

Linking Home-Based Child Care and State-Funded Preschool: The *Community Connections* Preschool Program (Illinois Action for Children)

As part of Illinois Action for Children’s (IAFC) Preschool for All program, *Community Connections* is a mixed-approach model which intentionally links low-income families, their home-based child care providers, and center-based pre-kindergarten programs in caring for and educating preschool-age children.

Goals:

- To make state prekindergarten classroom experiences available to 3- and 4-year old children in home-based care,
- To extend classroom learning experiences in the home-based care setting, and
- To support infant and toddler development in participating providers’ homes.

Target population: Low-income, 3- and 4-year old children in Cook County, IL who are cared for in home-based care. According to Illinois Child Care Assistance Program data, among families using the Child Care Assistance Program in Cook County, 58% have enrolled their children in home-based child care (22% in licensed homes and 36% in license-exempt Family, Friend and Neighbor care).

Service delivery strategy: Children already enrolled in licensed or license-exempt family child care homes are transported to state pre-kindergarten programs in community-based child care centers for part-day sessions four days per week. On the fifth day, the pre-kindergarten teachers visit the family child care homes—visiting each twice a month—to coordinate curriculum, bring new resources, and discuss children’s progress.

Evaluation: Phase 1- Implementation Study

Research questions:

- What are the key activities of Community Connections identified by respondents?
- What are the perceived benefits and challenges of the program?
- What are the perceived improvements in the center classrooms and home-based settings?

Methods: **Phone interviews** were conducted with IAFC coordinators, center directors/owners, pre-kindergarten teachers participating in Community Connections, and parents of participating children. **In-person interviews** and one-time **quality observations** of home-based care using the Child Care Assessment Tool for Relatives (CCAT-R) were conducted with participating home-based providers.

Sample: The sample included—all three **IAFC coordinators** of the Community Connections program; four **center directors/owners**, which included three owners (of centers where there was no separate director) and one director; seven **teachers**, which included the lead teachers from each of the Community Connections classrooms in four centers and three of the four assistant teachers; fifteen **home-based providers** participating in Community Connections, which included five providers from each of the three centers; and nine **parents** of children participating in Community Connections, which included eight mothers and one step-mother.

Findings

Stakeholders Reactions:

- Community Connections was generally viewed as positive by participants.
- Both providers' and parents' motivation to participate focused on wanting to extend educational opportunities for the children. Only a few parents had some trepidation in having a child at the young age for enrollment (3-years-old) ride a school bus, and concerns about the adequacy of the curricula for preparing their child for school.
- According to parents and home-based providers, children enjoyed the new opportunity of attending a half-day of preschool.
- Teachers and home-based providers reported that participation in the program involved both professional development and personal gratification.
- All of the parents reported positive relationships between their children and the center teachers, and providers all reported having a good relationship with the center teachers.

Benefits:

- Parents and providers reported children's learning and development benefitted from participation in Community Connections (e.g. children developed better writing skills and social skills).
- Just over half of parents reported they have made changes to their home activities with their children because of Community Connections, such as: helping their child to learn letters, spelling, and developing writing skills; doing activities suggested by the provider and teachers; and communicating with the home-based provider more about how the provider is supporting the child's learning.
- Both teachers and home-based providers reported professional and personal benefits to participating in Community Connections. Teachers appreciated the higher salary offered by Preschool for All, and an increase in professional development and resources available to them. More than half of the home-based providers reported that the program increased their job enjoyment because they saw the children transitioning into a school setting, had more time to focus on the infants and toddlers, were motivated to be better at their job, were able to learn new things, and had more people to turn to with questions.
- A few providers commented that the program allowed parents, who could not otherwise afford it, give their child exposure to both home-based and center settings.

Challenges:

- Scheduling visits and some resistance to visits with providers was reported by teachers as challenging. Connecting families and providers with community resources, and how teachers can best use visits to support providers, including addressing the needs of infants and toddlers, was also a challenge. Further program specifications, standards, and training around outreach to and meetings with home-based providers are needed.
- Contact and communication between teachers and parents, including parent-teacher conferences, was a challenge, especially given the additional relationship with providers that sometime functioned as an intermediary. Participation by parents in outings, events, and classroom visits was also variable. Further support and specifications around parent- teacher communication are needed.
- Home-based providers expressed concerns about the limited number of available spaces that allow children to participate in the program, inconvenient timing of field trips (providers found it difficult to attend while still caring for other younger children).

Implications for Cross-System Collaboration

- The Community Connections mixed-model approach fostered alignment and communication across all settings involved in the care and learning of the child. Providers consistently reported benefitting from the activities teachers shared during visits, and being able to ask questions about the children during these visits.
- The program strategy of focusing on quality in both centers and home-based care was perceived as beneficial. Directors and teachers felt they benefitted from the supports to meet requirements for Preschool for All programs, such as use of specific curricula and staff qualifications. Home-based providers also reported that their care was strengthened through the new teaching techniques and materials the teachers introduced to them, as well as having more time to focus on infants and toddlers.

For more information the full report is available at: www.actforchildren.org, www.childtrends.org, and www.nccp.org

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