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

Final Report
September, 2013

Juliet Bromer

Corinne Weaver

Herr Research Center for Children and Social Policy

Erikson Institute

Acknowledgements

Thank you to all of the parents and caregivers in the CCCC program who allowed us to sit in on their group meetings and who shared their experiences and stories with us throughout the year. We also want to thank the staff at the two schools as well as IAFC staff who took time to talk with us about the program.

I.   Program Overview

A. Introduction

The Community Connections Caregiver Clusters (CCCC) program aims to build social capital among neighborhood groups of parents and caregivers of young children through weekly seminars that focus on parents' goals for themselves, their children, and their community. The seminars offer participants opportunities to meet other parents, connect with resources in the community, build leadership and advocacy skills, brainstorm and collaborate together around solutions to barriers, gain new knowledge related to parenting and child development, and expand their networks of support. The program also aims to increase parental involvement and engagement in early childhood programming and their children's learning experiences.

The rationale for the CCCC program was based on research underlining the importance of building social support and social capital in low-income neighborhoods, particularly among parents (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocon, 2012; Fram, 2003; Sampson, Raudenbush, & Earls, 1997). Parent leadership programs are one approach to bringing parents together to make new connections and networks. Such programs have been associated with increases in leadership and communication skills, and participation in advocacy, school-based, and wider community-based activities (Cunningham et al., 2012). Parental involvement in the school-community has also been found in numerous studies to have positive impacts on children's cognitive and social-emotional development (Henderson & Mapp, 2002; Weiss, Lopez, & Rosenberg, 2010).

B. The CCCC program

The CCCC program was designed by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) for parents and non-parental caregivers of young children and piloted in two public elementary schools in the North Lawndale neighborhood of Chicago. Recruitment for the program initially targeted parents of children enrolled in Head Start classrooms in the two schools. However, parents and caregivers were encouraged to bring other parents and caregivers to the meetings and the program had an open door policy so that any parent or caregiver regardless of their child's age, school attendance, or place of residence could attend and participate in the sessions. As a result, many parents and caregivers with older elementary and secondary school-age children attended the sessions. Participation and attendance varied from week to week with a minimum of 5 and a maximum of 19 participants at any one meeting. Overall, a total of 59 parents or caregivers attended one or more group meetings across the two schools.

The groups met once per week, excluding holidays, during the school day from October, 2012 through May, 2013 for a total of 26 sessions. Each session lasted between one to two hours and lunch was provided. An IAFC staff member facilitated the sessions at both schools which occasionally included presentations by personnel from outside agencies. A couple of sessions were co-facilitated with the director of a local child development and family services center in North Lawndale. Other staff members from IAFC were often present to sit in and observe the sessions and answer questions from the participants about IAFC programs and/or facilitate the collaboration between the program and the host school. Free lunch was provided each week and child care was provided by additional IAFC staff for some of the sessions.

Curriculum for the CCCC program was developed by Illinois Action for Children (IAFC) and was based on a variety of sources and trainings including, the Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI)'s *Family Focused Organizing Training*, the National Black Child Development Institute's *Spirit of Excellence Parent Empowerment Project* as well as others (see Appendix I for more detail). The program consisted of three phases: Phase I focused on participants' individual goals, Phase II focused on participant's goals for their children, and Phase III focused on participants' goals for their community. Each phase was conducted over a period of six to eight weeks. After the completion of each phase, a celebration was held. In addition, participants were invited on several field trips throughout the program year. Within this structure, however, the program relied on a flexible approach which allowed participant feedback, interests, and needs to guide the session content in addition to the curriculum.

II.   Evaluation Methods and Research Design

Erikson Institute collaborated with IAFC to conduct a program evaluation of the Community Connections Caregivers Clusters (CCCC). The goal of this evaluation was to gather multiple perspectives on the CCCC program in order to inform future program replication and improvement. The evaluation included focus groups and written surveys with participants, in-person interviews with school staff, monthly observations of group sessions at each school, and a telephone interview with the program facilitator. Approval for this research was provided by Erikson Institute's Institutional Review Board and all procedures and protocols regarding participant consent and confidentiality were followed.

A. Procedures

A total of four focus groups were held with participants; one at each of two schools housing the program at the beginning of the academic year (November, 2012) and one at each school at the end of the academic year (May, 2013) – school A and school B[1]. Participants were also asked to complete written surveys after the completion of each focus group.

IAFC assisted in recruiting participants for the focus groups which took place immediately after or the day following regularly scheduled cluster meetings. Focus groups lasted approximately one hour, the surveys took approximately 20-minutes to complete, and participants were given a $20 gift card for each focus group in which they participated. Focus groups were audio-taped and the tapes were transcribed for analysis. While participants filled out the surveys individually, the researchers read the questions aloud to the group and provided individual assistance when needed.

Monthly observations of the weekly seminar sessions were also conducted in order to document the approach, content, and experiences of participants in the program. Six observations were conducted at each school by researchers from Erikson Institute. Researchers took field notes during the observations regarding participant engagement, responsiveness of the facilitator toward participants, the structure and content of individual session, and group cohesion.

In-person interviews were conducted with select staff from each of the two schools involved in the program. School personnel were selected from among school teachers, principals, social workers and volunteers who were directly involved with the clusters meetings. Each

---

[1] Names of schools have been omitted for confidentiality reasons.

participating staff member was interviewed once toward the end of the program (April, 2013) regarding their perspective on the CCCC program. Demographic and contextual information was also collected and the interviews lasted approximately 30 to 45 minutes. Interviews were audio taped with the exception of one interview that was documented by hand because the respondent did not give consent for tape recording. Audio tapes of the interviews were then transcribed.

One telephone interview was conducted with the program facilitator at the end of the academic year (June, 2013). This interview focused on her experiences conducting the cluster meetings, including rewards and challenges, as well as recommendations for future program replication. The interview was audio taped and transcribed.

B. Protocols

The focus groups asked participants to describe their neighborhoods and support networks and to share their goals for themselves, their children, and their community as well as their goals for and experiences in the CCCC program. Written surveys included questions aimed at participants' perspectives on their capacity to help and support their children (Fram, 2003), self-efficacy, and leadership skills (Cunningham, Kreider, & Ocon, 2012), experience of group cohesion, as well as individual demographic characteristics.

A retrospective survey design was utilized for the post test. Retrospective surveys ask participants to compare their attitude or opinion from before the program began to their attitude or opinion at the end of the program. While surveys were conducted at two data points, all participants did not attend both focus groups and therefore, were not able to complete both the pre and post surveys. Retrospective surveys can benefit program evaluations in that they yield a more complete dataset and reduce response shift bias (i.e., the participants tendency to overestimate their initial responses due to limited knowledge about what they would learn through the program at baseline) (Engleman & Campbell, 2013; Numon, Zigarmi, & Allen, 2011).

C. Data coding and analysis

All transcripts, interview notes, and field notes were entered into NVIVO, a qualitative software analysis program. Codes were developed based on interview questions and on themes that emerged from the focus groups and interviews. The Principal Investigator and a research assistant independently coded transcripts and then reached consensus on areas of disagreement. Summaries of codes were developed and used for analysis of common themes. Survey data was entered and analyzed using SPSS, a quantitative software analysis program.

D. Sample description and school and neighborhood context

CCCC Participants
A total of thirty-one participants attended at least one focus group. Twenty-five participants attended the first focus groups; twelve from School A and thirteen from School B. Twenty-three participants attended the second focus groups; twelve from School A and eleven from School B. Recruitment efforts for the CCCC program were focused on parents of children enrolled in Head Start; however, caregivers of all students were welcome to attend the weekly

sessions. As a result, well over half (65%) of the participants who attended the focus groups reported their children were enrolled in Head Start.

As table 1 shows, all focus group participants identified as Black/African American and spoke English as their primary language. Eighty four percent of participants were female and 96% were single. The average age was 38 years. Close to half of participants reported they had less than a high school education, and only 3% had completed a Bachelor's degree. Although most parents had children under age five, 18% were parents of school-aged children or adolescents and had on average four children; 14% of participants were grandparents, uncles, or other types of caregivers.

Of the thirty-one caregivers who participated in at least one focus group, seventeen participated in both; nine from School A and eight from School B. These seventeen participants were similar to the overall sample; 83% were female, 92% were single, the average age was 40 years, 53% had less than a high school education and 56% were parents of children age five and under.

Table 1. Demographic Characteristics of Focus Group Participants (N=31)

	M (*SD*)
Age [a]	38.1 (10.2)
Number of own children (all ages) [a]	4.2 (2.4)
	% (*N*)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/African American	100 (31)
Marital status [b]	
Single	96 (21)
Married	4 (1)
Gender	
Female	84 (26)
Male	16 (5)
Primary home language [c]	
English	100 (28)
Highest level of education completed [d]	
Less than HS Diploma/GED	47 (14)
HS Diploma or GED	40 (12)
Associates Degree	10 (3)
Bachelor's Degree	3 (1)
Primary caretaking role [c]	
Parent of child 5 or under	68 (19)
Parent of school aged or adolescent child	18 (5)
Grandparent or other caretaker	14 (4)
Provider of care for child of family member not able to be in child's life [e]	35 (8)
Early childhood program enrollment	
Children go to preschool/daycare [a]	72 (21)
Children enrolled in Head Start	65 (20)
Group connections	
Knew at least one other group member before starting group	81 (25)

[a] 2 missing responses [b] 9 missing responses [c] 3 missing responses [d] 1 missing response
[e] Question only asked at second focus group, n = 23

School staff

A total of nine school staff members were interviewed; four from School A and five from School B (see table 2). From each school, the principal, two Head Start teachers, and one parent volunteer were interviewed. Additionally, the school counselor from School B was interviewed. The staff had worked at their respective schools for an average of six years and several had relationships with the schools beyond their current positions including being a former student at the school, having children currently or previously enrolled in the school, having family members who used to work at the school, and being members of the community. Eighty-nine percent of the staff self-reported their race/ethnicity to be Black/African-American, 78% were female, and they had an average age of 38 years. The education levels of the staff varied by position. That is, the two parent volunteers had completed less than a high school education (22%), one teacher completed some college (11%), two teachers had completed Bachelor's degrees (22%), and the remaining four staff members, comprising the two principals, one teacher, and one school counselor, had completed Master's degrees (44%).

Table 2. Demographics of School Staff (N = 9)

	M (SD)
Age	38.4 (11.4)
Years in current position	6.3 (5.6)
	% (N)
Gender	
Female	78 (7)
Male	22 (2)
Race/Ethnicity	
Black/African American	89 (8)
White	11 (1)
Highest education level	
Less than H.S. diploma/GED	22 (2)
Some college	11 (1)
Bachelor's degree	22 (2)
Master's degree	44 (4)
Role at school	
Head Start teacher	44 (4)
Parent volunteer	22 (2)
Principal	22 (2)
School counselor	11 (1)
Parent of child at school	
No	67 (6)
Yes (current)	22 (2)
Formerly	11 (1)
Additional affiliation with school/community	
Graduate of school A or B	22 (2)
Member of community	22 (2)
Family members attend school A or B	11 (1)

Program facilitator

The facilitator was a 32-year-old, African American woman. She had completed a Master's degree in early care and education and worked as a literacy coach prior to her current position of program manager.

Neighborhood context

Both School A and School B are located within the same geographical neighborhood in the community of North Lawndale, a predominately Black/African American community on the West side of Chicago. North Lawndale encompasses 27 public schools as well as more charter schools than any other community in the city of Chicago. Several social service agencies serve residents in North Lawndale including early childhood and family services organizations, employment networks, and youth programs and the community has benefited from private foundation-supported programs for several years.

Despite these resources, North Lawndale is a community that has experienced consistent population decline over the past several decades and high levels of unemployment and family poverty. In 2000, 43.7% of residents in this community lived below poverty, and the median income for a family of four was $22,982 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2000). Moreover, 12% of all children born that year were born to mothers under the age of 18, and the community had an unemployment rate (13%) that was almost triple the city average (5%) (U.S. Census Bureau; Steans Family Foundation).

Group participants were asked to describe their community during focus groups and to identify positive as well as challenging characteristics of their neighborhoods. Their responses echo neighborhood data. Respondents identified schools, church programs, and youth mentoring programs as strengths of the neighborhood. Some parents also noted that other parents were a source for community strength: "You have other caring parents that will say something when they see something going wrong."

However, participants also emphasized problems and negative aspects of their community such as teenage parents, unemployment, and crime. For example, two participants identified "babies having babies" as the number one problem in the community. Other statements about the community included:

"Easy to escape and get on the expressway."

"It's hard to let your children be outside."

"Now, the corner is the next education center from here [the school]. They leave out of school, the corner their next spot."

"Ain't too much resources around in this neighborhood."

Observations as well as the interview with the facilitator suggest that participants in the School B groups may have experienced extreme levels of hardship and distress associated with the stresses of living in poverty. During one session the agenda was put on hold as participants shared traumatic experiences related to child abuse, domestic violence, and criminal activity that they

were dealing with in their personal lives. During the first focus group, participants in Group B could not name any positive aspects of their community.

School context

The groups were held in two local public elementary schools located a couple of blocks from each other. Both housed Pre-K through 8th grade and enrolled students who were predominately low-income and Black/African American. Both schools had Head Start classrooms which were the only preschool-age classrooms in the school. School A had two Head Start classrooms and School B had one Head Start classroom. School A and School B also had a comparable percent of students enrolled in special education (12% and 17% respectively) and similar daily attendance rates (92% and 91% respectively) during the 2012-2013 academic year.

While School A and School B had many similarities, there were also numerous differences between the two schools resulting in diverse contexts for the CCCC groups. School A was larger than School B, enrolling almost twice the number of students during the 2012-2013 academic year. Further, while both schools were on probation for low academic standing, School B had even lower testing scores than A with less than half of enrolled students (41.5%) meeting or exceeding overall state testing standards Moreover, significantly fewer focus group participants from school B (33%) had completed a high school diploma or GED compared to participants from School A (73%). See Appendix II for detailed tables comparing the two schools.

School contexts were also shaped by leadership style and focus regarding family and parent involvement. The principal from School A expressed openness to family involvement in the school yet he discussed these efforts as secondary to his focus on student achievement and academic performance. On the other hand, the principal from School B talked extensively about his vision and goals for family engagement as a primary focus in the school:

> "I think that the power in building parent capacity is that we get parents to build relationships with parents, and then they can communicate directly with each other, versus administration or teachers communicating individually with each parent."

He described the school's approach to family involvement as "an open door policy" and explained:

> "Parents can enter the building as they see fit, when they choose. My personal value is that they can go to classrooms when they choose. We're a public school, so this is a public organization and in that, the public should always have access."

III.   Implementation Findings

Findings from the evaluation are divided into two sections – implementation and impact. Findings on implementation describe the key features of the program that appeared to contribute to the program's success based on participant reports and observations of program processes and approaches. Although this evaluation did not measure outcomes, qualitative findings on program impact describe participant and staff reports of how the program shaped participants' goals and actions as well as observations of participation over the course of the program.

A. Attendance

The attendance policy for the CCCC program was open in that participants could join the group at any point throughout the year and were welcome to bring family members or friends along. While attendance rates fluctuated over time, a core group of 25 participants across the two schools attended 10 or more sessions. School A had a maximum of 16 participants at any one weekly session and school B had a maximum of 18 participants at any one weekly session. No weekly session at either school had fewer than six participants. Both Principals and staff at the two schools reported that they had observed participation and attendance consistency increase over the course of the school year.

B. Key program features

The evaluation revealed several key features of the program that contributed to its overall success 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 3).

The facilitator

The facilitator's role in the groups was multi-faceted and essential to the program's success. The facilitator was a consistent presence each week throughout the year. Other presenters were invited and other agency staff often assisted the facilitator during sessions but the lead facilitator was responsible and present for every meeting. As one principal observed: "Once the parents became involved in the curriculum, and they had a consistent person that they could rely on to facilitate, trust began to unfold." Aside from being personable and welcoming, participants noted the facilitator's respectful, understanding, and patient attitude towards parents. Her non-judgmental approach was noted by several parents throughout the program:

"You talked to me in a way I understood."

"We are not judged here."

It was also noted by several participants that the facilitator was both an expert but also humble in her guidance, acknowledging the strengths and positive contributions of all participants to the group. Some parents described her as "one of us – she's one of the sisters" and emphasized how important it was to have a facilitator who made them feel at home and comfortable. In addition, the facilitator was able to individualize her relationship and support to parents in the groups:

"She relates in her own way to each one of us."

"She actually listens to our situations. She [doesn't] just bring her stuff and tell us we got to do what she wants us to do. She takes back our feedback, and then she brings what we want to do in class."

The facilitator employed several techniques to engage and empower participants. Reframing and helping participants find new ways of articulating their ideas was a particular strength that was observed throughout the sessions. One parent described this as: "And if you tried to say something and you can't get it, she'd get it for you." The facilitator was able to take participant comments and use them as teachable moments for the group. For example, a parent shared her experience of doing housework with her children. The facilitator helped this parent see that this activity was a way to teach children about responsibility and self-esteem. When another parent told a story of how she was able to convince her landlord to fix a two-year leak in her home, the facilitator validated the parent's competence by telling her: "you used tactful communication to get what you needed."

In many ways, the facilitator served as a steady and consistent source of weekly support over the course of the program. As one parent described:

"She encourages us when we feel low, she may not know that we [are] going through something that day, but just to see her smile lights us up and lets us know that things are [going to] get better if we just keep trying and focus on the more important goal at hand. She is all around awesome."

While the facilitator's job entailed conducting weekly seminars and arranging logistics for field trips, outside speakers, and celebrations, participants report that the facilitator went "above and beyond" her job by reaching out to individual parents between sessions, following up with resources, and making herself available by cell phone and email to all participants in the group. As one parent noted:

"She's one of those people that if she [doesn't] see you, oh, she's going to get to the phone and call. 'How are you? How come we haven't seen you? Is everything okay?' I mean she's very concerned. She's going to get to the bottom and she's not going to stop until she sees your face."

One of the school principal's also reported that the facilitator took an active role in supporting the school community at large beyond her job running the weekly parent groups.

Collaboration with and support of the school
As the cluster meetings were held in the school buildings during the school day, there was a high level of interaction between the group participants, the facilitator, and the school staff which was integral to the success of the program. The scheduling and location of groups greatly facilitated the collaborations and alliances that were forged between schools and the program staff. The facilitator spoke about the importance of building strong working relationships with the principals and teachers. She explained that she was able to build strong relationships with school staff by visiting and checking in with them, but also by inviting them into the groups to share information with the parents or just share some lunch and socialize. The facilitator indicated that building a relationship with one teacher in particular gave her the opportunity to provide this teacher with ideas for encouraging the children and parents to focus on academics at home.

However, it was also important for the facilitator to not appear to be one of the school staff. A staff person at one of the schools noted that parents don't want people in the school

"knowing their personal business." The objectivity of an external agency and facilitator at the school offered parents an opportunity to share personal experiences and feelings in a confidential and safe environment.

While several school staff members described playing more of a behind-the-scenes role in the groups by providing general support and encouragement to the parents for participating, others were directly involved with the groups through presentations or sitting in on sessions. For example, one principal spoke of sitting through some of the workshops and staying to eat with the parents. Another principal indicated that when the door was open he would "peek in and just give a word of encouragement and congratulations for their consistency as a parent group." Further, the school counselor and a teacher presented to the participants at one school on topics including the importance of routines for young children and ways to prepare young children for school.

The interactions between participants and school staff also extended beyond the group sessions to the classroom and even field trips. For example, one of the Head Start teachers attended a field trip with her own young child:

> "I look my little three year old because he's the same age as some of their children. The last [trip] was the Aquarium. We went there and I took a half day and picked up my son from his school and came with the parents. Because you know they like to see that, you know not that I'm just not better than you and kind of, you know, they want to see you involved and yeah, I got a little one too. Yes I go through the same thing you go through."

Beyond the teachers and principals, community members and parent volunteers were also integral aspects of the groups who helped to connect the parents to their school and neighborhood. For example, community members who were affiliated with the school occasionally stopped by the groups to encourage participants' involvement in other facets of the community such as the Local School Council (LSC) meetings and adult education programs. Furthermore, parent volunteers served as additional links between the group participants and the school staff by setting and cleaning up the room, finding extra chairs, and collecting games and toys for children to play with.

Flexible curriculum and participant input
The facilitator adapted the syllabus week to week to make it fit each group's needs and interests. Participants were asked to list types of presentations they would benefit from and to identify questions they would like the presenters to address ahead of time. As one parent explained:

> "And then we came to a collective agreement about what we think is best for us to have you know as far as who was going to facilitate with her, you know to help us. So, we had input into everything."

The facilitator echoed this process: "I made sure that I put it in their laps, so I always remind them, I say I'm just the facilitator, you guys set the pace of this entire program." For example, during one session a parent told of several traumatic incidents that occurred within her family. This led to several parents sharing similar stories. While this was not the designated topic for the

day, the facilitator allowed time for the parents to discuss this issue and provide comfort to one another. The facilitators reorganized the curriculum for the following week to include a presentation that directly addressed the issue of multiple influences on children and families in order to explore the topic further.

Participants described the process of being encouraged to take ownership of the groups as a way to build leadership skills. As one parent put it, "She [is] a leader, but she make us leaders too." Parents demonstrated their leadership and ownership of the groups by actively facilitating parts of celebrations, arriving early to organize and set up for sessions, and adding to group rules.

Predictable structure and intensive duration

Although the program syllabus was flexible, the facilitator maintained a predictable and stable weekly structure. In this way, participants knew what to expect from the groups and a routine was established. Predictable elements of the sessions included food, an agenda, group rules, review of previously covered material, action steps, and time for socialization. Moreover, the duration of the program over the entire school-year was an important feature as it allowed time for participants to build trust and take action steps toward their goals.

Food. Each week, the facilitators provided lunch for the participants. One participant identified the food as a benefit of the program and stated, "We're guaranteed to eat something every Thursday."

Agenda. The facilitator began each session with a welcome and an overview of the day's agenda which was usually posted on the board. She often reviewed the agenda for future sessions so participants knew what to expect and could share ideas for what they wanted to cover.

Group rules. The facilitator posted group rules at the beginning of each session. The participants helped make the list of rules which was amended throughout the year as new rules were thought of or became necessary. Examples of rules included being respectful, silencing cell phones, and being on time

Review of material. The facilitator regularly reviewed material covered in past sessions for participants who may have missed the session or did not recall the content. She also encouraged participants to review the past material with one another which served as a way to reinforce the lessons and promote public speaking skills.

Sharing of action steps. Each week the facilitator asked participants to share steps they had made toward reaching their goals. These action steps were compiled several times throughout the year and shared with the group.

Socialization. Time for socialization was regularly built into the sessions.

Outside speakers

Outside speakers were invited to come in and talk to the groups about various topics of interest to the participants. Presenters included staff members from early childhood agencies, community agencies, and the school. Presentations covered topics such as obtaining a GED, financing college, writing resumes and cover letters, proper interview attire and demeanor, low or no-cost community resources, and child development. The presenters were generally well received and several were invited back to attend celebrations.

Celebrations

Celebrations were held at the end of each of the three phases. The first two celebrations

were held at the individual schools during each groups' regularly scheduled meeting time. However, the third celebration was held in the evening at a community health center and the participants from both schools were in attendance simultaneously.

Celebration sessions differed from regular sessions in several ways. Specifically, the rooms were decorated by the participants, guests from community organizations were invited to attend, participants invited friends and family members, certificates of attendance were distributed, and during one celebration, raffle prizes were given out. In addition, the participants helped facilitate the celebration sessions by leading prayers and reading poems, sharing what they learned and did throughout the most recent phase of the group, and displaying picture boards.

Field trips

Participants and their children were offered opportunities to attend family field trips as well as outings to local community agencies as part of the CCCC program. Family trips included the Children's Museum and the Aquarium. Parents' interest in employment services led to an outing to a local community employment network.

Table 3: 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 over 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.

C. Implementation Challenges

Despite the overall success of the program during the pilot year, there were several challenges to implementation including 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. Each of these challenges is described below.

Participant prior experiences and trauma

Participants who attended the groups spoke throughout the year about the struggles of living in violent neighborhoods, poverty, mental health challenges, substance abuse, and family obligations. Although the weekly groups had an agenda, the facilitator often had to accommodate participants' needs to vent and share personal experiences and traumas before they could address the session topics. In this sense, the groups became a safe place for parents to share their experiences and frustrations with each other, receive support from other parents as well as the facilitator, and participate in a constructive discussion about these experiences. This was clearly a strength of the program as described earlier. However, for the facilitator, making time for these discussions was also challenging both for her own personal reactions to the traumas that were shared as well as for her ability to keep the sessions on track with the curriculum. As was noted earlier, this was a particular challenge in School B where participants may have experienced high levels of personal stress and trauma. The facilitator emphasized the importance of having her own support and supervision where she could reflect on the experiences shared in the groups.

Lack of trust

The facilitator reported that a lack of trust among participants was a challenge at the start of the program year. Many parents had not experienced this type of group activity and were wary at first of sharing their lives and experiences with other parents. She noted that it took many sessions to build trust and a comfort level where participants could feel safe sharing their experiences with each other.

Lack of readiness to change

In addition to developing trust, the facilitator also described participants' levels of readiness to identify ways they could initiate change in their own lives and in their community. She observed that the participants appeared overwhelmed by the barriers in their community and ended up focusing their energy on making changes in their school community as this seemed more manageable.

Group management

Group management and cohesion were important aspects of the program's success. The group became more cohesive as the year progressed yet the facilitator reported and observations confirmed that there were challenges around inappropriate group behavior throughout the year. Posting group rules at the beginning of each session helped set expectations for behavior yet some participants found it difficult to abide by the rules on a weekly basis. Disruptive and distracted behavior, inappropriate language, and lack of focus were observed in some of the groups yet overall most participants appeared fully engaged in the group activities. Child care throughout the program was inconsistent and this added to the challenge of effective group management. Parents often brought their own young children to the meetings and this created not only distractions but at times also resulted in uncomfortable situations where a parent engaged in harsh discipline towards a child during a session.

Logistics

Several logistical challenges were reported and observed such as fluctuations in

participant attendance, getting food and drinks to the school each week, and inconsistent child care. Regarding attendance, the facilitator mentioned it was sometimes a challenge when new participants joined the group late as they would have to backtrack to get the new arrivals up to speed. Occasionally, competing activities such as school meetings or community agency-run workshops were scheduled at the same time as the group meetings which resulted in lower parent attendance rates. Further, while the program had an open-door policy where anyone could come in the room, this resulted in occasional disruptions from non-group members including school staff and students. Staff members at both schools reported that the facilitator would have benefitted from additional support during field trips. Half-way through the program year, the facilitator received an AmeriCorps public ally[2] who assisted with weekly sessions and field trips. The facilitator reported that this was a significant improvement in ensuring the groups went smoothly.

Sustainability beyond the program year

The groups concluded at the end of the school year yet many participants were not ready for the groups to end. The facilitator reported that some parents were unaware that the groups would not be continuing over the summer months. Participants were eager to brainstorm ideas for how to sustain the momentum and motivation of the groups once they ended and many teachers and parents reported that they hoped the groups could continue the following year and become an integral part of school programming.

IV.   Impact Findings

"The groups are changing the way that parents feel. They're coming to the school for something positive; they're walking away with some skills; they're setting goals; they're fulfilling those goals through resources that the group has matched them with. So once they have some sense of self efficacy, it makes them a better parent, it makes them a positive role model to other children when they come in the building, and it's forming a powerful community amongst the parents." – School counselor

"To see the parents come together, socialize, help each other, laugh, and just be positive ...at least for that hour and a half it's a positive overwhelming feeling. You don't usually get parents together like that in different angles of this boulevard, and sit and be able to get along with each other. So, it's really, really positive."   – Parent volunteer

"One of the participants, an older lady, she pretty much is homeless, she lives in a shelter ... things got a little rocky where she felt like she would be out soon, she shared that with us ... and she trusted the group to share some of her personal story, and so one of the ladies shared with her some housing resources and subsidized information ... and it was like the ball

---

[2] AmeriCorps public allies are part of a public-private partnership in which federal funds are matched by a partner non-profit agency to fund staff and training roles in the community. For more information, go to: http://www.publicallies.org/site/c.liKUL3PNLvF/b.3256387/

was rolling. Unfortunately, of course, we hadn't seen her in a while because by her finding out that information she moved to the east side of Chicago, but the crazy thing is she still made it to like three more of the sessions after she moved." — *Facilitator*

A. Overall experience in the program

Participants in the program reported positive experiences across both schools where the pilot program took place. Survey responses indicate that participants' sense of group cohesion significantly increased over the program year with participants feeling more supported and understood by each other as the year progressed (see table 5). For example, several participants reported that at the start of the year they did not feel comfortable sharing personal experiences in the group yet at the end of the year, all participants reported they felt comfortable sharing experiences. Participants also reported that their understanding of the group's purpose increased over the year. For many parents, this was the first parent group or school-based meeting they had attended and their expectations and understanding about the program may have been limited at the start of the year.

Table 5: Experiences of group cohesion (n = 23)

Dimensions on which participants report positive change from beginning to end of year[1]
I feel understood by other group members**
I feel comfortable sharing personal experiences w/ the group**
I feel supported by the group**
I feel that the group looks out for my best interests**
I feel that the group works well together**
I feel personally valued by the group leader**
I understand the purpose and goals of this group**

[1] Responses based on retrospective data where participants were asked to rate how they think they felt at the beginning of the program year and then how they felt at the end of the program year.
** $p \leq .01$

B. Impact on personal achievements and social networks

The first phase of weekly seminars focused on participants' goals for themselves including education, employment, housing, and personal aspirations. As table 6 shows, participants reported setting new goals for themselves and, in some cases, taking steps toward achieving those goals.

Staff members at both schools also spoke about parents setting new goals for themselves and how the groups helped parents take action around their goals. A principal noted that he had seen parents setting more realistic goals such as timelines for completing school. Staff noticed that parents were using the school computers more to send out resumes as well as asking about resources such as housing referrals and job leads. For example, one parent obtained a job interview for a preschool teaching position at the school after interacting with the principal at one of the meetings. One of the teachers talked about another parent who did not have any clear

goals prior to attending the groups but as the year progressed, she started to ask questions about college courses, housing, job opportunities and using the computers at the school – "So that's a big improvement from where she started, because at first she used to just drop the kids off and go home."

Table 6: Participant reports of action steps to achieving personal goals

Employment
Attended job training
Attended a job fair
Found a new job
Education
Decided on an area for study
Got financial aid to begin schooling
Enrolled in a degree program
Housing
Found new housing
Learned how to budget
Completed home repairs
Personal aspirations
Weight loss
Stress reduction

Resources

  Participants and staff spoke about obtaining information and resources on education, resume and job interview preparation, job search, job training, housing, and financial aid from participation in the weekly groups. Survey responses indicate that parents' participation in neighborhood and community resources increased over the course of the school year (see table 7). In addition, 30% of participants reported that they had obtained a new job since participating in the parent groups.

  Resources were shared by the facilitators, outside speakers, participants themselves, and school staff who were invited to present to the groups. A school counselor reported that the groups helped the school learn more about the specific needs of parents and families. This information was used for grant writing and networking with local services and agencies. She also noted that the groups allowed parents to share information about their own experiences accessing and using different resources. This is important because "there are a lot of resources in [The Community], but not all of them are great." Parents learned about new resources in their own neighborhoods that they didn't know existed as the following grandmother noted:

> "Things I wouldn't have known about. Even as far as getting my new apartment. I got an apartment just from word of mouth listening to one of the other mothers telling me about where to go online. Because I'm not a computer person like that, but she told me how to

get online. I'm in my own apartment now."

Table 7: Program Participation and Access to Resources (n = 17[1])

	Start	End
	% (N)	% (N)
Program participation over time		
Preschool or daycare center	47.1 (8)	76.5 (13)
Head Start or Early Head Start	58.8 (10)	64.7 (11)
Library programs	17.6 (3)	52.9 (9)
Child health programs	29.4 (5)	47.1 (8)
Home visiting program	29.4 (5)	35.3 (6)
Education/training program enrollment	0 (0)	17.6 (3)
Other resources accessed: GED programs for new mothers/ Financial aid Resume writing and job interview skills; Criminal record management; Free job training for single women; Job postings Housing resources Youth mentoring and after-school programs		

[1]Responses are from 17 participants who attended a focus group at the beginning and end of the program year.

Some school staff reported that parents appeared more willing to seek information and help for their children – especially around mental health and counseling referrals – as a result of participating in the parent groups. Participants' reports of their own capacity to help and support their children significantly increased at the end of the program year although they reported high levels of capacity for helping their children even at the beginning of the year (see table 8).

Table 8: Help and Resources Taking Care of Children[1] (n = 23)

Dimensions on which participants report positive change from beginning to end of year[1]
When I have trouble or need help with my child or the child I care for I have someone I can really talk to. **
I am confident in my ability to get the help I need for my child or the child I care for. **
I know how to find help for my child or the child I care for. **

[1] Responses based on retrospective data where participants were asked to rate how they think they felt at the beginning of the program year and then how they felt at the end of the program year.
** $p \leq .01$

Emotional support

In addition to setting goals and obtaining new resources, parents reported receiving emotional and personal support from the groups. Several parents talked about the importance of having a safe place to share experiences with other parents facing similar challenges:

"We've grown to be like a little family over here. Everybody is concerned about the next person and that's wonderful. You don't find that all the time in schools."

"We [are] learning about each other and we got the same thing going on in all of our hearts."

Observations of the parent groups found that participants were quick to offer emotional and personal encouragement to each other in response to accomplishments and difficult situations alike. An uncle in one of the groups shared that he was doubtful about being able to obtain a job because of his past criminal record but participants were quick to let him know he could still make it happen. During the group discussions, participants encouraged each other to

continue meeting their goals despite setbacks or challenges that were shared with the group. In both parent groups, there were older women – grandmothers and aunts – as well as younger mothers and fathers. Some of the older women appeared to take on a mentoring role with the younger mothers.

Social capital and networking

One of the goals of the CCCC program was to increase social capital among caregivers and parents in these school communities. Participant and staff reports alike confirm that the weekly groups resulted in enhanced social networks, connections, friendships, and a sense of community in each of the schools – as one participant noted, the groups "brought all of us together." Another parent explained how her own network had expanded:

> "My network of people has broadened. Like they said at first it was just the teachers. Now, it's the teachers and parents and the other people in school. Now, I actually talk to everybody. Even the little bitty kids."

A grandmother talked about how the groups helped parents at the school get to know each other beyond passing in the halls:

> "Now, we can laugh, call us sisters and brothers. We could do that 'cause we met … we met our sisters in a neighborhood where we know nothing about them, but now we know about all these sisters at the table. And it's a family, hey, we came together as concerned parents. Now we're a family."

Other parents talked about new friendships that had formed and staff observed that friendships among parents had extended beyond the school to shared nights out and community get-togethers at local parks for their children. A parent participant explained how the groups helped her develop new trust in other parents in the school community:

> "Trust doesn't come very easy with me and I'm a very confidential person…but being in this group, I'm learning how to trust other people and hopefully just by seeing, you know, some of the faces and who they're related to and socialize with and that person's okay, they should be okay and I should be able to widen my variety of trust."

Another parent said she found it beneficial to be around other parents that are concerned about their children, noting that "we don't see that too much at all."

The connections and networking that occurred in the parent groups led to the sharing and exchanging of resources, information, and ideas. A father in one of the groups talked about getting parenting tips from listening to other families. An older grandmother said that she enjoyed learning from the younger mothers in the group - "So, I've learned some new and a little bit of old, and it's working for me." Parents mentioned exchanging job leads, sharing transportation, and helping each other with computer skills and resume writing. A school counselor observed that new friendships among the parents had led to exchange of resources:

> "So because the parents are able to form these positive relationships, I've seen some of the parents who may not know a whole lot of people around this area and now the

parents, the moms, have kind of come together with their families and have become
friends and are helping each other with babysitting."

The majority of staff members agreed with the sentiments expressed by participants that
there was a greater sense of connection among the group members than there was before the
groups began: "They seem more friendly. There are a couple of parents that [speak] outside of
the school… and I don't think that happened until they started going to the meetings." A
principal at one of the schools noted: "Last year, there was gossip and just a negative energy
between parents. This year, I see ten times less of that."

Empowerment

Through their participation in the groups, parents gained valuable new group and
communication skills in addition to resources and information. Participating in weekly
discussions as well as planning speakers, celebrations, and other events, allowed parents
opportunities to learn new ways of listening, communicating their ideas, setting goals, and taking
action for themselves, their children, and their school community. It seems that much of the
confidence and skill building that was fostered in the groups helped parents become advocates
for themselves and their children within the schools. The parent groups took place over the
course of the year in which school closings were announced. Many parents in the groups became
leaders at their schools around this issue, participating in rallies and giving speeches in support
of their schools. A principal at one of the schools described the process of empowerment that he
observed among participating parents during the school year:

"I think they are working towards reaching that mission that we initially started off with,
to empower parents and parents are empowered. [They have] developed a sense of
confidence and courage to speak to power, to speak their needs, wants and desires for
their children."

As the year progressed, parents took pride and ownership of the groups as was evidenced
by one grandmother who at the beginning of the year appeared overwhelmed with her care of
several grandchildren and talked about attending the groups just to "get out of the house." By the
end of the year, she was a group leader and took the initiative on her own to put together a board
of photographs of her group using a web of support image that had been introduced at one of the
sessions. Her active participation in the groups over the course of the year suggested she had
developed confidence in herself as a parent leader.

A staff person at one of the schools noted that parents in the groups were learning to take
initiative in their lives: "The parents are learning a lot… they don't have to just sit around and
wait. They learned how to get out and do for [themselves]." When describing one participant's
increased involvement with her church, a teacher at one of the schools observed: "It could be the
fact that this meeting has opened up her understanding and it may have opened her up to realize
that you can do it, you know, it's not too late. Just because you have kids [doesn't] mean life
stops. You know, so I think it's empowering."

Survey responses indicate that participants significantly increased their confidence in
their own self-efficacy around achieving goals for themselves and their children and in their
capacity for leadership. For example, several participants reported that at the start of the program
year they disagreed with the statement that they could follow through on an action plan yet by

the end of the program year all of the participants agreed that they could follow through on an action plan. Similar responses were reported for being comfortable speaking up at meetings, communicating effectively with others, and making positive changes in their community (see Table 9).

Table 9: Empowerment and self-efficacy[1] (n = 23)

Dimensions on which participants report positive change from beginning to end of year[1]
I am comfortable speaking up at meetings about the things that are important to me**
I know how to set realistic goals for myself **
I know how to set realistic goals for my child or the child I care for **
I am able to follow through on an action plan **
I am able to communicate effectively with others **
I can make positive changes in my community**

[1] Responses based on retrospective data where participants were asked to rate how they think they felt at the beginning of the program year and then how they felt at the end of the program year.
** $p \leq .01$

In sum, the primary 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 friendships 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.

C. Impact on parenting and involvement in children's learning

> *"You can tell they want to do better. They want more. They want to be good parents."*   *--Teacher*

> *"The program has been able to empower these parents to realize that they can be a bigger part of their child's education."*   *– School Counselor*

The second phase of the program focused on participants' goals for their children. During these sessions, discussions focused on child development, parenting, and parent involvement in school. Participants reported that they improved their parenting skills and strategies for helping their children at home:

> "I learned how be a better parent … and how to teach her to do things on her own and be involved in her education."

> "I learned how to sit back and read with them and talk about what they read."

Parents also talked about getting new ideas about how to help their older children with school work at home. As one grandmother described, she learned how to help her granddaughter complete homework:

> "She was struggling so I struggled with [her] but together we struggled and got the homework turned in. My granddaughter got an A and I got a plus! We worked together."

Teachers at both schools also reported that they had noticed parents taking more interest in their children's education and learning. Teachers reported that since the start of the parent groups, parents were more likely to ask for teachers' suggestions and initiate more conversations with teachers about their children's needs.

In addition to learning how to support their children's learning at home, parents also reported that they learned new ways of communicating with and disciplining their children and the importance of patience and understanding in childrearing, as is heard in the following:

> "Just don't jump up and scream at them and holler at them. Just sit and talk with them and find out the situation… what's going through the child's mind."

> "I learned to be more patient and understanding… I used to snap out at the drop of a hat."

> "I learned to talk with my children instead of at them."

> "Instead of spanking them I talk to them more to understand what's really going on."

Staff at both schools also observed these changes:

> "I've seen a lot of good, positive things, a lot more communication even with their children….it seems like they're getting these ideas from these meetings about communication and engaging with your child and being with your child, and it seems like they're really taking it home and actually doing it, so it's a good thing."

> "They're much more willing to sit down and have a conversation than screaming and physical punishment."

One of the group sessions featured the school counselor talking about television watching and young children. Several parents referred to this particular discussion as an example of how the groups helped them learn new parenting strategies and activities. After listening to the presentation, one of the grandmothers who said that her television is always on, reported: "I'm going to try to change this around. It's going to be hard."

Parent involvement in school
Participation in the parent groups over the course of the school year resulted in increased parent involvement in the school. Staff and principals observed that the groups were better attended than any other parent meeting. For some parents, the groups may have been an incentive to bring their children to school. One teacher described a child who had been absent for two weeks until the parent brought her on a Thursday so she could attend the parent group. Overall, coming to the groups on a weekly basis helped parents feel more comfortable in the school building and interacting with other parents and staff in the school.

Teachers also observed that parents were offering to volunteer in the classrooms more and initiating more communication and interactions with school staff as a result of attending the parent groups. Parents would often stop by their child's classroom either before or after the groups and ask to help supervise children, prepare materials, or just check in on their own children. As a school counselor noted, "those types of things were not going on before this group."

Both participants and staff indicated the groups had a positive impact on the relationships between parents and teachers. Teachers explained that the groups offered them a weekly opportunity to talk with parents about something positive and to find out more about their needs. One teacher observed that parents often stopped by her classroom after the groups to chat and tell her about the discussions. Other teachers reported that parents seemed more relaxed and comfortable approaching teachers and having open communication with the school. A principal at one of the schools felt that the groups "bring down everybody's guard" leading to better communication and relationship-building between teachers and parents. A school counselor observed that the groups gave teachers and parents something to talk about aside from problems with children in the classroom.

The increased interaction between parents and teachers led to a greater understanding across the two groups. One teacher reported that the groups helped her see the parents in a new light. Specifically, she said that the fact that so many parents really want to be at the school to participate in the groups made her realize that "every parent isn't the same" and that "some of the parents really do want extra help."

Staff at both schools observed changes in the conduct and behavior of parents who attended the groups. One of the principals noted that parents seemed more relaxed in the school as they spent more time in the building and learned more about the culture and rules of the school. A school volunteer who also attended some of the parent groups, noticed that parents were more respectful in the school:

> "Because they used to go through this hallway cursing. They used to have no respect …but I see a big change."

School staff also reported that parents' conduct with children in the school had changed as a result of their participation in the groups. Field trips and meetings resulted in parents interacting more with other parents' children in the school halls. A school counselor told of changes she had noticed in parents' behaviors toward children in the school:

> "You would see that the parents would take it upon themselves to yell and scream at the kids, threaten to do things to them physically… now they calmly talk to a child… have positive conversations …just as effective, if not more effective than threatening them, screaming at them, or making it some big public thing…..some of the parents have done an amazing job of that."

A teacher also noticed this change in conduct:

> "They feel more comfortable talking to the kids now. Saying, oh, you should be in line or stop jumping around or something so they feel more comfortable saying things to other people's children, whereas before they probably wouldn't have said anything.

They probably just drop their kids off and just keep going as usual."

Participants in the groups also described these new connections and interactions with other parents' children and a new sense of communal responsibility for child supervision that developed over the program year:

"One thing I can say is if my children see any of their faces, they know not to clown, because they know oh, I know your mama. I'm gonna tell."

"You'll see their kids at the park; they know we're going to look out for their kids just as we look out for our kids. I know everybody's kids.

"You know a lot of us wouldn't say too much to these children because of their parents. So, now since I'm getting to know the parents much better and they're getting to know me, and then we talk about it. And I can deal with their children more, because I can go to their parents and say 'You know he disrespected me, he did this.' And then we talk one on one and with the child. So, then they talk to their children, and then the children are listening more."

In sum, the second goal of the program to engage parents in early childhood programming and education for their young children was achieved as indicated by the increase in parent engagement in the school over the school year 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.

D. Program impact on community and school engagement

The last phase of the year was focused on goals for community improvement. Although these discussions were intended to focus on empowering parents to improve their community and neighborhoods, the sessions focused on the school community as this was a more manageable context in which to take action and create change.

Community engagement
The groups helped many participants adopt greater optimism about being able to make positive changes in the community and a new perspective on their communities that included the positive aspects as well as the obstacles. The following comments reflect this new perspective:

"I just look at it as we can make it all positive if we all come together and just listen to what each other [has] to say and not try to badger each other with all the negative things that they're doing in their life. I think that's wonderful.

"That's our neighborhood, trouble and crime, but you got to let kids see the beauty that's in here. This greenhouse is right across the street. Got [the most] beautiful flowers you ever want to see. And they [have] been there for the longest - 40 years, 50 years."

Some parents became actively involved in community organizations. For example, one parent began volunteering at a youth center after hearing a presentation at one of the groups from a local after-school program. Another parent became more involved in her church and another parent talked about attending community meetings about neighborhood safety and monitoring.

School improvement

The facilitator noted that despite changes in how participants perceived their community, participants had trouble envisioning how they could improve their neighborhood given the overwhelming poverty and violence. Instead, they focused on their school community as a more manageable context in which to engage in community action and advocacy.

In addition to getting more involved in their children's learning at school, school staff reported that parents in the groups were more involved in school improvement activities. One of the principals reported that parents appeared to be more proactive in helping improve their school. He talked about how the groups have helped parents to "generate their own ideas for what they can contribute to the school." Both principals reported that parents from the groups had volunteered to set up a parent patrol for safe passage and entry to the school for children and families. This was something both principals had tried to initiate in years past but without success due to lack of parental participation. One parent noted that she and other parents have become more willing to take action to make the school community safer for their children by asking drug dealers to move away from the school entrance. As she put it, "So that's the way you can do it in your community, just go talk to them." Several parents who participated in the groups also joined their local school councils during the year – something they attributed to their participation in the parenting groups.

Principals reported that participation in the groups had resulted in parents feeling more empowered to take action to improve their school. Parent initiatives mentioned by the principals included Saturday programming, mentoring program for young girls, and a family movie night. As one principal put it, "parents are becoming more demanding… I think that is the result of the empowered parent group."

E. Program impact on children

Although child impacts were not measured in this evaluation, focus group reports from participants and interview responses from staff at both schools suggest that the groups may have had a positive impact on children of participants as well as on the participants themselves. As one principal noted, the groups helped parents to feel more confident in their capacity to support their children and their school and this in turn shaped their children's behavior at school:

"[It] helps the students to see that these parents are involved and it adjusts their behavior, it changes their behavior."

Family field trips were reported to be positive experiences for both parents and children. Many of the parents lacked funding or transportation to bring their children to museums and the field trips offered them an opportunity to participate in a family-centered activity with their children. As one parent noted, the trips helped "build a bigger and stronger bond between the parents and children." Another parent elaborated, "'Cause some parents don't get to take their

kids places." A teacher observed that the children were excited about the trips and often talked about the enjoyable time spent with their family: "the fact that they're going somewhere with their parents…so it's not so much about where they're going, they just like the fact that they're with their family." Moreover, the field trips allowed parents to expose their children to other parts of the city. As one of the principals noted, "they want to leave the community and experience the diverse world of Chicago." A social worker at one of the schools elaborated on this idea and shared her observation that the trips benefitted both parents and children by providing a respite from the stress of their home neighborhoods and lives:

> "And then the field trips at night where they get to bring their kids along, they're getting exposed to places they've never been before, and they're having these positive field trips where they get to leave behind the stress of the neighborhood; they get to leave behind the violence and be in a place where everyone can have fun. And because it allows them to have a positive experience outside of what they're used to, this outlet that allows them to understand that they can have fun with their kids."

F. Barriers to positive impacts

Despite the many gains and positive experiences of support and trust that were reported by participants and staff and that were observed throughout the year, some participants and teachers noted that the changes may have been minimal and limited. An older woman who was a volunteer at one of the schools and participated in the parent groups expressed skepticism about the capacity of participants for real change and transformation:

> "The parents that come to the group they all live in different sections, and like I indicated for that hour and a half parents are able to communicate and be able to be themselves, and feel comfortable. But, beyond that, there's no socialization."

She also noted that although many parents set goals for themselves and their children throughout the year, very few parents were able to actually achieve their goals. Some teachers reported that the parents who were involved in the groups were the same parents who had always been involved in the school so she did not view their participation as a dramatic change in school involvement.

V. Discussion

In sum, the CCCC program was implemented successfully with high participation rates over the school year and consistent weekly participation among a core group of parents. Parents and caregivers engaged in curricular activities around goals for themselves, goals for their children, and goals for their community. In addition, the program's flexible structure allowed ample room and space for participants' input into discussion topics, outside speakers, and field trips and outings.

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 10).

Although this evaluation did not examine child outcomes, program impacts on parents may have also shaped children's experiences at home and in school. Research on family engagement in early childhood education programs suggests that parent involvement in their children's early school experiences and learning has a positive impact on children's cognitive and social-emotional development (Forry, Bromer, Chrisler, Rothenberg, Simkin, & Daneri, 2012; Weiss, Caspe, & Lopez, 2006).

Several factors may have contributed to the success of the program. First, the agency's external relationship to the school may have contributed to the program's success. Parents may not have felt comfortable sharing their personal lives with school staff given their own prior negative experiences with school. By having the groups facilitated by an outside agency and facilitator, the parents were able to develop trust in the group process. It is possible that this trust and positive experience in the groups contributed to parents' general increase in their willingness to use school services and resources that several of the school staff reported.

Related to this, the agency and facilitator's collaborative approach to working with school staff was critical to the program's success. The facilitator forged working relationships with the preschool and Head Start teachers at each school as well as with social workers and principals. In her role she was able to facilitate parent-teacher and parent-staff relationships in the school by bringing staff into the groups for mini presentations and socializing. These relationships helped to create a culture of parent support in each school beyond the weekly parent groups. Staff across schools reported an increase in parent involvement and comfort in the school and this was seen as a direct result of the CCCC program.

The facilitator's role was also clearly a key factor in the program's success. The facilitator came from a similar background to the participants in regards to parenting status (i.e., she was a parent of a young child), race, and age. She was seen by many participants as one of them and as someone who had shared similar life experiences.

The flexible and relationship-based approach to the groups also contributed to the success. Trust and a high comfort level were achieved in the groups and participants felt they could share openly in a safe and respectful environment. Moreover, for School B in particular where participants may have been facing extreme hardship, the opportunity to share experiences and resources with each other around the events and experiences in their lives was as important as the curriculum topics.

The weekly, year-long structure of the program allowed parents time to build trust with each other, the facilitator and with school staff. The consistency and predictability of the program allowed for the potential of real change and transformation among group participants.

Parent and school factors may have also contributed to the program's success. First, parents who participated in the groups were not working full-time which allowed them time to attend the groups. In fact, as parents in the groups succeeded in obtaining employment, some of them stopped attending the groups on a regular basis. The program was not able to reach those parents who held full-time jobs. Future programming might consider holding groups in the evening or on weekends although part of the success of the program seemed to be the location and timing of the groups during the school day.

Another factor contributing to the success of the program was that most of the parents recruited for the program were Head Start parents. Given the parent-involvement focus of Head Start, it is not surprising that the program was able to engage parents in the groups. However, it should be noted that several staff observed that participation in the CCCC groups was much

higher than parent participation in Head Start parent meetings. Nevertheless, future programs would need to explore how to engage parents who are not involved in Head Start.

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.

Table 10: 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**
Access to and use of community resources Employment, housing, and education/GED classes; Health and mental health services	***Parenting competence and confidence*** Patience; Positive discipline; Learning to communicate with children; Childrearing strategies; Implementation of daily routines.	***Positive vision for neighborhood*** Identification of neighborhood strengths	***Strong home-school connections*** Enhanced family leisure time
Increased social networks New friends and community of parents; New networks for child care and social support	***Parent involvement in children's learning and school*** Classroom volunteering; Improved parent-teacher communication; Comfort level in school; Preschool and child care enrollment	***Parent involvement in school community improvement efforts*** Attend school meetings; Communicate with school leadership; Advocate on behalf of school community	
Empowerment and self-efficacy 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.

VI.   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 intensive facilitated 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 and length of program duration**. The program's success was shaped by the facilitator's ability to develop trust with participants, the school's involvement and support of the groups, the flexible and responsive approach to parent and caregiver needs and interests, the predictable weekly structure over the entire school year, and curricular features such as field trips, celebrations, and outside presenters.

2. **Expand curriculum content to include a focus on school-age and adolescent development and parenting.** Many participants in the program were parents or caregivers of school age children. Future modifications of the curriculum could include the addition of content on parenting teenagers, helping school-age children with homework, and sibling relationships.

3. **Expand curriculum to include information on school systems and structures.** Parents would benefit from understanding how school systems operate including staff roles and hierarchies and protocols and processes for school-home communication and accessing of resources and services. Many parents who participated in the groups had not been involved in their children's schools prior to this program. Presentations from school personnel about school decision-making processes and protocols could help parents learn how to negotiate different systems within their schools. As one principal noted:

   > "I think that's in a cloud for a lot of parents. So it's mysterious, you know, it's behind the curtains. If we pull the curtains back, then parents feel more empowered to go and approach the system and articulate their needs."

4. **Extend recruitment and participation to parents and caregivers of school-age children and adolescents as well as to teen parents.** The pilot program recruited parents whose children were enrolled in Head Start. Yet nearly all of the participants had older children in addition to young children and several parents only had older children. The potential to engage parents across the school grades could be enhanced by opening up the parent groups to all parents within a school community. Moreover, targeted efforts to young and teen parents should be explored in future implementation efforts. The parents in the pilot year tended to be older parents with several children, many of them school-age and older. Younger, first-time and teen parents may have unique needs for support and resources and groups targeted to these parents may be a future direction for the program.

5. **Integrate opportunities for individual consultation time between facilitator and participants into program structure.** Throughout the program year, participants communicated with the facilitator outside of the groups about job leads, personal goals as well as challenges. Future programming might consider formally integrating two or three individual meetings (by phone or in person) between the facilitator and each participant as a way of helping participants become more engaged in the group sessions and offering participants another outlet for reflection. Such meetings may help to strengthen

engagement of parents in the groups as well as positive outcomes for parents, especially those parents who may be less likely to actively participate in group sessions.

6. **Include the development and implementation of professional development for school staff around family engagement strategies as a way to extend program impact.** The CCCC program was successful in engaging parents who had not been involved in their child's school prior to this program. The strong relationships that were developed between the facilitator and school staff could be used to build professional development opportunities for school staff around strategies for family engagement. The CCCC program could have the potential of impacting schools beyond the one year program by helping to build strong school staff-family relationships that could be sustained on a long-term basis. In addition, participants who complete the CCCC program could become mentors for other parents in subsequent cohorts.

7. **Provide child care at all group meetings.** Inconsistent child care was a barrier to parents being able to fully engage in the parent groups. Presence of children in some of the groups was disruptive for both the facilitator and the participants.

References

Community Organizing and Family Issues (COFI): Family Focused Organizing Training
   http://www.cofionline.org/?q=COFIModel/COFIModelAndTraining

Cunningham, S. D., Kreider, H., & Ocon, J. (2012). Influence of a parent leadership program on participants' leadership capacity and actions. *School Community Journal,* 22(1), 111-124.

Engelman, S., & Campbell, B. (2103, May 6). The advantages of using retrospective surveys. [Web log comment]. Retrieved from http://aea365.org/blog/?p=8949&utm_source=feedburner&utm_medium=email&utm_campaign=Feed%3A+aea365+%28AEA365%29

Forry, N., Bromer, J., Chrisler, A., Rothenberg, L., Simkin, S., & Daneri, P. (2012). *Quality of family-provider relationships: Review of conceptual and empirical literature of family-provider relationships*. Washington, DC: Child Trends.

Fram, M. S. (2003). Managing to parent: Social support, social capital, and parenting practices among welfare-participating mothers with young children. *Institute for Research on Poverty,* Discussion Paper no. 1263-03.

Henderson, A. T., & Mapp, K. L. (2002). *A new wave of evidence: The impact of school, family, and community connections on students achievement*. Austin, TX: National Center for Family and Community Connections with Schools.

National Black Child Development Institute. http://www.nbcdi.org/resources-page/from-nbcdi

Numon, K., Zigarmi, D., & Allen, J. (2011). Measures of program effectiveness based on retrospective pretest data: Are all created equal? *American Journal of Evaluation, 32*(1), 8-28.

Sampson, R.J., Raudenbush, S.W., & Earls, F. (1997). Neighborhoods and violent crime: A multilevel study of collective efficacy. *Science*, *277* (5328). 918-924.
   Steans Family Foundation. (n.d.) North Lawndale today. Retrieved from http://www.steansfamilyfoundation.org

U.S. Census Bureau. (n.d.) *Community facts.* Retrieved August 29, 2013, from http://factfinder2.census.gov/faces/nav/jsf/pages/community_facts.xhtml

Weiss, H., Caspe, M., & Lopez, M. E. (2006). *Family involvement in early childhood education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Weiss, H. B., Lopez, M. E., & Rosenberg, H. (2010). *Beyond random acts: Family, school, and community engagement as an integral part of education reform*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Family Research Project.

Appendix I: Community Connections Caregiver Clusters

North Lawndale
Community Connections Learning Framework

Theory of Change

This work is based on an ecological systems view of children's development which views the child as the center of nested social and cultural systems starting with the family and moving outward through small personal settings like family settings and home-based child care, to larger institutions like schools and health centers, and finally to social policies and cultural forces. IAFC recognizes that no single intervention or program is likely to change a child's future, and that those people closest to the child will need to be the most active in co-constructing that future. The focus of the N Lawndale Community Connections groups is on the primary caregivers, including parents, other family, and friend or neighbor caregivers.

The Community Connections groups work together to build social capital which the caregivers can call on to overcome obstacles and become more active in helping to ensure the kind of future they desire for their children. The social capital model views a family's connections as key to its strength. Supportive peer relationships are important for meeting day to day demands of child rearing (bonding social capital). Relationships across the nested systems provide families with resources and opportunities to meet needs and achieve goals (linking social capital).

Constructivist Learning Approach

It is in keeping with the ecological systems view of child development to use a constructivist approach to learning within the Community Connections groups. Constructivism is a learning strategy that builds on participants' existing knowledge, beliefs and skills. This is especially important for adult learning since adults bring years of experience, beliefs, knowledge and perceptions to any new learning environment. The constructivist approach recognizes and respects one's current knowledge and experience base and facilitates the integration of new understandings and information. The group facilitator structures and supports group dialogue and learning opportunities based on participants' personal goals, hopes for their children, and vision for their community.

In the constructivist approach,

- Multiple perspectives are encouraged
- Learning is shaped based on participant-directed goals
- The group leader serves as a facilitator and guide rather than an expert
- Activities take place in the participants' community and surrounding metro area, thus they face real world complexities
- Participants start by sharing their current knowledge, attitudes and beliefs on the subject, followed by exploration with others to construct new insight and connections.
- Problem-solving is emphasized and failure is considered as a learning opportunity.
- Participants have opportunities to reflect on their experience as they go through this learning journey.

Acknowledgements

Appendix II: School Context

School Demographics and Test Scores (2012-2013 academic year; 2012 test scores)

	School A	School B
Students Enrolled	482	247
% Low-income	97.3	91.9
% Special Education	11.6	17.0
Race/Ethnicity		
Black/African American	98.3	98.8
Hispanic	1.5	0.8
Average Daily Attendance Rates	92.0	91.0
% Students Meeting/Exceeding State Standards :		
ISAT Composite	53.6	41.5
% Students Exceeding State Standards		
ISAT Composite	5.1	1.3

Chicago Public Schools. (n.d.). *CPS school locator.* Retrieved May 15, 2013, from http://Web address http://www.cps.edu/SCHOOLS/Pages/Schools.aspx