suggestions for speakers and field trips. Agenda can accommodate participants' interests, experiences, needs.
Predictable structure and intensive duration	Weekly meetings with agenda, group rules, action steps, lunch, and child care provided; meetings for the duration of the entire school year.
Outside speakers	Mini presentations on topics of interest to group; Use local community resources and leaders as well as school staff as speakers.
Celebrations	End of phase celebrations included food, opportunities for participants to engage in public speaking, awards, and raffles.
Field trips	Family field trips outside of neighborhood to museums as well as parent-focused field trips.

Impact Findings

The program impacted participants in three core areas: 1) personal achievements and social networks; 2) parenting and involvement in children's learning; and 3) school and community engagement (see table 2). First, the goal of the program to build social capital among participants was achieved as indicated by the social networking and connections that were formed over the course of the year. These new relationships and networks led directly to some participants' securing new employment opportunities, school enrollment, housing, and help with child care. Group presentations also increased participants' knowledge of and access to resources such as job training and financial aid programs. The program also positively shaped participants' personal goals and achievements including the development of leadership and advocacy skills. Participants reported gains in self-efficacy and confidence in reaching their goals.

A second goal of the program was to engage parents in early childhood programming and education for their young children. This was clearly achieved as was indicated by the increase in parent engagement in their children's school experience over the school year as reported by both school principals and teachers. The program also shaped participants' goals for their children and their own parenting practices. Participants reported learning new childrearing strategies, new ways of understanding and responding to their children's behavior as well as increased involvement in their children's school and learning experiences.

Third, the program aimed to increase parents' engagement and involvement in community improvement efforts. Findings suggest that participants identified new goals for community improvement and engagement, although most of these activities focused on the school community rather than the community at large. In addition, the program's family field

trips as well as parents' increased engagement in their children's classrooms may have had led to positive experiences for children of participants.

Table 2: Summary of impact findings reported by participants and staff*

Areas of Impact			
Personal achievements and social networks	Parenting and involvement in children's learning	Community and school engagement	Children's experiences
<i>Access to and use of community resources</i> Employment, housing, and education/GED classes; Health and mental health services	<i>Parenting competence and confidence</i> Patience; Positive discipline; Learning to communicate with children; Childrearing strategies; Implementation of daily routines.	<i>Positive vision for neighborhood</i> Identification of neighborhood strengths	<i>Strong home-school connections</i> Enhanced family leisure time
<i>Increased social networks</i> New friends and community of parents; New networks for child care and social support	<i>Parent involvement in children's learning and school</i> Classroom volunteering; Improved parent-teacher communication; Comfort level in school; Preschool and child care enrollment	<i>Parent involvement in school community improvement efforts</i> Attend school meetings; Communicate with school leadership; Advocate on behalf of school community	
<i>Empowerment and self-efficacy</i> Development of leadership and advocacy skills; Public speaking; Confidence in ability to bring about change.			

*Based on data from participant focus groups, program observations, and interviews with staff and program facilitator.

In sum, the CCCC program was implemented with high participation rates and positive reports from participants as well as school staff. The program led to both personal achievements for participants such as job attainment and school enrollment as well as improved parent involvement at the schools. Although changes in individual behaviors were not measured in this evaluation, participants reported making significant changes in their personal lives both as parents and community members.

Several factors may have contributed to the program's success including the flexible and responsive approach of the program, the collaboration between external community agencies and the public schools, the facilitator's ability to develop trusting relationships with parents and caregivers, and the involvement of the school staff in the weekly implementation of the groups.

Program limitations included the narrow focus on Head Start parents, many of whom may have already been familiar with school involvement activities. Moreover, the program was only able to reach parents who were not working or in school during the week days.

It should be noted that although this qualitative examination suggests that the CCCC program shaped participants' access and use of resources as well as their goals and behaviors, we were not able to measure outcomes. We do not know if the changes reported by participants over the course of the year were a direct result of program participation or other factors that we were not able to examine. Future research could examine outcomes and measure the relationship between program participation and participant attitudes, practices and knowledge

Recommendations

Findings from the pilot evaluation have implications for future program replication efforts as well as family engagement initiatives across settings. The program's success in increasing participants' social capital and access to resources as well as engagement in their children's school, suggests that replication of this program model should include a similar approach and structure. In particular, the facilitated and structured weekly sessions as well as the accommodation of parental interests and needs were found to be an effective combination for reaching parents and caregivers who may not have been involved in their children's school prior to the groups. Moreover, the successes of this program have implications for family engagement initiatives beyond the specific program. First, the collaborative nature of this intervention suggests the importance of bringing community agencies and schools together to involve and empower parents of young children in low-income neighborhoods. Second, the focus on peer support and the development of social capital among parents of young children is a promising approach to enhancing parental well-being and development which has been shown in prior research to positively impact child and family outcomes.

Given these findings, the following program recommendations are suggested as ways to build on and improve upon the success of the pilot program:

- 1) Maintain core features of the CCCC program and curriculum including flexible approach to working with parents and caregivers, collaborative approach, and program implementation over the entire school year.
- 2) Expand curriculum content to include a focus on school-age and adolescent development and parenting.
- 3) Expand curriculum to include information on school systems and structures.
- 4) Extend recruitment and participation to parents and caregivers of school-age children and adolescents as well as to teen parents.
- 5) Integrate opportunities for individual consultation time between facilitator and participants into program structure.
- 6) Include the development and implementation of professional development for school staff around family engagement strategies as a way to extend program impact. Use lessons learned from the program to help teachers engage and involve families in the school.
- 7) Provide child care at all group meetings.

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